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Trần Đức Thảo's Theory of Language Origins

Jacopo d'Alonzo

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Thèse de doctorat en sciences du langage

Jacopo D'ALONZO

Trần Đức Thảo's Theory of Language Origins

Thèse dirigée par
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Thèse en cotutelle avec Sapienza-Università di Roma
Dipartimento di studi filologici, linguistici e letterari
Dottorato in Teoria dei linguaggi e Educazione linguistica
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La théorie des origines du langage de Trần Đức Thảo

Résumé

Depuis des siècles, plusieurs penseurs et scientifiques ont abordé la relation entre la coopération, le langage et la cognition sociale. Parmi eux, Trần Đức Thảo (1917-1993) mérite une mention spéciale. Le but de la recherche qui suit est de présenter au lecteur la réflexion philosophique de Thảo sur le langage humain et son évolution. Nous essaierons de tracer les grandes lignes de la théorie de Thảo sur les origines du langage dans ses *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience* (1973) dans lesquelles il a essayé de trouver une synthèse entre philosophie, linguistique, psychologie et anthropologie physique. La découverte du marxisme-léninisme a conduit Thảo à proposer une approche matérialiste et dialectique au problème de la relation entre corps esprit. De cette façon, Thảo a proposé une sorte de tournant matérialiste et historique de la philosophie de la conscience de Husserl qui était au cœur de ses premiers intérêts philosophiques. La théorie de Thảo met en relief la nature sociale du langage et de la cognition, de sorte que l'évolution du langage est inextricablement liée aux relations sociales. Une telle conclusion reposait sur l'hypothèse que le travail est une caractéristique exclusivement humaine qui distingue les humains des animaux. Pour lui, la genèse du langage est dans le travail humain et donc le langage se développe parmi nos ancêtres pré-humains ainsi que chez les humains en réponse aux problèmes posés par la vie matérielle. En gardant à l'esprit que le langage découle des exigences sociales et des besoins du monde matériel, selon Thảo le langage se transforme lui-même au fur et à mesure que la société humaine change. Et compte tenu des racines sociales de la pensée et du langage, la conscience évolue continuellement avec le temps. Dans ce cadre, Thảo a voulu déterminer la nature du langage et son rôle dans les sociétés préhistoriques et son évolution à travers les relations sociales.

Mots clés : *Tran-Duc-Thao, Evolution du langage, Cognition sociale, Marxisme-léninisme, Phénoménologie, Conscience*

Trần Đức Thảo's Theory of Language Origins

Abstract

Several thinkers and scientists throughout the philosophical and scientific tradition took up the relationship between cooperation, language, and social cognition. Among them, Trần Đức Thảo's (1917–1993) deserves a special mention. The purpose of the following research is to introduce the reader to Thảo's philosophical reflection on human language and its evolution. We shall attempt to map out the main lines of Thảo's theory of language origins set out in his *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience* (1973) that combines philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and anthropology. The discovery of Marxism-Leninism led Thảo to suggest a materialistic and dialectic approach to the mind-body problem. In this way, Thảo tried to suggest a materialist and historical turn of Husserl's philosophy of consciousness which was at the very heart of his own first philosophical interests. Thảo's account threw into sharp relief the social nature of both language and cognition, so that language evolution is linked inextricably to social relations. Such a view depended upon the assumption that labour is an exclusively human characteristic which sets humans apart from animals. And the genesis of language is in human labour. In this way of thinking, language develops among both our pre-human ancestors and present humans in response to problems posed by the material life. Bearing in mind that language arises from the social demands and needs of the material world, language is transformed itself as human society changes. And given the social roots of thought and language, consciousness evolves continuously over time. Within this framework, Thảo wanted to determine the nature of language and its role in pre-historical societies and its making through social relations.

Key Words: *Tran-Duc-Thao, Language Evolution, Social Cognition, Marxism-Leninism, Phenomenology, Consciousness*

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Ja; mach nur einen Plan
sei nur ein großes Licht!
Und mach dann noch 'nen zweiten Plan
gehn tun sie beide nicht.
Denn für dieses Leben
ist der Mensch nicht schlecht genug:
doch sein höch'res Streben
ist ein schöner Zug.
(Bertolt Brecht)

and in the eyes of the people there is the failure;
and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath.
In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling
and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.
(John Steinbeck)

List of abbreviations

- CLG = Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1916, 1995. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot. English translation by Wade Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics* ed. by Perry Meisel & Hau Saussy. New York: Columbia University Press 2011.
- HUA = Husserl, Edmund. 1973–2014. *Husserliana. Gesammelte Werke*. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff; The Hague, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, New York: Springer
- ILC = Thảo, Trần Đức. 1973. *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience*. Paris: Editions Sociales. English translation by Daniel J. Herman & Robert L. Armstrong. 1984. *Investigations into the origin of language and consciousness*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 44. Dordrecht Boston: D. Reidel.
- MEW = Marx Karl, Friedrich Engels. 1956–1990. *Marx-Engels-Werke*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag.
- PDM = Thảo, Trần Đức. 1951. *Phénoménologie et Matérialisme Dialectique*. Paris: Minh Tan. English translation by D.J. Herman, D.V. Morano. 1986. *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*. [= Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 49.] Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster & Tokyo: D. Reidel.

Preface

Le philosophe travaille sur l'histoire,
comme le savant opère dans son laboratoire.
(Léon Brunschvicg)

Le problème de l'origine concerne évidemment autre chose
que l'origine du langage: son essence, son rapport à la pensée et
à la société, l'organisation de la pensée humaine
(empirisme vs rationalisme), sa différence à la pensée animale
et plus généralement la position de l'humanité
dans l'ensemble du règne animal.
(Sylvain Auroux)

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Life and Works. - 4. Contents of the Present Work. - 5. Expected Results and
Further Perspectives. - 6. Some Methodological Remarks. - 7.
Acknowledgements.

1. Introducing Thảo's Theory of Language

The following research provides the first systematic survey of Trần Đức Thảo's (Từ Sơn, Bắc Ninh, 26 September 1917 – Paris, 24 April 1993) philosophical reflection on language. One of the main features of Thảo's approach to language is the emphasis on the formation of language. By this, we shall attempt to map out the main lines of Thảo's conception of language, along with an original analysis of his hypothesis on language origins that combines philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and anthropology. The scope of the present study compels us to provide a historical perspective on how Thảo addressed the problems of language. Added to this, it is essential to broaden and complete historical research with a closer epistemological examination of Thảo's theory.

Thảo's *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience* (Investigations into the origins of language and consciousness, 1973; henceforth ILC) deserves a special

mention in this regard and most of our efforts will be devoted to a detailed analysis of that book. As a matter of fact, the ILC marks the most relevant moment in Thảo's career in so far as it is the first book he entirely devoted to language. Since the 1940s, Thảo had wanted to offer a dialectic materialist treatment of the formation of consciousness. The problem of the genesis that emerged in Husserl's last writings joined in Thảo's work the great collective scientific project of dialectical materialism. This choice brought Thảo closer to the great currents of Soviet anthropology and sociology-based psychology. After having dealt with the formation of consciousness for a long time, in the 1960s, Thảo became more and more aware of the significance of the role of language to describe the nature of consciousness. In this way, Thảo freed himself more and more from the Husserlian legacy and was increasingly interested in semiology, psychology, linguistics, and empirical sciences. This leads us to wonder how the question of language origins arose in Thảo's philosophical career.

The ILC deserves a special mention also from an historical point of view. In the ILC, the problem of the nature of language is faced by Thảo in an original way compared to the great currents of linguistics and semiology in the 1960s – except for Sebeok and a few others. Here it is important to bear in mind that Thảo set out his theory of language origins in a period when official linguistics avoid discussing the issue. When semiology was being established as academic discipline and semioticians were trying to define the nature of that research field, Thảo tried to propose a general semiology in dialogue with the Saussurian heritage which at the time was the battle field of several different theoretical projects. But Thảo was also particularly sensitive to the most recent trends in ethology, animal psychology, and palaeoarchaeology. Thus, he was aware of the need to put in place a systematic survey of language origins which would link findings coming from several different research fields. And he tried to do this under the sign of the dialectical materialism during the hardest moment in the Cold War. When Hanoi was being bombed by US Army, Thảo dealt with Soviet anthropology, Western palaeoarchaeology, linguistics, semiotics, Husserlian phenomenology, and tried to suggest a general insight of natural history and human nature. This leads us to wonder what dealing with language origins from the standpoint of dialectical materialism in a so troubled

period from a political and cultural point of view exactly meant.

From a more theoretical point of view, the value of the ILC is also indisputable. In his ILC, Thảo clearly highlighted to what extent the question of the origin of consciousness must be understood in chronological terms. Thus, in the ILC he took into due consideration the need to explain the human-specific form of thinking from an evolutionary point of view which cannot dismiss the slow evolution of symbolic abilities among our ancestors. At first glance, there are clear advantages to be gained from the perspective of phylogeny: viewed from the perspective of glottogenesis, consciousness can be analysed in a simpler way. To him, only describing the slow development of language light can be shed on the first forms of consciousness. By this, Thảo completely reformulated the Hegelian phenomenology of consciousness in that he described the slow formation of consciousness through stages among our pre-human ancestors during their practical life. Added to that, the discovery of *Homo habilis* in 1964 and the increasingly frequent publications dedicated to social and communication behavior in animals attracted Thảo's attention. This leads us to ask what kind of rationality is at work in the formulation of a theory of language origins that at the same time deals with general philosophical questions and the empirical sciences.

Historians of philosophical ideas have rarely paid attention to Thảo's linguistic thought. Unfortunately, it still lacks a systematic enquiry of Thảo's philosophy of language; and nobody has even taken his hypothesis on language origins into account in great detail. Historic relevance of Thảo's philosophy is, nonetheless, unquestionable. Note, for example, that by the 1940s and the 1950s, Thảo was considered one of the most relevant French scholars in phenomenology. Over the years, he never stopped working on Husserlian phenomenology and tried to completely reformulate it. It is remarkable that some assumptions of dialectical materialism lead Thảo to argue that both the practical life and language are prerequisite conditions for having consciousness. Consciousness is not an original datum, but the result of the dialectical interplay of social, working, semiotic, embodied and preexisting practices. For Thảo the phenomenological method cannot fully account the constitutive process of consciousness. It will be worth investigating further how the objectivity of semiotic and social practices which are

the foundation of subjectivity outlines the horizon of Thảo's research. For the time being, we shall focus on the fact that Thảo's philosophy of language could be regarded as a relevant chapter in the history of phenomenology which must still be written. And for this reason, the following study adds fresh research in the history of philosophy.

Needless to say, a reevaluation of Thảo's account might be also useful in the field of the history of linguistic ideas. It shall be our concern to substantiate this thesis in the following chapters. The only point we need to note for now is that a central claim of Thảo's theory, for example, is his criticism towards Saussure's semiological model. In the light of the recent interest in the theoretical affinities between linguistic structuralism and the Husserlian phenomenology (Stawarska 2014; De Palo 2016; Aurora 2017), the way in which Thảo conciliated his criticisms towards both the Saussurian semiology and the Husserlian philosophy is undoubtedly an interesting chapter in the history of interactions between linguistics and phenomenology. Added to this, given the transdisciplinary nature of investigations into the origins of language, a research concerning Thảo's anthropological, philosophical, linguistic, and psychological sources could at last cast (new) light on the distinctive dissemination of certain linguistic ideas during the 20th century.

Thảo's materialist turn of Husserlian philosophy led to pursue a monistic approach to the puzzle surrounding consciousness. Thảo's conception of language could still be appreciated in the context of current philosophical and scientific debates on the so-called "mind-body problem". Our study reflects some of the fundamental questions in the understanding of consciousness that have taken place over the last years and, as such, it will be of great interest to professionals and scholars who are interested in the subject. But questions about consciousness have proved to be notoriously difficult. Lots of question will be left open because, in this study, we shall limit ourselves to a general analysis of the basic features characterizing the question of language origins and language faculty.

We firmly believe that Thảo's theory could help us to better understand some aspects of the current debate on language origins. This point is particularly relevant because, in recent years, a new way of dealing with the old question of the origin of language is emerging. In this regard, scholars are talking about

“evolutionary linguistics”. The question of the origin of language is not something new that has appeared in the past decades. Nor the debate on the scientific status of a research of this kind is something new. However, there is no doubt that, in recent years, there has been a proliferation of works, conferences, research centres, journals, etc., devoted to the subject. In this regard, we can wonder if what we are witnessing is the formation of an unprecedented sociological, scientific and academic entity. Among the several topics we can choose to analyse, we could address the question whether there are taken-for-granted knowledge and procedures underlying current debates on language origins. In this regard, one of the most sensitive aspects of the debate is the explanatory power of thought experiments. Do they rely on existing data and concepts? Can they do something else than integrating existing data? Can they be particularly effective at providing the shift in perspective? To what extent can they solve problems? What is supposed to be the universal features of the human condition? What is the role played by our biological substrate? And what is the role played by sets of social relations? Do scholars argue for biological determinism or historical contingencies? What is the role of women in thoughts experiments? How does language naturally evolve? What are the properties of naturally evolved language? Is language cut free of the social world? Is language regarded as an autonomous system? In determining the nature of language and its role in society, is language essentially social or just contingently? In this case, too, we have to deal with problems of great complexity. A detailed survey of them, along with a discussion of the current debate on language origins, would have necessitated enlarging the following work considerably. However, the following study does not preclude any possibility of engaging the most fundamental and crucial features of the current debate on language origins.

Lastly, we can go so far as to say that a research concerning Thảo’s theory of language origins indicates some of the ways in which other relevant issues of great interest can be approached. The present study will provide the basis for a more general reflection on some topics that are just as topical as ever: the relation between humankind and other animal species than the human one, the logic of nature and history, the origins of humankind, the emergence of human cognition,

the function of society, the role of institutions, and so on. In short, the following work will provide a detailed analysis of Thảo's theory without neglecting wide-ranging and fascinating issues of general interest. Now that we have outlined the main strong points of the present study, we are going to describe the scientific starting point of our research.

2. Literature Review

Exploring available literature on this subject will also enable us to examine the extent to which Thảo's reflection on language has been debated up to now. As a means of evaluating the excellent reputation enjoyed by Thảo among his contemporaries, we will begin by citing some records. Here is how the French philosopher Jean Cavailles described Thảo's dissertation in 1942:

Mr. Thảo has read all of Husserl's published works, some unpublished, most of the commentaries. *His work is itself one of the best French studies on Husserl* and well above the level of ordinary degree. It reveals many skills and a penetrating philosophical reflection [M. Thảo a lu toute l'œuvre publiée de Husserl, quelques inédits, l'essentiel des commentaires. *Son travail constitue lui-même une des meilleures études françaises sur Husserl* et dépasse nettement le niveau du diplôme ordinaire. Il révèle des connaissances nombreuses et une réflexion philosophique pénétrante.] (from Israël 2005: 57; see fig. 1).

Louis Althusser ([1992] 1995: 176) wrote: "I also got to know a little about Husserl, whom we discovered thanks to the phenomenological Marxists Desanti and Tran Duc Thảo, whose thesis I found brilliant." Along the same line, it could be also interesting to mention the testimony of Jean-François Revel (1924–2006). Since the first years after his graduate thesis, Thảo had appeared to his comrades as a "demi-god of thought" (Revel 1997: 101-102).

After the publication of *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique* (Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism, 1951; henceforth PDM), Thảo reputation became enormous. In this regard, we should also mention Roland Barthes' quite favourable review of Thảo's PDM. Jean-François Lyotard ([1954] 1991: 51, fn. 2) explicitly set out his admiration for Thảo and affirmed: "I must recommend this remarkable little book too strongly to the reader" (also cf. id., p.

125, 128-129). But Lyotard continued to discuss Thảo's text in following pages¹. Jacques Derrida ([1962] 1989: 65) invoked Thảo in his famous *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry. An introduction*. A few years later, Derrida ([1990] 2004: 117) still remembered Thảo's philosophical project. In opposition to the dominant approach to phenomenology of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, according to Derrida, Thảo's PDM pointed to the scholars of 1950s the philosophical task of dealing with the history of ideal objects and of truth. Paul Ricœur (2004: 168) dedicated to "Trần Đức Thảo's remarkable book [PDM]" a chapter in his *À l'école de la phenomenology* (see also *Le travail et la parole* in Ricœur [1955] 1965)². Other examples could be added. At least, many eminent French scholars considered Thảo as one of the main philosophers of the last century. Nevertheless, Thảo's choice to live in Vietnam from 1952 to 1991 might probably be a previous answer to explain the reason why his work is "no longer discussed today" (Derrida [1990] 2004: 117; see also Herrick 2005).

If one asks to what extent Thảo's philosophical project and his theory of language origins have been effectively discussed in the past fifty years, at least three points must be kept in mind. Firstly, it is clear, from the very start, that the problem of Thảo's Vietnamese period (1952-1991) is essential to determine the meaning of his works and especially of those he wrote between the 1960s and 1980s (see for instance Melançon 2016a). In the following paragraph, we will largely use the results of some recent studies devoted to Thảo's Vietnamese period. For the moment, we shall take note of the fact that an important part of the recent literature on Thảo is eminently biographical and historical (see for instance Thảo 1993, 2004 and 2013; Hémery 2013; Papin 2013 and Feron 2014).

Secondly, over the course of the period in question, most of the interest in Thảo's works has been extensively devoted to his writings on Husserlian

1 Montag (2013: 47) writes: "Precisely because both Thảo and Lyotard explicitly sought not to uncover and present the meaning of Husserl's texts, assuming, within each period of Husserl's thought at least, a coherence, but rather to describe the coexistence of contradictory meanings in a textual disarray that was never definitely overcome, their reading appeared superior to earlier efforts to criticize (but sympathetically) Husserl, such as Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego* (1937)."

2 Ricœur carefully read the copy of PDM Thảo gave him and wrote down meticulous notes of Thảo's PDM in a notebook (for the notebook see Fond Paul Ricœur, Dossier d'archive 99, 13893-13911; for the copy of PDM see the library of the Fond Paul Ricœur, document J142.7). Fond Paul Ricœur: Institut Protestant de Théologie, 83 boulevard Arago 75014, Paris.

phenomenology. In connection with this, according to some scholars, it is essential to determine the role played by Thảo among French students in phenomenology (see Brouillet 1970, Invitto 1985, Jarczyk & Labarrière 1990, van Breda 1962, de Warren 2009, Moati 2013, Feron 2017). As we have already noticed, Thảo's writings have been largely appreciated by French contemporary scholars who were interested in phenomenology (Derrida, Ricœur, Barthes, Althusser, etc.). The extent to which those scholars invoked Thảo's works more or less polemically exceeds the scope of our present paragraph. For the time being, we shall leave that question open. The only point we need to note for now is that we can observe a wider interest in Thảo's writings on phenomenology starting from the 1960s (Neri 1966; Rovatti 1970; see also Tomassini's Italian translation of PDM in 1970; Picone 1972, Tomassini 1972, Brouillet 1975, Nardi 1994, Herman 1997, Benoist 2013, Feron 2013, Giovannangeli 2013, Melegari 2014, Melançon 2016b). Symptomatically, this literature is eminently introductory rather being addressed to those working on Thảo's philosophy almost exclusively.

It seems quite relevant that several works are devoted to Thảo's reflection on politics and especially on Marxism and colonialism (see Federici 1970, McHale 2002, Majkut 2003, Espagne 2013, Melançon 2013, Simon-Nahum 2013). This is the third point we must keep in mind. Now that we have outlined the main trends of secondary literature devoted to Thảo's life and works, let us mention a book of collected papers edited by Benoist and Espagne in 2013 which summarises the three main trends of secondary literature on Thảo. It must be regarded as the first attempt to offer a comprehensive survey on Thảo's intellectual activity.

What emerges from all that has been said is the role assigned to Thảo's philosophy of language. Needless to say, most papers devoted to Thảo's philosophy of language took the shape of reviews and brief articles (Drévilion 1973, Caveing 1974, François 1974, Haudricourt 1974, Trognon 1975, Schmitz 1978, Baribeau 1986, Tochahi 2013). The fact is not surprising because the study of Thảo's writings is far from being highly selective and is still focused on some general issues. What is necessary to examine Thảo's philosophy of language in depth is a wide research which takes Thảo's writings on language dating from the 1950s to the 1970s into account. Only after having done so will we be able to develop a detailed analysis of

Thảo's theory of language. We have already mentioned in the previous paragraph the advantages of a research of this kind. And the scope of the present study is exactly to provide the first systematic survey of Thảo's philosophical reflection on language.

3. Thảo's Life and Works

It is extremely difficult to establish when Thảo took a sudden interest in issues relating to language. Our working hypothesis will consist of considering that Thảo's interest in linguistic topics was the result of his personal reflection on the Husserlian phenomenology. To Thảo, the phenomenological reduction to consciousness had not been radical enough and, for this reason, Husserl failed to understand natural origins of consciousness. Given what he considered the main conundrum of phenomenological method, Thảo was forced to elaborate a new approach to studying consciousness. Faced with this problem, Thảo claimed that human language must be understood to be the key to have access to a better understanding of the formation of consciousness.

To begin to gain a clearer sense of what was and what was not distinctive about Thảo's conception of language, one needs a previous systematic and comprehensive overview of Thảo's life and works. This overview could be also of interest for all those who do not know Thảo's biography in great detail.

However, Thảo's biography is not always clear or renowned at all. The mystery that surrounded his life made Thảo's philosophy fascinating, exciting, and intriguing for a very long time. Even the most important information on his life, such as his date of birth, was unknown until a few years ago (see for instance Tomassini 1970). That seems to be a sufficient reason to devote an introductory paragraph to Thảo's biography. Added to this, Thảo's Vietnamese period shrouds in mystery nowadays too. It is particularly important because Thảo's theory of language was exactly drawn up during that period of time. This is another reason why an introductory paragraph to Thảo's life and works seems to us essential to our aims.

It is not possible in a limited space to analyse every detail of Thảo's biography in

depth. The present paragraph shall attempt only to map out the main lines of Thảo's biography and intellectual activity. Fortunately, in recent years, all the problems mentioned above have led to the proliferation of studies devoted to Thảo's life (see the previous paragraph for more elaborate treatment). Most of the information used here are based on those sources³.

Thảo was born in the little village of Phong-Tháp (part of Châu-Khê City) in the province of Bac Ninh on 26 September 1917. He was the son of a postal employee. It could be useful to remember that, at the time, Vietnam was a French colony. Thảo studied at the French *Lycée* Albert Sarraut in the Vietnamese capital Hanoi. Polyglottism was entirely part of his education. In the coming years, he would learn classical languages, German, English and Russian and he would continue to publish in Vietnamese and French. He received a French baccalaureate degree in 1935. One year later, he won a scholarship of the general government of Indochina in order to study in France. After having studied at the *Lycée* Louis-le-Grand and at the *Lycée* Henri IV in Paris, eventually, he became a student of the École Normale Supérieure's (henceforth ENS) in rue d'Ulm (Paris) in 1939. The same year began the Second World War (WW2). After French defeat (the so-called *Débâcle*) and the surrender of Paris June 14, 1940, Thảo left Paris and went to the South of France. In Clermont-Ferrand, during winter 1940–41, he met the French philosopher and partisan Jean Cavailles (1903–1944). Under the auspices of Cavailles, Thảo began to be interested in phenomenology.

In 1941, Thảo was again in Paris. Here, he personally knew Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) who was working as a temporary researcher (*agrégé préparateur*) at the ENS. Merleau-Ponty read with Thảo some pages of his dissertation *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Phenomenology of Perception). So many years later, Thảo would still remember the way in which Merleau-Ponty highlighted the

3 For Thảo's biographical information see Feron 2014, Giao 1988, Hémery 2013, Israël 2005, Papin 2013, Melançon 2016a, Revel 1997; cf. also Thảo 1991: 1-11; id., 1993a; see also Thao 2004 and 2013. See also the letters to Van Breda maintained by the Archives of the University of Leuven. For the period at the ENS see the following documents maintained by the National Archives of France (Saint-Denis): 61AJ/174, 175, 176, 191. See also de Warren 2009 for a brief but meticulous introduction. For the earliest Thảo's Vietnamese period of see the testimony of Tô Hoài (1992: chap. 2) who represents him as enthusiast and naïf. For Thảo's political engagement at the end of 1950s, cf. Kux and Dall'Ongaro 1967: 117-125.

relevance of Husserl's last writings such as *Erfahrung und Urteil* (Experience and Judgment) and the first two sections of *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften* (The Crisis of European Sciences). Genetic phenomenology and the problem of the epistemological status of phenomenology marked Th  o's first encounter with Husserlian phenomenology. In 1942 Th  o defended a thesis (*m  moire*; DES, Dipl  me d'  tudes sup  rieures) about the phenomenological method. One year later he passed as second *ex-aequo* the *agr  gation* in philosophy (Spring 1943). Interestingly, he was the first Vietnamese who passed the *agr  gation* in philosophy. But he was *non class  *: he won but he cannot become a professor in France because was not a French citizen but a *prot  g   fran  ais*.

After the *agr  gation*, Th  o started working again on phenomenology (September 1943). From January to April 1944 he spent some time at the Husserl-Archive in Louvain (Belgium) where he read some Husserl's unpublished works⁴. He transferred several unpublished Husserl's documents in Paris. He kept some of them by him until 1946 and some of them until 1948. In June 1944, Th  o began to rework his dissertation on phenomenology under the supervision of the French philosopher Emile Br  hier (1876–1952). The text largely circulated among his colleagues at the ENS. Th  o's dissertation could be regarded as one of the first academic works on phenomenology and it probably seemed interesting in particular in the light of the role assigned to last Husserlian writings. Unfortunately, the text is lost. Anyhow, according to Th  o's published works, this in-depth study of phenomenology leads Th  o to assume a more and more critical attitude towards Husserl's work.

To fully understand Th  o's philosophical career, we cannot underestimate his political interests. Slowly, political engagement leads him to deal with certain philosophical questions, and especially that of the relationship between history and consciousness. In the early 1940s, Th  o played a part in the political activities of the Trotskyist *Groupe bolch  vick-l  niniste indochinois* (GBL). He had the opportunity of meeting the communist militant Daniel Gu  rin (1904–1988) and the writer Pierre Naville (1904–1993). And, in 1944, Th  o engaged himself in the safeguard of Vietnamese workers who had been deported in France and employed to contribute

4 For the list of Husserl's texts he read see Tomassini 1970.

to production of weapons needed cause of the war against Germany. Simultaneously, Thảo became a member of both the General Committee and the Central Committee of Indochinese during the Congress of Indochinese (*Congrès des Indochinois*) which took place in Avignon (December 1944).

At the end of WW2, Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) declared the Independence of Vietnam (2 September 1945). Then Thảo gave a press conference to defend the independence of Vietnam. But, during the conference, he inflexibly answered to a question: journalists asked him to express his opinion concerning the way in which the French troops will be received in Vietnam and Thảo answered: “à coup de fusil!” (With guns!). After a few days the political group of which he was the political leader is dissolved by order of the Ministry of the Interior. Thảo was arrested on 6 October and incarcerated in the Santé Prison (Paris) from 9 October to 16 December 1945 (see fig. 3). During the imprisonment, he wrote two articles: *Sur l’Indochine* (On Indochina, 1946) and *Marxisme et Phénoménologie* (Marxism and Phenomenology, 1946). Both revealed the immediate results of Thảo’s earliest intellectual and political experiences.

Thảo (1946a) discussed the Husserlian notion of *Lebenswelt* (monde de la vie, lifeworld) viewed as the key to produce a synthesis of phenomenology and Marxism. Thảo was disappointed by those Marxists who had merely postulated that the general structure of world-experience (*structure générale de l’expérience du monde*) strictly depends upon economic base. He, therefore, tried to investigate the relationship between material conditions of life (economic base) and the intellectual or spiritual dimension (culture, philosophy, art, etc.). It is quite clear that Thảo’s main aim was to elucidate the relative autonomy of superstructures. Thus, he set out that some economic elementary conditions furnish *l’allure générale* in which several ideological interpretations of the world could be conceivable. But economic base does not determine superstructures. Thảo had placed the subjective experience of the lifeworld between the two dimensions. It shall be our concern to substantiate this thesis in Chapter 1. Let us move on to the article entirely devoted to Indochina. The Husserlian notion of *lifeworld* was regarded by Thảo (1946b) as the starting point for all his subsequent remarks: French and Vietnamese have two different lifeworlds and, for this reason, they differently interpret the same events.

Consequently, a possible solution of the Vietnamese crisis could only be the abolition of the colonial structure which had produced two different lifeworlds. In the 1945 articles, the problem of the origin of idealities emerges clearly and for the first time.

After the WW2, Thảo became one of the most relevant scholars in phenomenology. In 1946, Thảo is invited to give lectures about phenomenology at the ENS⁵. From 1946 to 1949, he published several articles devoted to phenomenology. From a philosophical point of view, after a brief period in which Thảo was close to existentialist trend (see Thảo 1946a), he began to disapprove of Sartre's existentialism even more (see for instance Thảo 1949a). At the end of the 1940s, Thảo's philosophical project involved a radical criticism towards existentialism from a materialist and anti-dualistic point of view. In Thảo's work, the question of animal consciousness and the transition to human consciousness became increasingly relevant. Over the following decades, this interest would slowly lead him to focus on the question of the origin of language.

In the meantime, Thảo became even more sympathetic with Marxism and his political engagement became radical (see Thảo 1946a; 1946b; 1947a, 1947b). He supported the political view of Ho Chi Minh who probably Thảo personally met during the Conference of Fontainebleau (Summer 1946). And in 1951 Thảo's political engagements for the independence of Vietnam led him taking the decision to return to Vietnam.

Before the departure, Thảo summarised and published some results of his research into phenomenology (see Thảo [1951] 1986). To some extent, Thảo disagreed with Husserl's approach exactly because Husserl neglected the empirical origins of knowledge. After adopting a materialist perspective, Thảo tried to reevaluate certain ideas involved in Husserl's theory of consciousness and integrated them into a description of animal cognition. Consciousness is nothing other than the result of a given inhibited behaviour. In this context, Thảo gave up Husserl's way of thinking and assumed dialectical materialism as the theoretical horizon in which phenomenology could be successfully integrated. To Thảo,

5 One can consult the content of Thảo's lessons by way of the notes of his student Althusser (see ALT2. A56-09 maintained by the IMEC in Caen, France). I would like to thank Alexandre Feron for this information.

phenomenology may be useful to describe animal intelligence, but a coherent description of human cognitive skills requires an overview concerning the practical and historical dimension in which they arose. Thảo, therefore, explained the way in which human social institutions – language, politics, philosophy, religion, and so forth – arose from practical and collective working life⁶. For instance, before being a tool of communication, language was a working tool that rhythmically coordinated collective goal-oriented actions. Slowly, language turned into a personal mode of expression and, consequently, involved human-specific reasoning and other cognitive skills (see Chapter 2 for more details). The origin of language is, therefore, analysed in a key moment of the book, that is, the transition from animal consciousness to human one. Nonetheless, the space Thao dedicated to this point is extremely small. Furthermore, the phylogenetic perspective is only sketched out. He rather prefer to compare species living today so as to highlight their characteristics.

In 1952, Thảo arrived in the region of Việt-Bac that was the military base of Việt-Minh Army. During the first year, he wrote two reports on the economic and educative politics that had to be realized in Vietnam. The two reports are lost. Then he worked in the Department of Literature, History and Geography of the province of Thái-Nguyên. One year later, he translated some writings of the Maoist General Secretary of Indochinese Communist Party Truong Chinh into French. Thereafter he took part in the organisation of ideological re-educational activities in the province of Phú-Tho during the period of the Agrarian Reform. It could be necessary to remember that from 1952 to 1954, the Agrarian Reform was characterized by terrible cruelties, destruction of local traditions and the imposition of the Central Committee's political doctrine.

At the end of the First Indochina War (1954), Thảo had been appointed as Director of Department of History at the University of Hanoi. From then on, he began to teach and write in Vietnamese. During the same period, Thảo published

⁶ In those pages, as pointed out by Feron (private correspondence), Thảo followed the historiographic paradigm of Émile Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 1912) and Engels' *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats* (The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, 1884).

some historical articles devoted to the history of Vietnam and to Vietnamese literature (see Aubert-Nguyen 2013). Since 1955, he has taught History of Philosophy at the University of Hanoi and at the Institute of Pedagogy. A Vietnamese transcription of Thảo's lectures has been published in 1995 (*The History of Thought before Marx*)⁷. He began his lectures with Homer, finished with the analysis of Hegelian philosophy and included references to Western literature and Chinese traditional philosophy. In the meantime, he returned to questions concerning the origin of consciousness with two articles devoted to *The Origins of Consciousness in the Evolution of Nervous System* (1955). The evolutionary perspective begins to emerge in Thảo's work.

Thảo taught at the University of Hanoi until 1957 (cf. Papin 2013: 64). Meanwhile, Thảo supported democratic reform in two articles of the same year. As a result, the Vietnamese Communist Party –deeply hostile to every kind of revisionism – decided to arrest, try and imprison Thảo until 1961 (id., p. 79). After being forbidden to publish articles or books in Vietnamese, Thảo restarted getting involved in French intellectual life. Thus, he wrote some articles in French and sent them to some French reviews (see Thảo [1965] 1956, 1966, 1969a, 1969b, 1970). This was a particularly difficult moment from the biographical point of view. Meanwhile the American involvement in the Vietnam War (1955–1975) increased. Nonetheless, from an intellectual point of view, this is an extremely fruitful period for Thảo. In the 1960s he was engaged in a vast research project on the origins of consciousness and language, as evidenced by a series of articles collected in his ILC in 1973⁸. This project can be summarized as an attempt to formulate a monistic and materialistic theory of consciousness. Dissatisfied with the results of phenomenology, Thảo also sought to explain human cognition through the practical and collective life of our ancestors, following some indications he found

7 The version of Thảo's lectures corrected by Thảo is lost. Thảo 1995 is the synthesis of the notes of his students (cf. Papin 2013: 69; Thao 2013: 96-102).

8 See Thảo 1966, 1969a, 1969b, 1970. The first article corresponds to the first chapter of the ILC. In detail, Thảo 1966 corresponds to Thảo 1973: 11-57. There are small differences of editorial nature that concern examples. On the other hand, the two articles of 1969 correspond perfectly to Chapters 2 and 3 of the ILC. In detail, Thảo 1969a corresponds to Thảo 1973: 59-146 and Thảo 1969b corresponds to Thảo 1973: 146-219. In the same way, the last article (Thảo 1970) corresponds to the last chapter of the second part of the ILC (Thảo 1973: 220-244).

in the classics of Marxism (see Federici 1970, Caveing 1974, Haudricourt 1974, Frédéric 1974). The conversion of genetic phenomenology into a phylogenetic investigation into the origins of consciousness was definitively concluded.

In PDM, language played a role, but not a very relevant one, because it was simply the mental reflex of social praxis. Thảo's perspective changed in his ILC: the language is no longer a reflex of social life but rather an essential element of social practices. ILC is composed of three parts: the first one envisages the movement of the indication as the original form of consciousness, the second one is devoted to the evolution of propositional syntax and semantics, and the third one focuses on the relation between the Marxism and psychoanalysis, and more precisely the phylogenetic origin of the Oedipus complex⁹. In short, Thảo dealt with the three main stages of the evolution of the human language – pointing, syncretic language, and fully-developed sentences. There are no clear-cut distinctions between these three stages but proximate overlaps, slow transitions and coexistence. To explain the evolution of language, Thảo also described the interactions of some elements: physiology and anatomy, communication, tool-making, cognition, social relations, and environment.

In 1951, Thảo explained the origins of human language without taking the evolution of the human lineage into account. To him, linguistic skills arose among our fully-developed human ancestors. In contrast with that, as he set out in his ILC, prehominds (the Australanthropus) already developed a sophisticated form of language (see Chapter 7 for more details). Additionally, the evolution of the human lineage reveals a gradual development of anatomy (hands, brain, and sense organs), social life (labour, communication), and cognitive skills (abstract thinking and consciousness). But, similarly to what he had already made in PDM, Thảo kept linking the stages of human evolution with the corresponding phases of child development.

9 For the Oedipus complex see Freud's letter to Fliess (15 October 1897) in Freud 1954. See also Simon & Blass 1991; Ellenberger [1970] 1994 and 446; Perron 2002. For the debate on the Oedipus complex and the corresponding political implications (the so-called "Freudo-Marxism") see Bernfeld 1926 and 1928; Reich 1927 and [1929] 1934; Sandkühler 1970; Kätzel 1987; Reiche 1968; Marcuse 1955; Foucault [1972] 2006; Deleuze & Guattari [1972] 2004; Gente 1972; Wolfenstein 1993. For the universal validity of Oedipus complex in anthropological debates see Malinowski ([1921] 1927) and Lévi-Strauss ([1949] 1970).

Thảo tried to suggest a dialectic-materialist theory of language origins. It is clear, as we will worth investigate further in Chapter 3, that the main target of Thảo's theory was the French structuralism and Saussure's linguistics (see Thảo 1974 and 1975). Thảo's theory started from three hypotheses: i) consciousness emerges in and through the language considered in its materiality and in its practical and operational function; ii) language is not an object, but it is mediation between humans and reality, between the individual and the others, between the individual and the own self; iii) language cannot be studied as an autonomous reality, but it must be observed in the social and practical life. Then, he supposed the existence of certain fundamental natural signs in which the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not arbitrary (gestures, vocalizations, pointing, physiognomic expressions, etc.). These signs have a strong bodily character and are part of the practical and collective life.

In the 1980s, the international political context changed. Thảo restarted writing articles in Vietnamese once again (see Melançon 2016a). In 1979 Vietnam won the war against the Cambodian Democratic Kampuchea governed by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge (KR). In the meantime, Vietnamese public opinion discovered the atrocities of Cambodian genocide carried out by the KR between 1975 and 1979 (an estimated one and a half to three million people died). It could be remarkable the fact that, in this period, the diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China were not easy at all. And it is no coincidence that Thảo wrote a polemic paper against Maoism and the supporter of the so-called *Cultural Revolution*. In the same period, Thảo tackled Hegel's and Marx's dialectics. He wrote the article *La dialectique logique dans la genèse du "Capital"* (The Dialectic in the Genesis of "Capital"; see Thảo 1984) and a book devoted to the *Philosophy of Stalin* (see Thảo 1988a). This research allowed Thảo to reconfirm the criticism of structuralism and in particular his disapproval for Althusser's insight (see Thảo 1988b).

Archival documents refute the view that Thảo was alone and isolated in Vietnam. Let us mention just three examples. At the Department of Applied Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy and Psychology of the University of Padua (Italy), there is the Rossi-Landi Fund. In this fund it is possible to consult the exchange of letters taking place from 1971 until 1973 between the Italian semiologist Ferruccio

Rossi-Landi (1921–1985) and Thảo (see the following documents: (1) faldone muto. Titolo provvisorio: Thảo; (2) V4, cartella “Editions Sociales”; (3) 15°, “Trần Duc Thao”). The subject of the letters is the editorial project of a volume titled *L’Origine del linguaggio e della coscienza* (The Origin of Language and Consciousness) that would collect the Italian translation of some of Thảo’s articles that appeared in the previous decade in the French review *La Pensée* (see fig. 2). A wider correspondence concerning theoretical as well as practical topics existed between Thảo and the French philosopher Lucien Sève (born in 1926) and which took place between 1971 and 1986 at least (see figures 4-6). In the case of Rossi-Landi and in that of Sève, several books and reviews were sent to Thảo (see fig. 7). Moreover, from 8 March to 27 May 1982, Thảo was in East Berlin as visiting scholar at the German Academy of Sciences (Akademie der Wissenschaften) under the supervision of Vincent von Wroblewsky (see fig. 8). The three examples we have mentioned show very well that Thảo was not alone and isolated but rather he was up-to-date on most recent research (as it is clear in so far as one takes the chronology of Thảo’s references in his ILC into account: see figure 20). The reason for this interest in empirical sciences is that dialectical materialism was considered by Thảo as a synthetic approach to the sciences against abstract philosophical speculation.

Let us now to move on to a letter of Thảo to the French philosopher Guy Besse (1919–2004) dating 1 February 1987 (see fig. 9; Thảo 1987a). Thảo talked about a collection of essays and he called them *Recherches anthropologiques* (Anthropological Investigations; see fig. 10). Thảo also said that he had already proposed such a collection to the French Communist editor *Messidor/Editions sociales*. The book was supposed to be composed of three essays: *L’origine du premier homme* (The Origins of First Human Being), *Le concept de l’homme* (The Concept of Human Being), and *La formation de l’homme* (The Formation of Human Being). With regard to these essays, two of them remained unpublished: *L’origine du premier homme* (The Birth of First Human Being; Thảo probably referred to a manuscript entitled *La naissance du premier homme* and dated November 1985: see Thảo 1985; in 1986, he published an article with the same title) and *Le concept de l’homme* (August 1986; see Thảo 1986b). The question of the origin of consciousness, of humanity, and of language had already slowly emerged during the 1940s and 1950s, starting from a review of

genetic phenomenology and under the aegis of dialectical materialism as a method to put in relations several different research field. The issue is now firmly established as the main interest of Thảo's philosophical reflection.

La formation de l'homme was published by Thảo himself in 1991 (see Thảo 1991). This book was composed of *La formation de l'homme* (September 1986) with a *Preface*, an *Introduction* devoted to an analysis of some recent findings in genetics, an *Appendix to the Introduction* dedicated to the communication system of chimpanzees (June 1983). In the same period, Thảo also published two articles concerning language origins. Those two articles are entitled *Mouvement de l'indication et certitude sensible* (The Movement of Indication and the Sensible Certitude, see Thảo 1981 and 1983). Unfortunately, a deep analysis of the *Anthropological Investigations* cannot be fulfilled by the present study because of the additional philological work which is necessarily required to offer the content of Thảo's manuscripts and almost unpublished writings in an accessible form.

Interestingly, during the 1990s, Thảo's renewed interests in logic implied a relevant rehabilitation of Husserl's phenomenology and, specifically, his notion of *Living Present*. In a letter to the French philosopher Vincent von Wroblewsky (born in 1939) written 8 March 1993, Thảo described his last efforts and said: "As you can see at the beginning, my philosophical assumptions changed completely" (see Kail 1993: 141-142). Thảo probably alluded to his re-evaluation of Husserl's philosophy that allowed him to rediscover some of his own philosophical assumptions of the 1940s and 1950s. Unfortunately, the achieving of such a philosophical, ideological and scientific project would be suddenly interrupted by his death in Paris. He returned to Paris in 1991 sick, elderly and worn out by years of financial and existential difficulties (see Marchaisse 2013). For instance, in 1992, Jean-Toussaint Desanti sent a letter to the President of the Association of the ENS Former Students to ask whether the association could help Thảo (see *Archive Desanti*, Pièce n. 239/2_1/46_1 p. 5 et 6). Thảo passed away 24 April 1993. His body has been buried in Văn Điển Cemetery (Hanoi, Vietnam).

After having briefly summarised Thảo's intellectual itinerary and made essential information available to the reader, all the necessary elements are there, and we can devote the following paragraph to the main contents of the present study.

4. Contents of the Present Work

Chapter 1 will focus on the development of an interest in language origins in Thảo's early writings. Among them, PDM deserves a special mention. PDM came up against a backdrop of growing interest in Husserlian philosophy and, along with other works, marked the innovative reception of phenomenology in France.

In this respect, our thesis is that Thảo became to be interested in language origins as soon as he tried to explain the transition from animal consciousness to the human one. But Thảo slowly came to consider this problem. Firstly, he focused on the problem of consciousness in genetic terms under the influence of phenomenology: How does consciousness arise? Thảo suggested that the development of Husserl's phenomenology must be regarded as a series of efforts to solve a conundrum that Husserl failed to solve. He reasoned that the consciousness described by phenomenology must be reckoned to be the result of both the biological evolution and the social history. Then, Thảo claimed that there is a need to assume dialectical materialism as the only coherent solution to save and integrate the positive achievements of phenomenology into a richer account. Thus, Thảo tried to explain the origin of consciousness from the movement of matter and then he was forced to consider the animal consciousness. Furthermore, as we will see, according to Thảo, phenomenology is able to describe the animal consciousness, but in order to explain human consciousness, the contribution of sociology is needed. At the point of transition from phenomenology to historical materialism, from animal psychology to sociology, Thảo introduced the question of the origins of language. In regard to living beings, Thảo set out that we could observe a primordial form of consciousness already in simpler organisms. More specifically, he argued that consciousness is nothing but the result of the inhibition of a given behaviour through a more sophisticated one. In short, consciousness is the inner experience of an inhibited act. In this way, Thảo introduced the "symbolic function" and declared that symbolic function could be reckoned to be an important juncture in the evolution of animal consciousness. The inner lived experience of the organism is no longer experienced in the inner flow of consciousness, but it is rather communicated to others through the behaviour.

Nevertheless, the way in which Thảo posed the problem of language origins did not yet depend upon an evolutionary insight.

Before coming to other considerations, it must be said that it is not the task of Chapter 1 to explore Thảo's treatment of Husserl's philosophy in great detail. As a matter of fact, this issue is discussed enough in secondary literature and everybody could find sufficiently thorough analyses of it (see Rovatti 1970, Tomassini 1970, Invitto 1985, Lyotard 1991, Ricœur 2004, Warren 2009, Benoist & Espagne 2013).

The main point of Chapter 2 is the analysis of Thảo's hypothesis on origins of human language set out in his PDM, along with a detailed study its semiological assumptions. Our thesis will be that Thảo's first theory of language origins entails some difficulties. In detail, Thảo does not seem to be able to describe the mediation between practical life and linguistic consciousness once the fully developed language emerges. The problem facing Thảo at this juncture is how i) to conciliate the linguistic ego and the real subject of practical life, and ii) to justify the link among language, reality, and consciousness. After having published PDM, Thảo was obligated to set out a new theory of the origins of language and consciousness in order to solve the difficulties that we have just mentioned.

As we have already seen, the results of Thảo's research dating from the 1960s to 1970s took the shape of a book devoted to the origins of language and consciousness. PDM had taken the origins of human language into account but did not highlight very well the relevance of language for human cognitive development. By contrast, ILC underlined the role played by language in the evolution of human cognition. In the following chapters, we will focus on the RLC. We will study the book from 9 different perspectives which correspond to 9 different way to approach its main contents (see Chapters 3-11).

Between 1974 and 1975, Thảo published a long article that may be seen as a biographical and theoretical introduction to some themes that he had already discussed in ILC. In Chapters 3 and 4, that article will be analysed together with ILC in order to show the way in which Thảo described and justified the general outlines of a semiotics that allowed him to talk about the signs employed by our ancestors before they spoke languages similar to ours in every way. In those articles, Thảo called into question Saussure's semiotic model explicitly and gave an interesting

treatment of Saussure's semiology. Chapter 3 will describe the main outlines of Thảo's treatment of Saussure's semiotics. In this way, it will be possible to raise the question of the theoretical conditions for having a theory of language origins. Our thesis will be that Thảo was forced to broaden the narrow limits of Saussure's semiology in order to study the origins of language. Emphasis will be put on Thảo's semiological project, i.e., the "semiology of the real life". This semiology dealt with what he called "the language of real life", i.e., the pre-conscious and social system of motivated signs which entail some fundamental significations. In Chapter 3, a deep analysis of the notion of the language of real life will be conducted on the base of Thảo's philosophical sources (MEW III: 26-31), along with the analysis of some examples of understanding of that notion within the Marxist tradition and the examination of Thảo's manuscripts.

In Chapter 4, we will deal with Thảo's criticism towards phenomenology and we will show that his theory of language origins seriously depended upon that criticism. In this way, the old longstanding philosophical issue of realism. Specifically, we will describe the way Thảo tried to link consciousness and material reality. Simultaneously, the meaning of Thảo's criticism of Husserlian phenomenology will become clearer. Since phenomenology merely described the lived experience of the subject and neglected the real relation between the subject and the material external reality, the Husserlian philosophy is a kind of subjective idealism and cannot represent a touchstone to investigate the origins of language and consciousness. Thảo anchored consciousness and intentionality in collective activities and especially in the semiotic act of gestural indication which involves the most fundamental relationship between humans and physical environment. And for this reason, Thảo stated that pointing must be reckoned to be the semiotic base of conventional systems of arbitrary signs, as it allows their reference.

In Chapter 5, we will see that, according to Thảo, consciousness arises from the language of the real life. Consciousness is the peculiar way human thinking represents reality and becomes aware of the contents of experience. And this is nothing other than the effect of the internalisation of language of real life. After that, a brief analysis of the Soviet debate on consciousness taking place in the 1950s and 1960s will be conducted in order better to understand the background against

which Thảo's theory needs to be read and to what extent his theory answered some questions that are at the very heart of contemporary debates. Some brief remarks concerning the debate on mind/body problem taking place in English speaking world in the same period will show how, during the 1950s and 1960s, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, scholars largely dealt with the question of consciousness. In this way, some philosophical questions will be introduced: How consciousness can simultaneously be the product of the nervous system and something spiritual? To what extent physiological mechanisms can produce something that seems to transcend matter? Or should we reduce consciousness to physiological mechanisms? What implications does the definition of consciousness as a social product have for the study of consciousness? To what extent social relations are involved in the formation of consciousness? Is nurturism the only insight Marxism had to support? Is there something more than experience and learning in the formation of consciousness? And then, did language reorganize the prelinguistic experience? To what extent does language have an influence over thought? What kind of conscious contents does language convey? In the conclusions of Chapter 5, we will assume those questions as guidelines to describe the peculiar way Thảo's addressed the puzzle of consciousness.

Chapter 6 will examine the extent to which the language of real life must be reckoned to be the mediation between social practice and consciousness. Before we address this question, however, we must begin by sketching a particular comparison between Thảo's conception of consciousness and Vološinov-Baxtin's one. Exploring some of the similarities and differences between those two socio-semiotic approaches to the description of consciousness may allow us highlighting the main assumptions of Thảo's theory of sociogenesis of consciousness. The main element in the approach Thảo suggested to the puzzle of consciousness is the internalisation of the language of real life. The language of real life seems to be the key to explaining the way conscious contents arise. Thảo's discussion underscores implications of understanding the origin of concepts and abstract notions. By this, he described how tendential meaning conveyed by the language of real life can be internalised by a sophisticated mechanism of self-dialogue and proprioceptive attitude.

Chapter 7 is intended as a detailed exploration of Thảo's hypothesis on the development of practical skills such as the use and production of instruments and tools. We have already said that Thảo's hypothesis on language origins largely depended upon Engels' theory of the part played by labour in the development of linguistic skills. But the main property which belongs to Thảo's theory that is of the highest order of importance can be at best summarised in his efforts to substantiate Engels' suggestions with the most recent findings in several fields of research such as biology, archaeology, palaeoanthropology, and so forth. The main thesis of Chapter 7 is that Thảo knew and took a position on contemporary studies devoted to the origins of humankind. Meanwhile, we cannot forget that Thảo seems also to be seriously influenced by contemporary scholars whose thinking betrayed some elements of anthropocentrism and teleology.

Chapter 8 will place Thảo's theory within contemporary debates on the role played by gestures, hunting, ape communication systems, phylogenetic development of cognition, and so forth, and the role of the evolution of language. The framework we will map out will enable us to appreciate the Thảo's theory of language origins within the broader context of Soviet anthropology (Spirkin, Bunak) and linguistics (Abaeb) as well as of debates on language origins taking place in Western countries in the mid-20th century. Given this scenario, Thảo's insight seems to be one of the most radical in so far as he assigned to gestures and multi-modality a key role to explain the formation of language and thought.

Chapter 9 will focus on some aspects of Thảo's approach to several different topics. Though various issues will be tackled, Chapter 9 revolves around the epistemological evaluation of Thảo's theory. In the first group of paragraphs, we will focus on the heuristic methodology used by Thảo. Archaeology and psychology offered Thảo findings that he assumed as the empirical starting point to suggest his own hypothesis. In the second group of paragraphs, Thảo's approach to nativism will be analysed in great detail. We will illustrate how the analogy between the development of language in the child and the symbolic skills of our ancestors is based, according to Thảo, upon the innateness of some of modern human symbolic abilities. After having described some examples of the results Thảo's approach, we will introduce some questions concerning the deductive method which seems to be

at work in Thảo's reasoning. In effect, he established a finite set of formulas (six) that can generate all the infinite occurrences of signs which arise during the phylogeny as well as the ontogeny. The third group of paragraphs will deal with the language of the child in greater detail and will try to analyse Thảo's theory against the background of debates among psycholinguists during the 1960s. Then, we will evaluate whether Thảo's hypothesis lacked a solid basis of experimental data or whether his elaboration of experimental data was really inappropriate. After that, some remarks concerning Thảo's alleged scientism and his relation to the phenomenological method will be required. Lastly, we will illustrate Thảo's representation of human language.

To Thảo, retracing phylogeny of language amounts to a description of a sort of phenomenology of consciousness in Hegelian terms. Chapter 10 will deal with the way Thảo described the most ancient forms of language – circular-arc gestures and straight-line gestures – and analysed the development of corresponding conscious cognitive skills. He claimed that language of real life and the corresponding forms of consciousness slowly appeared through dialectical shifts. To Thảo, the emergence of new signs depends upon the intrinsic contradictions of available signs which are no longer appropriate to new material activities. As a matter of fact, the language of real life evolved in order better to represent mind-independent things. Every sign reveals some inadequacies, and, for this reason, it could be transcended by a more sophisticated one. For instance, to Thảo, the qualitative leap that marks the emergence of the sign of representation from the simple indication depends upon the ability to transcend the limits of present perception. Furthermore, in this Chapter, the semantic formulas of signs of representation will be analysed in great detail.

Chapter 11 will substantiate the thesis that Thảo suggested a conception of the iconic nature of syntax. To him, the function of real sentences is to express the connections of things by means of the connection of words. To begin to gain a clearer sense of what was and what was not distinctive about Thảo's theory of iconic syntax, we need a systemic overview of his theory of the formation of the functional sentence. According to Thảo, the functional sentence marks the dialectical transition from the use of isolated syncretic words to the first real

sentence.

Chapter 12 will introduce the reader to what we consider the profound meaning of Thảo's philosophical project. We believe that Thảo wanted to suggest a philosophical anthropology which served him to identify the roots of alienation in modern societies. The main element in the approach Thảo suggested to the problem of human nature is the question of the origins of consciousness. To him, that question can be solved if we assume the standpoint of the evolution and development of human language. In order to understand Thảo's conception of language, it is necessary first to see some of the assumptions on which it was based and then proceed to its details. For this reason, Chapter 14 will start with a wide overview of the main trends in the history of the question of language origins. In that history, the link between language and labour emerged as one of the main concerns of what we will call "Noiré tradition" preceded by the name of the German philosopher who has long been considered a reference point of that tradition. In Chapter 12, we will also be able to discuss a central claim of Thảo's anthropology. He refused to reduce consciousness to corporeal activity. Rather, he preferred to see consciousness as an emergent ability of the human body in so far as it is embedded in social relations and labour. We know beforehand that the language of real life plays the role of mediation between consciousness and practical life. It follows naturally that consciousness evolves continuously over time because the transformation of language parallels the development of human society itself. There is an essential bond that links the individual and society, the individual and the creative power accumulated during human history. The roots of alienation in modern societies could be seen in the negation of that human essence.

Thảo's anthropology seems thus to be the exact opposite of Gehlen's one. Even if there are some similarities between Thảo's anthropology and Gehlen's such as the role played by labour in the evolution of humans and the active role played by language to shape the relationship between individuals and material world under the pressure of social demand and needs, there is a deep difference between the two anthropologies they suggested. Central to Gehlen is the idea that humans do not have, unlike other animals, a relationship with his environment set once and

for all on the instinctual level, genetically codified. Humans are thus historical animals. But if the human being is an animal open to the world, since human behaviour is not inscribed in a circle of predetermined activity on an instinctual plane, human passions should be disciplined. This is the main condition for having human societies. But Thảo's emphasis on the universal human nature does not allow us to underestimate the formative role and the open-ended nature of both language and labour. Thus, the last paragraph of this chapter will be devoted to Thảo's theory of material and intellectual culture as the human-specific environment in which humans live.

5. Expected Results and Further Perspectives

The main purpose of the present study will be to suggest a systematic survey of Thảo's philosophical reflection on human language. We will attempt to map out the main lines of Thảo's conception of language, along with an original analysis of his hypothesis on language origins that combined philosophy, linguistics, psychology and anthropology. Our efforts will tend to place Thảo's theory in its historical context and to study its inner development over the period in question (see the Conclusions for more details).

As has already been said, Thảo's ILC deserves a special mention in the formation of Thảo's theory of language origins. Our efforts, which have been devoted to a detailed analysis of that book to provide a historical perspective on how Thảo addressed the problems of language, could take the shape of a commented edition of the book. After his publication forty-five years ago, a revised edition of ILC can now be successfully edited. Scholars will have at their disposal a text enhanced by Thảo's first-hand *errata corrige* (see figure 15). A historical analysis devoted to the development of Thảo's theory and essentially based on the results of the present study – which largely depend upon unpublished manuscripts – will also enable scholars better to appreciate the philosophical value of ILC. This will be the most immediate and concrete further perspective of the present study.

Given that the present study will allow us better to understand the relation between the two theories of language origins set out by Thảo in his PDM and ILC,

one can explore to what extent his theory changed during the 1980s. Thảo's partially unpublished and totally neglected *Recherches anthropologiques* (Anthropological Investigations; see fig. 10), to be sure, represented Thảo's perspective on language origins during the 1980s. Thảo's *Anthropological Investigations* show several fascinating, unexpected and suggestive hypotheses which seem to deeply and essentially differ from what he had suggested in his previous writings. As we have already said, unfortunately, a deep analysis of the *Anthropological Investigations* cannot be still fulfilled by the present study because of the additional philological work which is necessarily required to offer the content of Thảo's manuscripts and almost unpublished writings in an accessible form. But the present research will offer the fundamental elements to carry out research into Thảo's last writings in the next years.

Once the purpose of describing Thảo's theory of language origins set out in the 1980s will have been fulfilled, as a result, a comprehensive overview of the course of Thảo's research will be finally at a disposal of researchers. Over the course of the period in question, Thảo suggested several different solutions to the question of the origins of consciousness. Only analysing the inner evolution of Thảo's thought throughout his career, light can be shed on the forms of his philosophical insight. In this way, it will be possible to gain a clearer sense of what was and what was not distinctive about Thảo's theories of language. This is the most important field scholars should investigate in the coming years.

Every theory of language origins – like any other theory – depends upon the historical context in which it is set out, and, specifically, on available technological, linguistic, historical, scientific knowledge as well as the given political and cultural background. We have strictly followed this assumption in the present work. However, further research could examine Thảo's theory from an epistemological standpoint in order to test his approach and highlight some difficulties (see the next paragraph for more elaborate treatment). Thảo's theory is an attempt to philosophically answer some questions concerning language and language origins. In his efforts, we see the same problems that affect today's research. The aim of questioning of this kind is to individuate new methods, new research fields, new problems, new terminologies, etc., which allow us to deal with still unknown

subjects or to analyse the logic which guides every investigation into language origins. What has to be also stressed is that Thảo's thought might be still useful to evaluate and appreciate certain hypotheses on the origins of human language which have been set out in the past few decades. His perspective can serve as a touchstone by which the current proposals may be judged. Nevertheless, we may also be reproached for making the error of anachronism and for this reason some remarks concerning our idea of what anachronism are necessary (for more details see the next paragraph).

6. Some Methodological Remarks

We should note that Thảo's theory of language could be legitimately seen as a consequence of his more general philosophical account. In this regard, Thảo's theory of language origins is neither a strictly linguistic theory nor a strictly scientific and experimental theory. Of course, everything depends upon how we define *linguistic* and *science*. For the time being, we shall leave that question open. To avoid misunderstanding, we shall now only anticipate that Thảo regarded his own theory as a scientific one, but, as we will also note in the following study, he used a particular idea of science. To him, every scientific theory must be based on dialectical materialism (see below Chapter 1). Whatever Thảo defined what was or was not "science", "linguistic" or "dialectical materialism", it does not preclude us to say that his theory is neither scientific in current term nor it was based on experiments.

To the extent we will deal with Thảo's philosophical approach to language, some brief remarks concerning what we mean by "philosophy" are needed. In our mind, "philosophy" means an investigation into the external world and our relationship with it (cf. Cellucci 2008: 19 ff.; cf. also Russell 1997: 170). Philosophy is not limited to sectoral issues but tends to provide a clear and general vision of the world (cf. also Plato, *Republic* VII 537 c7). Philosophy aims at developing knowledge and, thus, questions such as those of the conditions and nature of knowledge and methods of discovery are essential for philosophy. One of the main values of philosophy is to suggest new methods, new problems, new terminologies, etc., which allow us to

deal with new and still unknown fields of research. The history of sciences demonstrates this point very well. How many sciences arose from philosophy?

This gives rise to two consequences at least. Both results of other disciplines in a wide sense and existing knowledge are thus essential to philosophy. Secondly, the goals of philosophy cannot essentially differ from those of sciences – whatever it is the scientific standards a period accepts. Both science and philosophy are intended to develop our knowledge of the world and ourselves. In this vein, there is a kind of continuity between philosophy and sciences as a domain of acquired and established knowledge. But philosophy cannot blindly accept findings of other disciplines. Sciences deal with a very limited scope by very sectoral approach. Instead, philosophy cannot be understood to be a professional activity in the same way as sciences. Philosophy lacks objects, methods, practices and categories that are shared and established once and for all. For this reason, philosophy constantly seeks new ways to improve methods, research areas and existing approaches. And, in this vein, philosophy is aware that there is no guarantee that current methods, approaches, fields of research, etc., could allow us to discuss and solve new problems.

The very quick and operational description we have just given of the nature of “philosophy” serves first as a keystone for readers so that they can orient themselves throughout the following work. We can now say that our interpretation of the task of philosophy corresponds very well to that envisaged by Thảo in his writings. As we will see, a central aspect of Thảo’s theory is the fact that his philosophical research naturally takes as its point of departure both the scientific discoveries and the philosophical theories of the past. His aim was to propose a general theory of the world and of our epistemic relationships to this world. Questions such as our epistemic relation to the world and the nature of our thought are not specifically scientific questions, but general epistemological, i.e. philosophical questions. Thảo was aware that philosophy absolutely needs scientific findings to achieve its goals. In the following chapters, we will describe examples of how Thảo proposed a philosophical synthesis of the results of sciences. At this moment, what interests us is the role Thảo assigned to language in the formation of consciousness and his efforts to explain its origins. At this point, we

see at once the role of dialectical materialism as a philosophy that provides the theoretical tools for articulating and ordering the results of empirical sciences to answer philosophical questions concerning the nature of consciousness. In doing so, dialectical materialism would expand our knowledge of the origins of language, offering researchers some useful working hypotheses.

But why does a philosopher treat the origin of language to explain the nature of consciousness? It is remarkable that, according to Thảo, consciousness is the result of the biological history of our species and language the condition of its development. Assuming that, we understand why he developed a theory of the origin of language. But there is more. There are singular affinities between philosophical discourses and discourses concerning the origin of language. It could be useful to remember that theories of language origins have a special place among scientific discourses. Specifically, the question of language origins cannot be reduced to the tasks of one scientific discipline. Since Darwin's theory of origins of species, it has become clearer and clearer that hypotheses on language origins must be based on findings of several different sciences (anthropology, psychology, linguistics, biology, genetics, archaeology, etc.). Crucially, over and above the scientific value of each science whose findings collaborate to the understanding of language origins, one of the main issues related to language origins regards the way different sciences can contribute to suggesting a plausible theory of language origins. By this, the question of language origins meets an epistemological concern that has just been seen to be at work also in philosophical discourse. But if it is so, the question of language origins is a particularly interesting area for philosophers.

It is essential to note that often a theory of the origins of language is reduced to a form of the literary genre usually called *narrative*. A theory of the origins of language aims to illustrate a pre-historical one-time hypothetical scene by connecting events, real and imaginary. The test of the plausibility of such fictionalization of unattainable events depends upon indirect elements. But a theory of language origins cannot be reduced to fiction merely because scientific findings of several different scientific fields of research give theories of language origins some starting points. A theory of language origins must, therefore, be in accordance with available knowledge. The extent Thảo's theory was in accordance

with the available knowledge of the period will be discussed in depth in Chapter 7.

Starting from the results of the empirical sciences, in the sense indicated, does not mean that a theory of language origins obliges us to leave aside questions of more general interest. There is no doubt that topics related to language origins have been and perhaps they are still philosophical subjects. Language and reality, language and thought, language and society, the evolution of humankind, the relation between humans and animals, etc., are just some of the topics that the origins of language must deal with. That is the case with *Thảo*: philosophers such as *Thảo* tend to a theoretical goal which goes beyond a theory of language origins. But the question of language origins cannot be reduced to the work of philosophers alone. There are at least three different ways to approach the issue. First, as we have just seen, there is no doubt that research that aims at hypothetically reconstructing the origins of language has historically been and may still be a philosophical research. That kind of research attempts to provide a general overview collecting available results to suggest a plausible development of events. There is also the sectoral approach to the issue. This is the case of researchers who focus on the origins of language against the background of their particular scientific field. Third, research on the origins of language sometimes seems to attempt to legitimize and test methods, theories, and ideas of language that arose elsewhere (eg Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch 2002).

After having briefly analysed the relationship between the theories of language and the (scientific) available knowledge, we must address the other question we posed at the beginning of this paragraph, namely the question of the relationship between the origins language and linguistics. In part, the previous lines have already answered this question. Linguistics, like any other science, provides the necessary elements for the development of a hypothesis on the origins of language. Furthermore, we must admit that the topics concerned with the question of language origins are parts of the history of the discipline. And that is true assuming whether the standpoint of historiography of linguistics (Koerner & Asher 2014) or that of historiography of philosophy of language (Coseriu 2015). If we ignore that point, we cannot understand, for example, why the question was sometimes neglected or banned by linguists (see for example Auroux 1989). And we cannot

forget that nowadays too, though in a partial way, some linguistic disciplines such as sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, biolinguistics, etc., actively contribute to hypotheses on language origins.

Regardless of the definition of what linguistics is – whether it is a recent scientific discipline (Oesterreicher 1986) or a more ancient inquiry into language and languages (Koerner & Asher 2014), Thảo’s theory is certainly a paragraph in the history of linguistic ideas. Suffice here to remind the reader that Thảo suggested a theory of the faculty of language and its relation to the real life of humans. But we can draw at the same conclusion if we analyse Thảo’s efforts to tackle Saussure’s semiology. And the following work will enable us to see at work the transfer, the transmission and the reception of Saussure’s theory which was born in the field of linguistics and Thảo employed in a different context.

In this respect, it is important to think carefully about the meaning of the words “idea”, “theory” and “knowledge”. At first glance, we must observe that the present study is not interested to distinguish the history of linguistic *ideas* from the history of linguistic *theories* (cf. Colombat, Fournier & Puech 2015: 11). In fact, we will deal with the theory of a single author and our aim won’t be the long history of *ideas* suggested in different historical periods. In a similar way, we do not deal with a scientific *theory* in the current sense, i.e. the body of knowledge of a professional domain, as defined by relevant learned societies or professional associations. In effect, we do not deal with the history of science(s) in a strict sense because we do not tackle the issue of the emergence of a discipline, shared methods, standards, institutional goals, etc., within a scientific community. With the term “theory”, we mean a coherent set of concepts, procedures, methods, and statements. This use of the term “theory” will allow us to compare ideas, notions, concepts, etc., of different authors who worked in different periods. In this vein, the distinction between “science” and “non-science” does not concern us because Thảo’s research tried, on the contrary, to find a synthesis between domains and categories that are based on scientific criteria that do not always coincide. Thus, we will sometimes use the terms “idea”, “theory” and “knowledge” naively and interchangeably.

What does it mean to focus on the history of a theory about language? In July 2018 took place the 20th Intentional Congress of Linguists. A workshop has been

devoted to the history of linguistics and the call for papers explicitly emphasized the goal of the workshop: “contributors are invited to show how older, lesser-known or forgotten linguistic theories may support modern research.” Contributions focusing on the importance of the history of linguistics for current linguistic research are welcome! And what does it happen to linguistic theories which cannot support a modern research? Should we really exclude them from our field of research? When can this choice take place? What kind of modern linguistic research should be regarded as “current”? Should the history of linguistic ideas demonstrate its own importance? And should it do it in this way? Should linguistic historiography merely offer a rhetorical support for current research? If not, why can’t history of linguistic ideas open new fields of research?

The call for papers was not basically wrong but some functional distinctions need to be introduced for our purposes. We previously noted that our following remarks do not presuppose a distinction between linguistics as a science and non-scientific linguistic ideas since that distinction is not useful to our aims. Thus, we will mean by “linguistics” every linguistic theory which deals with the faculty of language, languages and language practice. It is precisely for this reason that we call the *history of linguistics* the historiographical discipline that i) studies the production, transmission and circulation of past theories, concepts and statements, which arose to describe languages, language and language practices; and ii) relates them to their social, economic, institutional and cultural context. Like all historical research, the historiography of linguistics can not be reduced to a tool serving to establish the authority of the present nor to disqualify current research. In fact, history of linguistics can also be interested in long-dead concepts that are not still active today. Historiography must provide reliable descriptions and explanations of the transformations that have taken place in the past by finding evidence and asking questions about that evidence.

The point of view of the historiography of linguistics is not the only point of view that one can adopt to study the past of the discipline. Moreover, linguistic ideas have developed over at least the last 3,000 years and several different approaches have been used over the period in question (philosophical, philological, erudite, quantitative, qualitative, empirical, theoretical, etc.). This raises a number

of questions. What could the historical conditions of the emergence of new concepts, reasoning styles, experimental systems, technical objects, etc., be like? Answering this question is one of the tasks of the historiography of linguistics. How did linguists, philosophers, grammarians, etc., articulate their statements, descriptions and observations starting from the practices, technologies, knowledge and methods available in their time? We call the approach that tries to answer such questions “historical epistemology of linguistics”. It is interested neither in deducing norms from past theories nor evaluating their validity in relation to present research. How did linguists, philosophers, grammarians, etc., try to solve the same problems as linguists today? In this case, we try to answer the problems of today’s linguists through the theories of the past. We call this approach the past of the discipline “epistemology of linguistics”. The evaluation of past methodologies and their comparison with current linguistic research is the task of the epistemology of linguistics. By “epistemology”, we mean the study of the foundations, methods, and implications of scientific knowledge. It could be useful to remember that the French word “épistémologie” corresponds to the English “philosophy of science” more than “epistemology” which is concerned with the theory of knowledge.

What the call for papers requires are contributions in the field of the epistemology of linguistics. Obviously, the epistemology of linguistics supposes two assumptions at least: i) the scope of linguistics is a set of ahistorical, general, and universal problems; ii) linguistic theories of the past are evaluated in the light of the same set of problems which troubles linguists today. The goal of the epistemology of linguistics is to deduce norms from the description of past assuming the point the standpoint of current linguistic theories. Evidently, one must dismiss the historiographical standpoint. Nevertheless, we can reliably distinguish relevant theories from irrelevant ones only after having carried out historical research. The description must precede every evaluation; history of linguistics must precede epistemology of linguistics. Another important point is also to understand that historical epistemology remains closer to historiographic research, while the epistemology of linguistics enjoys a greater freedom compared to the context of production and transmission of certain ideas.

The three approaches could be intimately related and interact each other. And we use all the approaches in the following work. But attention must be paid to distinguish them because each one satisfies different needs. We firmly believe that the historical approach must be the starting point of both the historical epistemology of linguistics and the epistemology of linguistics. It is difficult to introduce rigorous observations concerning the emergence of concepts and problems as well as useful evaluations for today's research without the support of historical enquiry. In the first case, we previously need some historical coordinates to illustrate the conditions of emergence a field of knowledge at a given time and place. In the other case, the evaluation of the solution of a given problem cannot be detached from the contingent packages, methods, proofs, contingent conditions of methods, evidence, procedures, etc., which were at a disposal in a given period. Only after having conducted the historical research, we can introduce the standpoint of the epistemology, whatever it could be more or less historically-oriented. In this vein, even if we will use the three approaches, historical research must be regarded as the infrastructure of the following work. Given that we will describe the historical, theoretical, social, etc., conditions of emergence of the question of language origins in Thảo's thought (see especially Chapter 1). After that, we will analyse his theory of language origins from a historical point of view and we will try to avoid every kind of anachronism. In the conclusions of this work we will propose possible lines of research that would take into account the extent to which Thảo's theory answers the problems of current research.

For the time being, we must describe in detail the historiographical and epistemological-historical approach that will be at work in the following study. While epistemology of linguistics is not basically interested in concepts which are not active today, history of linguistics, as a historical discipline, can also take into account phenomena without follow-up, without any continuity with the present day (Riot-Sarcey 1998). Interestingly, this allows the historian to reactivate possibilities of the past (Ricœur 2003). This point, as we will have seen in the previous paragraph could be important for the development of current research. Now, we do not believe that history can be guaranteed to be free from any influence of the present moment and especially from the expectations of the

researcher (see Koselleck 1979). One should also be aware that, as Aron (1938) noted, the teleological perspective plays a leading role in historical research. To make sense of evidence from the past, historians cannot ignore what happened after it (Farge 1994). Additionally, historical descriptions cannot be totally free from available knowledge. It depends upon the fact that history as every form of knowledge is an effort to solve problems – and in our case to explain how, where, why, when, etc., a certain historical fact took place – starting from available data.

What is furthermore an absolutely fundamental fact is the political and ideological role played by the link between the rhetoric of historical events and historical discourse – as is well known, at least, from Cicero (see *De Oratore*, 46 BC). The question of writing and narration of history is not an incidental aspect of historiography. Certainly, history must tell. But history cannot be reckoned to be a mere fiction (see for instance Veyne 1971). Nevertheless, historiography is a discipline which must test its own findings (De Certeau 1975; Ricoeur 1983-1985). Against the *narrativism* (see the works of Danto, Gallie, Mink, White, etc.), we believe that language of history does not create historical reality, but it rather interacts with evidence and available knowledge. The main difference between fiction and history is the same that exists between conjecture and verifiable hypotheses (thanks to the documentary, statistical, indirect evidence, testimonies, etc.). After that, it is necessary to add that historiography cannot be reduced to the recording of facts. First, the historical fact is not an absolute starting point. It is rather the result of the dialectic between problems, sources, and representations of facts or hypotheses. With the term *hypothesis*, we mean a proposed representation of a fact. Without hypotheses, all sources (or data) are at the same level. Once a hypothesis is made or adopted, the hypothesis organizes sources by representing the corresponding facts, creating connections, introducing causal connection, evaluating facts (not every fact seems worthy of our concern). At the same time, data give our hypotheses shape because we generate hypotheses from collected facts and compare our hypotheses with known facts, available knowledge, available sources, etc. In sum, there is a circle of facts and hypotheses.

Assuming that, we must add that once there are hypotheses, there is the effort to explain. Historical research cannot be reduced to a description of facts. We

believe that historiography can explain but we must immediately add that it depends upon what kind of questions we pose to historiography. As historians, we face with Thảo's writings. They will be considered as historical events and, as every historical event, we will try to explain why they appear at a certain moment and in a certain place given the fact that some historical conditions were at work. We call this kind of explanation *external* explanation. *External* factors cannot be dismissed to determine the meaning of a theory. We cannot ignore who Thảo was, where he came from, where he was educated, why he returned to Vietnam and his exclusion from academic and political life in Vietnam, the fact that his theory of language origins largely depended upon the necessity to write in French and addressed his writings to the French public, the difficulties to find scientific books and articles, etc.

Another objection that can be made concerns the fact that our research, like all historical research, necessarily needs general concepts to resume and designate theoretical trends (idealism, Marxism, materialism, physicalism, etc.). Generalizations of this kind are not unnecessary in so far as they are regarded as hypotheses. As such, they can be constructed from observations and may be verified at any time. Certainly, we must be aware of the historicity of our representations and concepts, especially when they do not appear in sources. And the researcher should clearly define concepts at work in her own descriptions. But we cannot say that representations are disconnected from sources, evidence and available knowledge (see Marrou 1954). In other words, neither sources form representations immediately nor representations create facts. Instead, representations, sources, evidence are dialectically interwoven.

In the following work, we will illustrate the conditions of emergence of certain questions in the writings of Thảo from a historical point of view. But we are firmly convinced that historical conditions are necessary but not sufficient to describe the emergence of a theory. As a result, we defend the idea that the agency of historical actors must remain intact in our work. We cannot give up to historize the theory against the background of the biography of the author. And for this reason, the *biographical method* could be very useful (cf. Schlieben-Lange 1989: 18). In this way, we are dealing with the development of a theory during the author's life. We want

to figure out how, why, when certain questions have arisen. And to achieve this aim, it is necessary to adopt a philological approach and try to find new sources such as letters, manuscripts, etc. Together with a biography of the author, the theory must also be regarded against the more general historical and cultural background of the epoch. In this way, a theory must be seen as an action which is simultaneously historical and ideological. We cannot forget what kind of public Thào addressed to: although the orthodox political terminology of Marxism-Leninism was widely used by Thào, he wanted to pursue a dialogue with empirical sciences. He translated and reformulated political concepts into philosophical ones in order to offer working hypotheses to empirical sciences:

You know that I have exposed in *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* how I have been led to Marxism by the *theoretical* contradictions of phenomenology and idealism in general, apart from all political considerations. Since then, experience has confirmed that my research is only useful if it remains purely theoretical and scientific [Vous savez que j'ai exposé dans *Phénoménologie et Matérialisme dialectique* comment j'ai été amené au marxisme par les contradictions *théoriques* de la phénoménologie et de l'idéalisme en général, – en dehors de toute considération politique. Depuis, l'expérience m'a confirmé que mes recherches ne sont utiles qu'en restant sur ce plan purement théorique et scientifique.]. (Letter to Rossi-Landi, Hanoi, 8 September 1971; see fig. 11)

At the same time, it means that our author and his theory cannot be reckoned to be one-dimensionally determined by the historical conditions (see for instance Febvre 1942). We cannot give priority to the collective dimension, the impersonal, and the automatism over actions of individuals. A theory must be rather regarded as an intentional act. The opposition between individuals and society must not be neglected but it should rather be reckoned to be dialectic interactions. In this way, we will analyse the theory of our author against the background of the theoretical context of reference. Another way of saying this is that we will see how Thào acts upon a theoretical context composed of philosophical, psychological, political, and biological discourses. So, we will analyse the margin of autonomy of Thào's theory, i.e., his work of adaptation, reformulation, translation (in a strict sense), and negotiation of more or less established discursive norms. Thus, the notions of *agency* (Thompson 1963) and *situated bounded rationality* (Barth 1966, 1967) will allow us better to determine the field of research of Thào. It will be so possible to

compare his theory with other ones in order to appreciate novelty/conventionality or authenticity/unoriginality of arguments and conclusions as well as to mark their limits. Thus, during the course of our research, we need to introduce what we have called the historical epistemological approach.

Pedagogical needs forced us to adjust the logic of research to the logic of clear descriptions of Thảo's theory. Thus, in the following pages, our historical-epistemological method does not always emerge in the clearer way. For this reason, few words are needed in this regard. Thảo's theory will be compared with other theories. Those theories are about some particular topics or more general ones which seemed us to be relevant to explain the peculiarities of Thảo's theory. They are theories that he knew or theory of the epoch which shared some assumptions, topics, methods, arguments, etc, with Thảo's one (see for instance Chapter 8). The comparison will permit us to focus on affinities and differences between them. Then we will try to explain those affinities and differences by theoretical or contingent factors. Our aim will be not to find precursors of Thảo's theory and ideas, but rather to understand why there were affinities and differences between Thảo's theory and the other ones. The comparison will also allow us better to describe some concepts and assumptions of Thảo's theory which are briefly sketched-out in the primary sources (for instance the concept of inhibition: see Chapter 2).

Certainly, the question arises of how to best reconstruct what an author knew. It is not always clear in texts and, for this reason, it could be useful to collect as many documents as possible (as we have already noted above about biographical method). But this method cannot provide us with the guarantee that we are not overestimating the role played by other sources. In these cases, we are often dealing with what it is not said, the implicit. This a conundrum which arises in every field of historical research. In fact, historiography cannot be reduced to record of events because it has also to reconstruct what lacks in the sources (Schlieben-Lange 1989: 12).

We will take the historical awareness implicit in Thảo's theory into account: the relation of Thảo's theory with its past, future, and present. Scholars call such an inner perspective on time *régime d'historicité* (François Hartog), the field of

experience and *horizon d'attente* (Koselleck 1979 applied these notions to the historical research), *horizon de rétrospection* (Auroux 1987). As we will see, Thảo's theory can be well seen as an attempt to transform available knowledge and bring together several different fields of research (psychology, archaeology, physiology, etc.) under the aegis of dialectical materialism. In effect, we must focus on the scientific model Thảo's theory was based on and which is very strange to us: to him, dialectical materialism is the scientific framework which gives empirical sciences their true meaning. In other words, to him, dialectical materialism is nothing but the philosophical framework (the metaphysics) of empirical sciences.

According to Auroux (1980: 8), we need to distinguish this explicative-descriptive epistemological approach from methodological and evaluative one. According to the perspective chosen in our research, we must, however, add some remarks. The historical and philological point of view is the precondition for having both the descriptive-explanatory epistemological approach and the methodological and evaluative one. According to the point of view of historical epistemology, what Auroux called "descriptive-explanatory epistemology," we will analyse the internal conditions of Thảo's theory. By this, we will also try to evaluate its methodology keeping in mind its historical and cultural context but without considering it as the only source of validity of a theory. A genuine treatment of a theory must not simply neglect the inner logic which specifies the peculiarity of a theoretical account. A theory joins a chain of implications and, thus, we must consider their value and function in the argument independently of the external context. What must be emphasized is the coherence or inconsistency of a given theory. In this way, we will test both cognitive mechanisms (the *opérations cognitives*: see Simone 1975) and processes of systematisation which were at work in Thảo's theory.

As we have already had occasion to mention in the previous paragraph, there are clear advantages to be gained from the point of view of the epistemology of linguistics. First, the epistemological evaluation of Thảo's theory furnishes the today's researches an informed awareness of some concepts they are using and their limitations. Second, the comparison of Thảo's theory with current research could be a means of evaluating new hypotheses, novel or opposing theories. In the

conclusions of the present study, we will suggest a possible development of this approach. For the purposes of this study, however, we shall not delve into the details of this point. And, for this reason, we encourage a further research to be devoted to this kind of investigations.

Certainly, we are aware that an epistemological research adopts an anachronistic point of view in so far as we suggest comparing Thảo's theory with research conducted elsewhere and many years after his death. But that does not mean that we are looking for precursors, prophecies, current issues in the past, etc. (see Febvre 1942). We would simply encourage to compare Thảo's theory with current research without assuming that a scientific paradigm (methods, topics, standards, etc.; see Kuhn 1982) is better than everyone else. The only profound legitimacy that can be conceived in the theoretical support of anachronism is therefore the fact that the question of the origins of language is a field of research in which several different approaches are still in competition. In effect, it lacks a shared conception of language, animal cognitive skills, etc. Thus, today's debate on language origins needs the support of older theories whose study – as Koerner (1978: 67) wrote about historiography of linguistics in general – promotes “skill in the judgement of novel or opposing theories, and thus at the same time safeguards us against uncritically accepting excessive claims in support of one particular [...] theory.”

Generally, a comparison between older theories and most recent ones could allow individuating what can be considered as “newer” in current debates. An essential condition for carrying out such a comparison is to study different approaches representative of a certain historical moment. Nonetheless, this is not our case. We deal indeed with a theory which cannot be reckoned to be the model of a largely shared approach to the issue in a given moment of the past. Since this kind of comparison cannot be taken into account, we must abdicate this still “historical” approach. We also believe that the “pseudo-historical” approach cannot help us to our epistemological aim. As Swiggers (1984) already argued, we believe that a comparison between a theory of the past and more recent theories is essentially wrong, in so far as they do not share the same theoretical assumptions and they do not start from the same empirical findings. Since one adopts such a

pseudo-historical approach, there is the risk to carry out a research whose goal is to distinguish science and non-science by assuming the current research as a norm to evaluate the past. We must, therefore, look for another solution to make the comparison between Thảo's theory and the current debate on language origins.

We defend the heuristic value of the anachronism (see Hartog 1980; Loraux 1993). Anachronism does not simply mean to discover a current issue in the past or a past issue in the current debate. In the first case, one justifies and reinforces current methods, hypotheses, assumptions, etc., through an ideologically oriented historical or pseudo-historical inquiry. Attempts of this kind are justified only to the extent that there is not unanimity among scholars but rather divergent theoretical views. But this effort does not contribute to enriching knowledge (see Auroux 2006). The second case, too, does not contribute to developing the knowledge of phenomena because it is based on the idea that current ideas are the result of a history that they conserve and convey nowadays too. However, even under that assumption, Thảo's theory do not have any historical connection with today's research.

What is the positive value of the anachronism? Before answering this question, it must be kept in mind that anachronism engages the substantial contribution of the researcher. We must indeed choose, correct, and ignore several different aspects of Thảo's theory in order to suggest a general model which can allow us to introduce the comparison with most recent theories. It involves the fact that we abstract Thảo's theory from his cultural, philosophical and scientific background. Without forgetting the nature of the practice of anachronism, we have just explained, we can now clarify the aims of this approach. Firstly, we can describe Thảo's theory in order to illustrate some cognitive operations underlying every investigation into language origins. Specifically, we can analyse relations between the following factors: metaphysical assumptions, conceptions of language, empirical data, arguments, hypothesis generation, methods of justification, etc. Then we can compare Thảo's theory with the cognitive operations at work in most recent research. In this way, we do not assume current cognitive operations as a norm to evaluate the past. And since a theory of language origin seems to be an interesting case of hypothetical discourse, we can highlight some general cognitive

mechanisms underlying hypothetical reasoning, imagination and mental experiment.

Secondly, we can read current debate against the background of Thảo's "revisited" theory. Thảo's theory and current research share the same field of interest in some way. Simply put, they try to describe and suggest a plausible mental experiment concerning language development. But Thảo's theory obviously needs to be *adapted* to current research so that it can be compared to the most recent theories. We have to "translate" Thảo's theory in current terms. We can do that because we know the source-context in which Thảo's theory has been suggested. As will be seen in the following paragraph, historiography must be considered as the essential starting point also in the case of anachronism. But in the case of the anachronism point of view, the work is target-oriented rather than source-oriented. We must highlight only some elements of Thảo's theory which can be relevant to current debate. At the same time, we would try to produce the same effects Thảo's theory aiming at in the 1960s. We can do it by generalizing some Thảo's statements – which still convey the same goal of original ones – and applying them to both current terminology and new available data. This approach can be justified only whether it injects new clarity and efficiency, new vision and energy, new dynamism into the current debate on language origins. Otherwise, we cannot demonstrate more than Thảo's theory is irreparably a past theory. And it is something that we already know. Instead, if Thảo's theory can help us to understand our troubles and solving our difficulties, the anachronistic approach can show its real heuristic value.

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Chapter One

The Materialistic Dialectic Genesis of Consciousness in Thảo's Early Works

der Kultus des abstrakten Menschen,
der den Kern der Feuerbachschen neuen Religion bildete,
mußte ersetzt werden durch die Wissenschaft
von den wirklichen Menschen
und ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung.
(F. Engels)

1. Thảo and Husserl's Phenomenology in France. - 2. The Phenomenological Method and its Content. - 3.1. Dialectical Materialism: Origins. - 3.2. Dialectical Materialism: Earliest Definitions. - 3.3. Dialectical Materialism – Historical Materialism. - 3.4. Dialectical Materialism as Official Ideology in the USSR. - 3.5. Dialectical Materialism in France. - 4. Thảo's Dialectics of Nature. - 5. Thảo – Merleau-Ponty. 6. Thảo's Criticism towards Existentialism and Physicalism. - 7. Thảo's Notion of Matter. - 8. Thảo's Notion of Consciousness.

1. Thảo and Husserl's Phenomenology in France

The question of the origin of language does not immediately emerge in Thảo's work. We can observe a first treatment of the issue in 1951 but until the 1960s we cannot find a richer discussion of the subject. Nonetheless, we can understand how Thảo's interest in the question of the "origin" - and *a fortiori* in language origins - arose against the background of a particular moment in French philosophy. In the 1940s, the interest in Husserl's philosophy was becoming stronger among French philosophers. What was discussed at the time was the epistemological status of the Husserlian phenomenology and the way in which Husserl had explained the genesis of idealities, meaning, and significations from both the perception and the lifeworld. At the same time, this interest joined two other debates. The first one tackled the legacy of Hegelian phenomenology, while the second dealt with the

scientific-philosophical project that went under the name of dialectical materialism, that is, the project of a synthesis of the sciences according to a dialectical logic and a strict materialist ontology.

Our hypothesis is that Thảo was primarily interested in these debates before developing an explicit interest in language and its origin. Therefore, the present chapter will try to show the extent to which Thảo began to reflect on the question of the “origin” starting from a study of Husserl’s phenomenology and its epistemological consequences. This interest would follow by an attempt to save phenomenology within a broader approach, that of dialectical materialism, in which the problem of genesis and origin seems to be inevitable. If the essence of a phenomenon coincides with the process of its genesis, as the supporters of dialectical materialism contend, then the study of human consciousness and thought cannot escape a comparison with the empirical and human sciences whose results need organizing in a unified description of the development of consciousness from animal world to human dimension.

Scholars has been discussing about the introduction of the phenomenology in France for a few years. According to Dupont (2014: 21), “Husserlian phenomenology became well known in France during the late 1920s, and by the mid-1930s original French appropriations of phenomenology had began to emerge” (for the *phenomenological movement* see Spiegelberg [1982³] 1994; for the reception of so-called phenomenology in France see Waldenfels 1983 and Monseu 2005). Dupont (2014: 154-155) individuates four stages in French philosophical reception of phenomenology between 1910 and 1939: i) Husserl and his criticism of the so-called psychologism; ii) the polemic over the *Ideas* and the *Logos-Essay*; iii) the popularization of phenomenology; iv) French original appropriation of phenomenology. According to Dupont, the French productive phase of the reception of Husserl’s philosophy started with Emmanuel Lévinas’ (1906–1995) writings: from *Sur les ‘Ideen’ de M. E. Husserl* (On Husserl’s Ideas, 1929) and *La théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology, 1930) to *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l’hitlérisme* (Some reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism, 1934). Against that, to Spiegelberg ([1982³] 1994: 426-427), the productive phase began in 1936 when Sartre published

La transcendance de l'ego (The Transcendence of the Ego).

Against this background, Thảo's treatment of phenomenology needs reckoning to be the expression of the French creative appropriation of phenomenology. One should add that the Husserl's death in 1938 and the transfer of his *Nachlass* to Leuven (Belgium) encouraged some French scholars to go there and read Husserl's unpublished writings (c.f. Dupont 2014: 146). As Merleau-Ponty before him (see van Breda 1962), Thảo spent some time at the Husserl-Archive in Leuven from January 1944 until April 1944 (c.f. Tomassini 1970: 278-279). Thảo probably heard something about Husserl for the first time during the winter 1940-41, when he met the French philosopher and partisan Jean Cavailles in Clermont-Ferrand. Then, in 1941, Thảo met Maurice Merleau-Ponty who worked on phenomenology and was writing *Phenomenology of Perception* (for Merleau-Ponty's earlier phenomenological account see Geraets 1971). Merleau-Ponty's reading of phenomenology was centred on the genetic method and oriented to problems such as the philosophy of history and the epistemological value of phenomenological method. Maybe Merleau-Ponty inspired Thảo's dissertation devoted to this topic and defended in 1942. In summer 1942, he probably read the *Sixth Meditation* of Eugen Fink (1905-1975) by Gaston Berger (1896-1960) in Marseille (see the letter to Van Breda, July 1942; see fig. 12). And we cannot rule out the possibility that Fink's project of a "phenomenology of phenomenology" influenced Thảo (see the letter to Van Breda, 27 September 1943; see fig. 13). Thảo kept on studying phenomenology during the second half of the 1940s and wrote some articles (cf. Thảo 1946a, 1949a, 1949b).

It is significant that the main contents of phenomenology were well known by Thảo. At this stage of reception of Husserlian works in France, phenomenology was analysed by some scholars to check its compatibility with Marxism. As an illustration, some of them could be mentioned here: Demarchi, Naville, Desanti, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lefebvre, Lyotard, Althusser (see Bandyopadhyay 1972; Poster 1975; Waldenfels 1983; Spiegelberg [1982³] 1994: 428-444; Dupont 2014). It is significant to emphasize that Thảo wrote PDM under the influence of this debate.

Meanwhile, a great political debate took place in France immediately after the Liberation in France (see Schoch 1980; Kelly 1982; Burkhard 1999; Lewis 2005; Judt 2011: 115-238). What emerged in this debate was a certain amount of political

questions related to anti-colonialism (Ageron 1973), Stalinism and its relation to Trotskyism (Kemp 1984), the choice between historical and dialectical materialism (Jordan 1967; Thomas 2008), etc. This point has to be mentioned because that debate had some consequences for Thảo's political and philosophical thought. Thảo's interests in political activities began during the WW2, specifically, when he joined the Trotskyist *Groupe bolchévik-léniniste indochinois* (GBL). More fundamentally, he engaged himself in the fight against French Colonialism and supported the independence of Indochina (see McHale 2013, Melançon 2013, Simon-Nahum 2013, Renault 2015). Under the influence of Ho Chi Minh, Thảo seemed lean towards a kind of moderate nationalism (see Thảo 1946b, 1947a, 1947b). In the same period began to be deeply impressed by Marxism from a philosophical standpoint. In France of the 1940s, he was not the only one to follow this way (see Cauté 1965; Gouarné 2013).

To explain the way Thảo tried to conciliate phenomenology, Marxism (even if a deep knowledge of Marx's writings still lacked in Thảo's approach), and anti-colonialism it could be useful to mention two of his articles of the 1940s. Thảo (1946a) discussed the Husserlian notion of *Lebenswelt* (monde de la vie, lifeworld, i.e., the pre-given perceived concrete pre-scientific historical world) viewed as the melting point between phenomenology and Marxism¹⁰. Thảo argued that lived experience of the lifeworld is embedded in collective activities which are based on a given economic and technical infrastructure (Feron 2013: 166 calls this lived experience "existential infrastructure"). On the one side, Thảo was disappointed by those Marxists who had merely postulated that *the general structure of world-experience* (structure générale de l'expérience du monde) strictly depends upon economic base¹¹. On the other side, Thảo (1946b) explained the reason why French and Vietnamese cannot understand each other: a possible solution to the Vietnamese crisis could only be the abolition of the colonial structure in so far as the colonial structure involves two different lifeworlds (the world of colonizers and

10 For the notion of *Lebenswelt* in Husserl's late writings see Hua VI (*The Crisis of European Sciences*), XXIX, XXXIX; see also Perreau 2010, Claesges 1972, Kerchenhoven 1985 and Waldenfels 1971.

11 For Marxist dichotomy see MEW XIII: 1-11 (*Preface to A contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859); and cf. Bottomore 1991: 45-48; see also Harman 1986 and Tomberg 1969.

the world of conquered).

After that, Thảo started to become more and more unsatisfied with two assumptions of Husserlian phenomenology: i) the fact that lived experience is the abstract moment of concrete and practical life; ii) the transcendental ego is the product of natural evolution and human history. Thảo's criticism towards Husserl and Existentialism shows the question facing him at this juncture: how to conciliate a philosophy of consciousness with the real and material life (see Thảo 1949a). In so doing, he tried to suggest a sort of naturalization of phenomenology (Benoist 2013). Furthermore, Thảo believed that dialectical materialism could solve the main conundrum of phenomenology, i.e., the risk of becoming a kind of idealism as far as i) phenomenology tends to separate the lived dimension of consciousness from real acts and ii) conceives of reality as related to consciousness. For this reason, in PDM, Thảo's aim was finding fault with the assumption of the ontological dualism between material reality and humankind (cf. Thảo [1951] 1986: 133 ff.).

Thảo's reading of Marxism was characterized by an improvement of the field of interests: not only did his research concern human history; it also tackled natural evolution from unicellular organism to humans. Indeed, the first paragraphs of the second part of PDM describe the growth of consciousness in both the natural world and child development. For this reason, nobody can overlook the role played by Engel's *Dialectics of Nature* (MEW XX: 305-570), though not exclusively of course. One of Thảo's most peculiar strategies in PDM consisted of mentioning the recent literature in the field of psychology. In developing the notion of *consciousness*, Thảo was increasingly concerned with the international debate on methods and results of experimental psychology and took the issue quite seriously. Though Thảo explicitly mentioned only a few authors – such as Piéron, Sgonina, Köhler, Pavlov, and Piaget –, he had probably examined in depth the core of the several psychological frameworks of his epoch (cf. Shiraev 2015: 102-418; see also Bloch 2006) – an occupation that lasted throughout his life.

The way in which Thảo's reinterpreted his psychological sources to point out a theory of the evolution of consciousness seems to owe more to Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl than to other phenomenological scholars. Indeed, Merleau-

Ponty (1942, 1945), too, drew out the implications of phenomenology regarding Marxism and some psychological accounts. And for both of them, Thảo and Merleau-Ponty, consciousness arises as perceptive and embodied consciousness. In this way, for all intents and purposes, Thảo arrived at a position similar to Merleau-Ponty's or basically continued along Merleau-Ponty's line. But there were some substantial differences between them. To Merleau-Ponty, the behaviour is a sophisticated, undetermined, and multimodal reaction to a situation. Against that, Thảo argued that the behaviour is the result of some physiological mechanisms (cf. Thảo [1951] 1986: 137-138). And Thảo does not agree with Merleau-Ponty's employ of Husserlian analysis of the *lived experience* (Erlebnis) to describe the consciousness of humans. To Thảo, indeed, phenomenology must be seen as a tool to explain animal cognition and nothing more (cf. id., xxiii-xiv).

In sum, Thảo took up studying phenomenology in a particular context in which different philosophical-scientific traditions (Existentialism, Hegelism, Marxism), research fields (psychology, ethology, natural sciences), and political interests led him to investigate the formation of conscious contents and therefore the status of phenomenology in the system of knowledge.

2. The Phenomenological Method and its Content

Thảo's PDM was almost exclusively concerned with "the essential features of phenomenology from a purely historical point of view and in the perspective of Husserl's own thought" (Thảo [1951] 1986: xxi). To draw a picture, when one browses through PDM to gain an impression of its contents, it is immediately clear the fact that the book is divided into two parts. The first one is devoted to Husserl's phenomenology (id., p. 3-132) and the second one to dialectical materialism (id., p. 133-220). What immediately stands out is the quantitative asymmetry between the two parts. The explanation for that should be sought in external and biographical reasons, of course: "The work that we present to the public consists of research belonging to different times and inspirations" (Thảo [1951] 1986: xxi). But there are scholars who suggest that this asymmetry depends upon an substantial error of Thảo's philosophy (cf. Ricœur 1953: 827-836; Neri 1966: 149-163; Rovatti 1970: vii;

Picone 1972): it is incomplete because the author does not fully develop the potentialities of the phenomenology as support of Marxism. And Thảo himself acknowledged that, in PDM, there was a conundrum. But it is the opposite of what some scholars propose: the phenomenological analysis of lived experience keeps him away from developing his own philosophical account (for instance see Thảo 1974 and 1975). There are scholars who, however, argued for the deep theoretical unity of PDM in so far as the criticism towards Husserl led Thảo to describe the natural and social origin of consciousness (see Benoist 2013; Feron 2017). We will try to substantiate this insight in the present paragraph. We believe that the contradictions of phenomenology led Thảo to put in place a broader approach to the problem of consciousness, which included the results of ethology, animal psychology, anthropology and sociology.

In the Preface of PDM, Thảo said that the first part of his PDM had been written between 1942 and 1950. More narrowly, in 1942 he wrote his dissertation (Diplôme d'Etudes supérieures) whose first chapter, he argued, was published in PDM. But it is not clear what he meant: does the first chapter of his dissertation correspond to the first part of PDM? Or does it coincide with the first chapter of PDM? As long as the dissertation will not be recovered no answers to these questions can be given. But we can affirm that the paragraphs devoted to Husserl's unpublished writings were written after Thảo's stay in Louvain in 1944. In fact, Thảo "study of Husserl", as Thảo ([1951] 1986: xxi) called it, continued during the 1940s. According to Thảo (1993a), the reading of Husserl's writings which were stored in Leuven confirmed the main conclusions of his dissertation: against the "most popular opinions" on phenomenology which regarded Husserl's philosophy as a doctrine of eternal essences which Husserl set out in his *Logical Investigations* (1900 –1901), Thảo discerned that Husserl's effective analysis implied a "philosophy of time, of historical man and of universal history" (Thảo [1951] 1986: 145).

To track the impact of Husserl's unpublished works on PDM, it could be relevant to underline what Thảo argued for in the Preface of PDM¹². To Thảo, there are deep differences between Husserl's published writings and his unpublished manuscripts.

12 For the list of Husserl's text that he read in Leuven (for the most part, they are the so-called Group C: see HuaM VIII) cf. Tomassini 1970: 278-279.

Specifically, Husserl's divergent intentions concerned methods and results. So Thảo introduced several terminological couples to describe Husserl's phenomenology. For instance, he opposed Husserl's "philosophical horizon" and his "descriptive method" (Thảo [1951] 1986: xxi) or the "concept of phenomenology" and "its actual achievement" (id., p. xxii) or, to mention one other example, "phenomenological idealism" and the "method of lived analysis." To Thảo, Husserlian philosophy fluctuates between two poles: the realism of some assumptions and the transcendentalism of its theoretical results, the transcendentalism of some assumptions and the materialism of its descriptive methods. But Husserl did not solve this conundrum and failed to understand that the lived experience he described is nothing other than the abstract moment of the real embodied life. This fact could be seen if we analysed the contents of Husserlian writings all over Husserl's career: i) from the objective idealism of *Logical Investigations* (PDM: ch. 1) and ii) the transcendental idealism of *Ideas* (PDM: ch. 2), towards iii) the genetic phenomenology of the late 1930s (PDM: ch. 3).

Thảo described Husserl's philosophical goal by tracking a constant concern all over Husserlian writings – although Husserl did not adequately develop it. Specifically, Thảo described the inner development of the Husserlian philosophy as a sequence of efforts to grasp the origin of the lived experience. In this respect, i) the *Logical Investigations* led the author to admit a pre-predicative perception; ii) the *Ideas* began to regard the sensible dimension as "the original *resting place* [couché originaire] on which are constituted values and ends"; iii) The *Crisis of European Sciences* and the last writings addressed the *lifeworld* (Lebenswelt). Specifically, Thảo highlighted that the lifeworld could be regarded as the "domain of human history" and "the origin and foundation for every intelligible signification" (Thảo [1951] 1986: xii). Consequently, Thảo reasoned that Husserl had slowly understood the role of concrete life (perception and human history) with regard to the origins of the intellectual world.

Thảo's major premise was the thesis that the ideal significations investigated by Husserl from his *Logical Investigations* were the results of the perceptive interaction with the objects of the world. But the minor premise was that the pre-predicative dimension corresponds to the life of the body. As a consequence, universal values

constitute themselves over time and at the level of the sensible world. But Thảo went much further and stated that the origins of pre-predicative experience of the world (the so-called *Weltkonstitution*, world-constitution) “correspond to the experience of animal life.” But Thảo did not refuse the transcendental account of the Husserlian philosophy. He rather refused to assume the lived experience of consciousness as something that is essentially independent of material reality. Specifically, phenomenology dealt with the idealised and abstract image of the life of consciousness and did not take into account the fact that the contents of consciousness depend upon a more fundamental relationship between the organism and the environment.

For Thảo, one must go beyond the way phenomenology conceptualised the lived experience. We should place the study of the lived experience within a materialistic horizon and seek its foundation and its authentic meaning in the material dialectics of the behaviour of living organisms and at the level of sensible life. In other words, the pre-predicative experience of the world is the common ground of humans and animals. It also means that the consciousness of animals and humans cannot be reckoned to be the starting point of what phenomenology called *subjective constitution of the world*. By contrast, consciousness is, in turn, the result of natural evolution and physiological mechanisms. Thảo, however, did not merely reduce the sophisticated life of consciousness to the physiological mechanism. To him, consciousness is the subjective aspect of the life of organisms. Or, to put it another way, consciousness is the life of matter becoming aware of itself. From this point of view, phenomenological descriptions of consciousness ideally reproduce the dialectics of nature itself.

That is to say that, as Thảo ([1951] 1986: xxiii) put it, “the transcendental subject thematized by phenomenology must [...] be identified, strictly speaking, with the man of flesh and blood who is evolving in the real world.” Since Thảo dealt with human psychical life, he acknowledged the role of history and the dialectics of production forces. Besides, the human lifeworld is the result of relations among the members of a given society. For Thảo, these kinds of relations firstly depend on the concrete satisfaction of needs. History coincides with the development of the forms of production. As a result, human psychic dimension arises in such a context.

The practical life precedes the inner life of consciousness (id., p. 49). Conscious contents are the idealized inner experience of the real contents of practical life.

The fact cannot be ignored that Thảo questioned the validity of Husserl's transcendental assumption and then dealt with the dimension of real life. In support of his position, Thảo rehabilitated the role of both animal behaviour as well as human societies in order to situate the development of consciousness against the background of its material origin. The inner analysis of phenomenology led Thảo to argue that contradictions of the Husserlian philosophy could be solved only by way of dialectical materialism in so far as this one could explain the natural and social origins of consciousness. But a further problem is that Thảo had to justify a philosophical perspective which links nature and humankind, human history and human psychic life, consciousness and concrete experience.

The questions of the link between animal and the human world could be reckoned to be the core of the second part of Thảo's PDM (see Brouillet 1975). Specifically, Thảo divided the second part of his book into two chapters: i) an explanation of animal behaviour ([1951] 1986: 133-178); ii) a reconstruction of human history (id., p. 179-218). To Thảo, dialectical materialism seemed to be the best solution to link animal and human world. More fundamentally, he esteemed dialectical materialism the only solution of Husserlian contradictions in so far as dialectical materialism shows the mechanisms underlying phenomenological consciousness and lived experience. To conclude, Thảo's description of Husserlian philosophy largely depends upon his understanding of Hegelian phenomenology. Not only did the inner development of Husserlian phenomenology seem to reproduce the way consciousness discovers its real nature, but it also represents an introductory way to a most fundamental account: the dialectical materialism.

3.1. Dialectical Materialism: Origins

Dialectical materialism represents a philosophical framework which may offer at the same time a naturalistic view of humankind without failing to appreciate its peculiar features depending on human social life. Thus, in Thảo's view, the most significant phenomenological thesis regarding the natural and historical

development of consciousness could be safeguarded only in the horizon of dialectical materialism.

Thảo did not offer a definition of dialectical materialism. For this reason, it could be useful to offer some historical remarks concerning this notion. In essence, dialectical materialism may be defined as a realist philosophy of science. Simply put, dialectical materialism argues that the world exists outside us and is in principle knowable. This is so because all the phenomena including human being are material. There is an ontological homogeneity between humankind and reality. All the phenomena in the universe consist of matter in motion. Assuming the ontological unity of reality and the omnipresence of motion, dialectical materialism suggests that all things are interdependent and interconnected. More fundamentally, the self-motion of matter involves some differences among natural entities. In this way, dialectical materialism differs from the materialism of the 18th century. For philosophers and naturalists just like Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751), Pierre-Simon de Laplace (1749–1827) and Pierre Jean George Cabanis (1757–1808) the interconnection of matter implies a causal chain of life-forms which might be characterized in terms of a simple uni-directional development without any qualitative change.

In contrast with that, dialectical materialism defends the idea of the emergence of new qualities in the natural being corresponding to new stages of evolution. In other words, it suggests that a new order of being has its irreducible laws even if it shares the same ontological status with previous stages. This conception of natural evolution and causation depends upon Hegel's philosophy. For this reason, before analysing the concept of dialectical materialism more precisely, it could be useful to devote some words to the notion of "dialectics" which represents the most relevant philosophical point to begin with.

Marxists usually recall Hegel's notion of dialectics. Before Marx employed the notion, Hegel had regarded dialectics as the most relevant feature of rational thinking. At the same time, he regarded thinking as co-extensive with the development of reality. It is well known his aphorism: "The *real* is *rational*, and the *rational* is *real*" (Hegel [1821] 1970: 24). The most relevant feature of Hegel's dialectics was the concept of opposition or *negation* (*Aufhebung*, sublation or

overcoming). Each stage of the dialectical process is the product of contradictions inherent or implicit in the preceding stage. For this reason, just to mention an example, Hegel wrote in his *Wissenschaft der Logik* (*Science of Logic*, 1812–1816) that “it is in this dialectics as it is here understood, that is, in the grasping of oppositions in their unity, or of the positive in the negative, that speculative thinking consists. It is the most significant aspect of dialectics” (Hegel [1812–1816] 1969: §§ 69, 56). From this point of view, the last stage of the dialectical method could be called *negation of negation* exactly because it denies the previous negation and so transcends it.

Marx recovered Hegel’s dialectics by essentially changing its application. Firstly, he wrote in the *Afterword of the Second German Edition of Capital* that “my dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite” (Marx 1887: 14). According to Marx, the main conundrum of Hegel’s philosophy did not concern the “rational kernel” of his dialectic – i.e., the logic of negation – but rather Hegel’s more general philosophical assumptions. To Marx, Hegel regarded the process of thinking as a real substance that transcends human historical dimension. So Marx stated, “for Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e. the process of thinking, which, under the name of ‘the Idea’, he even transforms into an independent subject, is the *demiurgos* of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of ‘the Idea’” (ibid.). Marx suggested bringing thinking back to its material origins: “It must be turned right side up again.” Marx would study both the dynamic of the real world and the human thinking. And he took into account the concrete history of humankind and not the abstract plane of logical ideas. Another way of saying this is that he wanted to describe the material and real development of human societies through the concepts of opposition and negation.

3.2. Dialectical Materialism: Earliest Definitions

After having provided an overview concerning the notion of “dialectics,” some remarks on Marx’s materialist turn of Hegel’s dialectics are needed. Firstly, Marx never employed the expression “dialectic materialism” but only “dialectic

method.” The term of “dialectic materialism” had been coined by Dietzigen in his *Streifzüge eines Sozialisten in das Gebiet der Erkenntnistheorie* (Excursions of a Socialist into the Domain of Epistemology, 1887). Before Dietzigen, Engels used *materialist dialectics*, but he never employed the expression *dialectical materialism*.

In his *Dialectics of Nature* – that represents one of the main sources of Thảo’s PDM – Engels pleaded for dialectical laws as they had been set out by Hegel and Marx: “It is, therefore, from the history of nature and human society that the laws of dialectics are abstracted. For they are nothing but the most general laws of these two aspects of historical development, as well as of thought itself” (Engels 1987: 356). Dialectic laws are the most general laws that govern both the natural development and human history. Engels reproached Hegel for having dismissed the empirical origins of the laws of dialectic. The laws of dialectic are nothing other than the result of thousands of years of observations. So Engels stated that “the mistake [of Idealism] lies in the fact that these laws are foisted on nature and history as laws of thought, and not deduced from them.” The laws of dialectics are the general laws of natural development and they could be regarded as laws of thinking deduced from observation of natural phenomena. If dialectic laws are the general laws of natural development, then they “therefore are valid also for theoretical natural science.” It means that in contrast to Marx, dialectics cannot be solely applied to the field of human history but also to the field of natural sciences. The scientific value of dialectics embraces the range of reality as a whole.

Significantly, some scholars doubt that Engels’ account could be regarded as a licit extension of Marx’s approach to social processes (see Jordan 1967; Schmidt 1971). But Engels’ insight was really influential in the history of Marxism. For this reason, could be useful to mention the following passage of Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886) which represent one of the most relevant sources of the successive debate on dialectical materialism:

According to Hegel, therefore, the dialectical development apparent in nature and history – that is, the causal interconnection of the progressive movement from the lower to the higher, which asserts itself through all zigzag movements and temporary retrogression – is only a copy [Abklatsch] of the self-movement of the concept going on from eternity, no one knows where, but at all events independently of any thinking human brain. This ideological perversion had to be done away with. We again took a materialistic view of the thoughts in our heads,

regarding them as images [Abbilder] of real things instead of regarding real things as images of this or that stage of the absolute concept. Thus dialectics reduced itself to the science of the general laws of motion, both of the external world and of human thought — two sets of laws which are identical in substance, but differ in their expression in so far as the human mind can apply them consciously, while in nature and also up to now for the most part in human history, these laws assert themselves unconsciously, in the form of external necessity, in the midst of an endless series of seeming accidents. Thereby the dialectic of concepts itself became merely the conscious reflex of the dialectical motion of the real world and thus the dialectic of Hegel was turned over; or rather, turned off its head, on which it was standing, and placed upon its feet. And this materialist dialectic, which for years has been our best working tool and our sharpest weapon, was, remarkably enough, discovered not only by us but also, independently of us and even of Hegel, by a German worker, Joseph Dietzgen. (MEW XXI: 293; trans. from Engels 1946: part iv)

Engels regarded Hegel's dialectical laws as the logical structure which may be seen at work in the natural world as well as in human history. Engels employed the expression "materialist dialectic" for depicting his own account and identified Hegel's dialectics with a description of the inner development of reality. To Engels, the reality is movement, interconnections and qualitative development from the lower stages to the higher ones. Dialectical materialism cannot be characterized in terms of a reductionist physicalism, i.e. the view that reduces human thinking to lowest interactions of matter. Among others, Engels argued for the ontological unity of reality. But he also acknowledged the functional differentiation of bodily activities. To him, for instance, the thinking cannot be reduced to chemical interactions in the brain. So Engels established a correspondence between material reality (natural, physical, and social) and forms of thinking. The reasoning is not independent of contingent reality. But it must be analysed according to the specific properties of mental dimension.

Similarly, to Engels but independently of him, Dietzgen stated that "to us, dialectical or Social-Democratic materialists, the mental faculty of thinking is a developed product of material Nature" ([1887] 1906: 294). Like Marx, Dietzgen wanted to show the material origins of human thinking. But Dietzgen argued for a non-reductionist version of materialism. Against traditional materialism (physicalism) which stated that "the faculty of reasoning or of knowledge predicated of the brain was not a substantive object of study" (Dietzgen [1987] 1906: 307), dialectical materialism set out that, even if the mind is a property of the brain, it can be dialectically regarded as a relatively autonomous object of study.

For Dietzigen, “tangible matter, does not possess the slightest preferential right to be more substantial, i.e., more immediate, more distinct and more certain than any other phenomenon of Nature.”

In the same period, Kautsky, too, used the expression “dialectical materialism”. He employed the notion to describe Marx’s and Engels’ account (Kautsky [1887/1899] 1889). After the writings of Engels, Kautsky and Dietzigen, dialectical materialism was interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, some scholars regarded it as a synonym of *historical materialism*. The historical materialism is the study of human history and human societies from a dialectic point of view. On the other hand, there were scholars who continued to interpret dialectical materialism as a more general method to analyse both nature and human world.

3.3. Dialectical Materialism – Historical Materialism

Historical materialism concerns human history. In this case, the term *materialism* should be understood in a sense that differs from *naturalism*. It is question neither of the influence of climate on societies nor the explication of all changes according to material causes (cf. Seligman 1901: 613). Historical materialism claims that material conditions of a society somehow determine its organization, development, institutions, and ways of thinking. By “material conditions”, one has to mean the given way of producing and reproducing the means of human existence (viz., the economic sphere).

Marx did not use the expression *historical materialism* but there is a very famous page of his *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) in which he described the relationship between the economic structure of a given society and its institutions and ways of thinking. In this page, Marx stated that in a given society individuals “enter into definite relations” which he called “relations of production” (MEW XIII: 1-11; trans from Marx 1955: 362-4). These relations correspond to “a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.” The totality of these productive relations constitutes the “economic structure of society” (ibid.). In turn, the economic structure of society is “the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which

correspond definite forms of consciousness.” Marx reasoned that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (cf. Bottomore 1991: 45-48; see also Harman 1986 and Tomberg 1969).

By “dialectical materialism”, some Marxists meant historical materialism. For instance, Georgi V. Plekhanov (1856–1918) employed the expression *dialectical materialism* to mean the science whose subjects are human history and economic origins of thinking. “The criterion of the ideal,” as he put it in his *Development of the Monist View of History* (1895), “is economic reality. That was what Marx and Engels said [...]” (Plekhanov 1947: 260). According to Plekhanov, dialectical materialism became the section of Marxist studies that concerns the relation between thinking and economic reality. But Plekhanov was not the only one who emphasised such an interpretation.

In the same period, there were also scholars who focused on the human history from a materialistic standpoint. Their aim was more practical than speculative. The Marxist historical account offered them a key to interpret the social dimension in which they had to operate. Even if they employed the expression of “dialectical materialism” or other similar notions, they alluded to human history and especially to the relation between thinking and historical-economic constraints. So by “consciousness”, or “class-consciousness”, they meant the mental representation of the world peculiar of the proletariat.

In his *On Materialist Dialectic* (Ueber materialistische Dialektik, 1924), Karl Korsch (1886–1961) addressed the influence of economic dimension over thinking: “Hegel’s method need only be turned over; by which a materialist dialectic would emerge that would determine not reality by thought but rather thought by reality.” He used the notion of “materialist dialectic” to indicate the field of research (history and society) of Marxist science. In his *History and Class Consciousness* (Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein, 1923), György Lukács (1885–1971) identified dialectical materialism with the doctrine that explains the relation between thinking and social existence.

One more example needs to be mentioned. Lenin was a Marxist scholar who employed the notion of dialectical materialism in a wide sense. He esteemed it a

study both of nature and the human history. But, after all, he studied only the relation between economic structure and ways of thinking. Lenin saw Hegel's dialectics as the "most comprehensive and profound doctrine of development" even written. And he acknowledged that "laws of motion" describe both "the external world and [...] human thought" (Lenin 1980: 7-9; then he mentioned Engels' *Feuerbach* even if he said that he was mentioning Marx). By contrast, Lenin wrote almost nothing about nature. He preferred to analytically study questions concerning history.

Thảo continued to use "historical materialism" to describe his adhesion to Marxism until 1949. For instance, in his article of 1946 entitled *Marxisme et phénoménologie* (Marxism and Phenomenology), he employed the expression *historical materialism* (see Thảo 1946a). The hearth of the matter in Thảo (1946a) was the thesis that some economic elementary conditions furnish the context (*l'allure générale*) in which several ideological interpretations of the world could be conceivable. Thus, by "Marxism", Thảo meant what has been called in this paragraph historical materialism.

3.4. Dialectical Materialism as Official Ideology in the USSR

During the 1930s *dialectical materialism* is the subject of a wide debate. Once again, the expression was taken to mean a method whose validity cannot be merely reduced to human history. In this regard, the intrusion of Stalin in the debate concerning dialectical materialism was crucial. In 1938 Stalin published *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*. In this pamphlet, he categorically stated that

Dialectical materialism is the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party. It is called dialectical materialism because its approach to the phenomena of nature, its method of studying and apprehending them, is *dialectical*, while its interpretation of the phenomena of nature, its conception of these phenomena, its theory, is *materialistic*. [...]

Historical materialism is the extension of the principles of dialectical materialism to the study of social life, an application of the principles of dialectical materialism to the phenomena of the life of society, to the study of society and of its history. [...]

When describing their dialectical method, Marx and Engels usually refer to Hegel as the philosopher who formulated the main features of dialectics. This, however, does not mean that the dialectics of Marx and Engels is identical with the dialectics of

Hegel. As a matter of fact, Marx and Engels took from the Hegelian dialectics only its “rational kernel,” casting aside its Hegelian idealistic shell, and developed dialectics further so as to lend it a modern scientific form. [...]

Stalin declared that dialectical materialism (*diamat*) is the official ideology of the USSR. After that, he defined dialectical materialism as an approach to studying the phenomena of nature and not only human history (in the case of human history, Stalin employed the expression “historical materialism”). So he clearly distinguished dialectical materialism from historical materialism by considering the latter as a section of the former. Then Stalin saw in Hegel’s dialectics the rational kernel (the method) of dialectical materialism.

The ideology that Stalin suggested allowed the Soviet power to reinforce scientific works concerning human history as well as natural sciences (biology and physics). In this way, Stalin could promote, for instance, the Soviet biological research as an alternative to Western one. More specifically, Stalin’s aim was to encourage Lysenkoism. Lysenkoism was political campaign supported by the top brass of USSR and conducted by the Russian biologist and agronomist Trofim Lysenko (1898–1976). As a director of the Soviet Union’s Lenin All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences, Lysenko took a position against genetics and Western science-based agriculture. He suggested a kind of biology different from the genetic Darwinism which represented the most significant framework of Western sciences of nature in the same period.

In the 1949 Thảo’s article, the expression *dialectical materialism* already appeared in the title: *Existentialisme et matérialisme dialectique* (Existentialism and dialectical materialism; see Thảo 1949a). But Thảo’s choice of the expression *dialectical materialism* seems to be ambiguous. Like Korsch and Lukács, Thảo meant with *dialectical materialism* a peculiar interpretation of human history. For instance, here is how Thảo (1949a) described what history is: “History is merely not a movement of economic relations, but the becoming of existences that realize themselves in such a relation: a limitless class struggle.” In this way, Thảo’s employ of the expression “dialectical materialism” does not seem to differ from what he talked about in his article of 1946.

The situation changes in PDM. Not only did dialectical materialism appear in the

title, a relevant section of the book is also devoted to a dialectical study of natural development. After this section, Thảo offered a description of human history. Thus, Thảo's choice of "dialectical materialism" was not merely formal but rather it could be understood as an adhesion to a more comprehensive philosophical perspective. At the same time, Thảo's description of natural evolution seems to have more to do with Lysenkoism than with genetic Darwinism of European biology. Lastly, Thảo probably knew the scientific and philosophical assumptions implicit in the term "dialectical materialism". The point is that the framework of dialectical materialism allowed him to describe the origins and development of consciousness from a non-reductionist point of view.

3.5. Dialectical Materialism in France

The introduction of *dialectical materialism* in France passed through the anthology *À la lumière du marxisme* (see Wallon 1935) edited by the so-called *Cercle de la Russie neuve* (CRN; see Gouarné 2010). The volume linked dialectical materialism with Hegelian dialectic. This effort led the scholars of the CRN to set out a peculiar historical epistemology of sciences. On the one side, according to the Hegelian dialectics, every scientific method has its own validity, but it must also be reckoned to be a historical product. On the other side, dialectical materialism shows the way every science should also be conceived as the result of some historical conditions (cf. Carlino 2015: 10).

In the same period, the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF) supported the exact opposite assumption. To PCF, the main predecessor of Marxism was not Hegel but rather the French traditional rationalism of Descartes revisited by 18th-century mechanistic materialism (especially Lamettrie and Voltaire). This ideological assumption marked the development of French Marxism and a change of theoretical framework was also imposed to the CRN. Since Marx's dialectical philosophy of history had been seen as the culmination of French materialism and rationalism, the dialectical materialism itself must be seen as a non-historical framework that should govern every scientific method. The French version of such a project could be summarised by the formula of *modern rationalism*

as it is shown by the subtitle of one of the most significant French Communist reviews of the 1940s: *La Pensée. Revue du Rationalisme Moderne* (The Thought. Review of Modern Rationalism; see Tosel 2001). Finally, on this point, we should also mention the project *Encyclopédie de la Renaissance française* (Encyclopedia of French Renaissance; see Wallon 1945) which, after the WW2, was in charge of reconstructing the entire edifice of knowledge on a dialectical materialist basis (cf. Feron 2017: part 2, ch. 1). According to Stalin's *diamat*, the Marx's dialectical method could be legitimately employed within every scientific field (cf. Carlino 2015: 10).

It would be useful to specify that, in this way, Engels' project – which argued for the ontological value of the dialectics – became the guideline to extend the field of the validity of laws discovered in human history to natural sciences. And it is not a coincidence that Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* had been translated into French by Denise Lévy and published with the introduction by Pierre Naville (1904–1993) in 1950 (see Engels 1950). This translation had been preceded by the publication of some abstracts in the review *La Pensée* (1948, n. 16: 3-10; 1949, n. 25: 3-10; 1949, n. 26: 3-17; 1950, n. 31: 19-28).

The ideological establishment of dialectical materialism in France intersected with the Soviet debate between Lysenko and Nikolaj I. Vavilov (1887–1943). Specifically, Vavilov was the main representative of the Mendelian genetic trends in the USSR. In 1936 and 1938 first traces of the argument between Lysenko and Vavilov appeared. But in 1948 the great debate concerning Lysenkoism officially began in Russia. In France, in October 1948, the French review *Europe* entirely devoted an issue to the debate and published the translations of the most relevant texts of the argument. In *La Pensée* (1948, n. 21), the Professor at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris and member of the Academy of Medicine Marcel Prenant (1893–1983) and the Professor at Faculty of Medicine in Paris Jeanne Lévy published two articles that described the debate in great detail (see Prenant 1948 and Lévy 1948). One year later, Prenant wrote three articles dealing with the role of Lysenkoism in the history of genetics published by the review *La Pensée* (see Prenant 1949 a, b, c).

Specifically, Prenant (1949a) took Lamarck's legacy in genetics into account. Prenant understood that the main conundrum of Lysenkoism concerns the

inheritance of acquired characters. Since the most famous supporter of this theory was the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829), the explanation of Lysenko’s genetics needed a deep understanding of Lamarckism. Prenant considered the interdependence organism-environment as one of the main principles of Lamarckism. To Lamarck, a change in the environment implies changes of habits and, consequently, changes of actions. Actions, in turn, produce a modification of organs that could be inherited¹³. Prenant’s efforts to rehabilitate Lysenko could be reckoned to be a section of a larger works conducted by the English biologist J.B.S. Haldane (1892–1964) and the French zoologist Georges Teissier (1900–1972). They suggested a biological theory that tried to conciliate dialectical materialism with the more recent findings in genetics.

Thảo shared the same end. But, in addition, dialectical materialism is also a model for Thảo to tackle the contradictions of Husserlian phenomenology. As dialectical materialism has surpassed and preserved the results of Hegelian phenomenology, so Thảo tried to overcome and preserve the results of Husserlian phenomenology through their integration into a broader approach to the problem of consciousness. This approach was that of dialectical materialism. This one was at the center of scientific debates concerning the system of knowledge as well as political debates concerning the relations between political doctrine and scientific research. At the same time, dialectical materialism led to the problem of the limits and extension of the human sciences and their relationship with the life sciences, namely the limits and extension of the definition of the human being and its

13 Thus, Prenant criticized Neo-Lamarckism of the French biologist Étienne Rabaud (1868–1956), namely the theoretical account that considered the needs of a given organism as the key to explaining the use of an organ. On the other hand, Prenant sharply criticized Weismann’s Neodarwinism. The German biologist August Weismann (1834–1914) stated that a given organism inherited only and merely the inborn features given in the *germinative plasma* (plasma germinative, what we call genes nowadays) of its parents. Prenant tried also to conciliate Thomas Morgan’s (1886–1945) “modern” or “new synthesis” between Darwinian evolution through natural selection and Mendelian genetics with Lysenkoism. To great extent, Prenant affirmed that Morgan accepted the possibility that environment could influence the genes even if Morgan did never conduce studies on this point. Prenant (1949 b, c) highlighted that the inheritance of acquired characters implies the theory of the influence of the environment. Thus, he affirmed that a given genotype could present different phenotypes because the organism interacts with the environment. So Prenant criticized the French biologist Jacques Monod (1910–1976) who insisted that proteins govern the shaping of organisms.

relationship with the rest of the animal kingdom. The solution offered by Thảo was that of a dialectic of nature, that is, an organization of existing knowledge which enable him to account for the difference and continuity between the human world and nature.

4. Thảo's Dialectics of Nature

In the second part of PDM, Thảo described the self-movement of becoming subject of nature within the framework of a monistic and materialistic ontology. He was totally aware of the French debate concerning dialectical materialism. On the one side, interestingly, he did not refuse to adopt Hegelian dialectics to organise the results of natural sciences and suggest a philosophy of nature. On the other side, he admitted some principles of dialectical materialism *à la* Stalin. This is the case, for instance, of the heredity of acquired characteristics. As Thảo put it in PDM:

The fact of heredity does not exclude, but rather implies variation – the germinating cells being but an abstract moment in the organic totality, and being modified necessarily according to the general movement of the adaptations of the living organism, at least to the extent that these influence the chemical composition of substances in circulation. (Thảo [1951] 1986: 137)

Thảo underlined how the heredity of acquired characteristics is not the only reason why organisms evolve. The scientific standpoint must assume the organism as a whole. And the entire organism is always embedded in a given environment. The interactions between organism and environment are then the conditions for understanding the heredity of both the inborn characteristics and the acquired ones.

According to Thảo, the gene does not explain variations if it is considered alone. Assuming that variations are targeted at the adaptation of a given organism to a given environment, it seems that the theory of acquired characteristics involves a certain form of finalism. By “finalism”, one must mean “the doctrine that natural processes, for example evolution, are directed towards some goal” (see “finalism” in Oxford Dictionary). And Thảo understood that the theory of acquired

characteristics can involve a kind of finalism:

A goodly number of scholars are opposed to the heredity of acquired characteristics by reason of the finalistic background that it seems to imply. [...] everyone knows that mutilations in parents are not transmitted to their children. But an adaptation of the individual organism can provoke, at the level of the tissues that it concerns, particular secretions that, in their turn, bring about a modification of the corresponding factors in the reproductive cells. (Thảo [1951] 1986: 236)

In support of his position, Thảo assumed a more open view concerning the interactions between genes and phenotype through the general interactions between organism and environment. Then he took exception to the simplistic view according to which any modification of the phenotype involves a genetic variation and the consequent transmission of new characters. So Thảo seems to agree with Lamarckism as it had been described by Prenant.

To Thảo, genetic variations depend on the intersections of two causal chains: the first one moves from the outside in and the second one from the inside out, from genes to behaviour and from behaviour to genes. The variation depends upon the contingent interactions between organism and environment and, consequently, variation does not take place necessarily. In this way, no finalism seems to be assumed in Thảo's perspective. In that passage of PDM, Thảo reasoned that

In fact, the process is perfectly rational, since it concerns only (as Lysenko tried to make clear) new characteristics *that introduce modifications into the formation of cells by the interchange of matter.* (Thảo [1951] 1986: 236)

Thảo mentioned Lysenkoism explicitly and, consequently, showed his own adhesion to that Soviet scientific paradigm.

We cannot forget that Thảo had to justify his theory of the development of higher mental activities. To him, the evolution of the nervous system follows the dynamic described by the theory of acquired characteristics. The interactions between organism and environment involve some modifications of nervous system. Those modifications cause new functions and they could influence the expression and reproduction of genes. It may be possible that those modifications can be inherited as acquired characteristics.

Thảo wanted to describe the evolution of nervous system among animals as the sequence of more and more sophisticated cognitive functions. Those new cognitive functions emerged as individual adaptive responses to problems posed by the environment. They could be acquired and transmitted to the next generation. Thảo explained that point in the following way:

[...] we have admitted that the advancements within the nervous system depend upon exercise within the framework of a specific experience, since the heredity of acquired characteristics has been demonstrated by the admirable works of the Michurinist school [that was the school of Lysenko: the Soviet botanist Ivan V. Michurin (1855–1935) was the predecessor of Lysenko]. (Thảo [1951] 1986: 173)

Assuming that new cognitive functions became characteristics of the species, Thảo regarded the development of cognition as corresponding to the sequence of species which differ each other because of different cognitive and behavioural skills.

As a further consideration, Thảo implicitly assumes the “biogenetic fundamental law” asserted by Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919):

I established the opposite view, that this history of the embryo (ontogeny) must be completed by a second, equally valuable, and closely connected branch of thought - the history of race (phylogeny). Both of these branches of evolutionary science are, in my opinion, in the closest causal connection; this arises from the reciprocal action of the laws of heredity and adaptation...ontogenesis is a brief and rapid recapitulation of phylogenesis, determined by the physiological functions of heredity (generation) and adaptation (maintenance). (Haeckel [1899] 1900: 80)

Assuming that humankind is the most sophisticated living being and the culmination of natural history, the ontogeny of humans reproduces the same stages of phylogeny and every stage of evolution corresponds to a stage of child development.

In PDM, Thảo also asserted his theory of the evolution of the structures of consciousness, which coincides with the evolution of nervous system. After new circuits of nervous system appear, in turn, new structures of consciousness appear as a result. Specifically, consciousness appears as the result of the inhibition of the behaviour: the inhibited and repressed behaviour becomes the content of consciousness. The inhibition is the negative principle that allows the dialectical

development of consciousness from behaviour.

According to Thảo, the findings of natural sciences support the following dialectical-materialist thesis: the natural dynamic conduces from chemical and physical dimension to human societies by way of dialectical shifts. To explain, Thảo postulated the following chain: i) the material conditions of life are the results of the interaction between organism and environment; ii) to solve environmental problem, a physiological mechanism triggers the inhibition of a given behaviour; iii) therefore, a new behaviour appears and modifies the anatomy of the organism. Thảo ([1951] 1986: 138) stated that

Reality qua dialectic is movement of such a type that, in each mode of being, the changes of causal order that are determined by the very structure of this mode *necessarily* conclude, by the very development of their content, in the constitution of a new mode that *absorbs* the first and maintains it as *suppressed, preserved, transcended*.

The hierarchy of centres in the higher animals (spinal cord, cerebral trunk, and cerebellum, corpus striatum, cortex) does, indeed, correspond to the genetic series of behaviour: reflex displacement, locomotion or orientation, affective automatism (apprehension), voluntary activity (detour and manipulation). But we know that, at each level, the inferior centre is inhibited by the superior centre [...]. (Thảo [1951] 1986: 145-146).

Thảo probably regarded dialectical materialism as a new materialist version of Hegel's dialectical philosophy. As Hegel's dialectic, the development of cognition follows the sequence: Given-Negation-Sublation. Every stage of the evolution of cognition is composed of those three moments. The result of the dialectical dynamic cannot be accomplished without the intermediary moment. This one denies the form of the first moment and, consequently, allows the emergence of the last moment. But the intermediary moment does not deny the content of the first moment. Indeed, the content of the first moment becomes the form of the last moment. In other words, the behaviour appears at the last moment as the realization of the potentialities embedded in the first moment (a previous behaviour). So, the first moment potentially contains the last one. Thảo regarded the intermediary moment of dialectics as a physiological mechanism that inhibits a given behaviour. He set out the thesis that each moment is suppressed, preserved, and realized in the following one thanks to the mechanism of repression or

inhibition of the previous behaviour. Inhibition indeed produces a new behaviour and accordingly a new attitude to the environment.

5. Thảo – Merleau-Ponty

Thảo's project was not the only one facing the relation between consciousness and nature. Merleau-Ponty's *La structure du comportement* (The Structure of Behaviour, 1942) needs to be regarded as the work that opens the way, broadly speaking, to a materialistic reading of the Husserlian phenomenology. In this regard, Montag (2013: 46) writes that "Merleau-Ponty had in some respects opened this path [criticism towards Heidegger's existentialism and revaluation of Husserl] by showing the way in which phenomenology might be compatible with a certain materialism." A comparison between Thảo's and Merleau-Ponty's account is consequently needed.

It is quite clear the existence of a close biographical relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Thảo during the 1940s. And this relationship must be regarded under the sign of Husserl. Here it could be useful to remember what Thảo (1991: 6) tells us: "[in 1941, Merleau-Ponty] read us extracts from his thesis in preparation on the Phenomenology of perception, and often said that all this would end in a synthesis of Husserl, Hegel, and Marx [il nous lisait des extraits de sa thèse en préparation sur la Phénoménologie de la perception, et disait souvent que tout cela finira par une synthèse de Husserl, Hegel et Marx.]" After the WW2, Merleau-Ponty and Thảo were the main promoters of the founding of Husserl-Archives in Paris (Toadvine 2002b: 236). Then, between 1949 and 1950, Merleau-Ponty organized five debates between Thảo and Sartre on the relation between existentialism and Marxism (cf. Thảo 1991: 1).

From a philosophical point of view, at least, we found the attempt of both Thảo and Merleau-Ponty to criticise some metaphysical assumptions of sciences and philosophy. Specifically, against idealism, they argued for the embodied origins of the consciousness, and, against dualism, they suggested that, ontologically, the psychological dimension and material world are inseparable. At the same time, against reductionism, they admitted the phenomenological differences among

forms of reality (physical, biological, and psychological).

Thảo's articles of the 1940s must be regarded against the background of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological Marxism. Specifically, in those years, Thảo and Merleau-Ponty tried to describe the materially and historically situated origins of consciousness. And, in this regard, both of them appreciated Husserl's theory of *ante-predicative experience of the world*.

To Merleau-Ponty, the great merit of phenomenology would be the fact that it shows the fundamental correlation between the subject and the world (cf. Toadvine 2002b: 238-239). Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1981: xiv) wrote that "far from being, as has been thought, a procedure of idealistic philosophy, phenomenological reduction belongs to existential philosophy: Heidegger's 'being-in-the-world' appears only against the background of the phenomenological reduction." It could be useful to remember that the phenomenological reduction (or bracketing) is indeed the philosophical operation which suspends our naïve opinions and preconceptions and allows returning to both our lived experience of the world and the things themselves (*die Sache selbst*) (cf. Hua III.1: § 62). To Merleau-Ponty, the external world is pre-given and the subject is already in the world (cf. Behnke 2002: 37). So "subjectivity and world cannot be understood in separation from each other" (Zahavi 2002: 13).

Then the world is the milieu in which, and the background against which, our perceptions, thinking, scientific and philosophical theories, ideologies, etc., arose (id., p. xi). To Merleau-Ponty, perception is the most original form of being-in-the-world and, for this reason, "the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (id., p. xiv) in so far as the subjectivity is always embodied and situated within a natural as well as historical context (see Merleau-Ponty 1946). Describing this fact is exactly the task that existentialism should assume.

In 1946, Thảo discussed the Husserlian notion of *Lebenswelt* (monde de la vie, lifeworld) viewed as the melting point between phenomenology and Marxism. Principally, *lifeworld* is the pre-given perceived concrete pre-scientific historical world. By this, he described what he called "infrastructure existentielle", i.e., the production of ideal entities and ideologies against the background of ante-

predicative experience of the lifeworld (see Thảo 1946a). In *Existentialisme et matérialisme dialectique* (1949), Thảo invoked the notion of “Dasein” and the corresponding theory of *choice* (Entschlossenheit) suggested by Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Thảo explained that *Dasein’s choice* must be seen as a historical-situated choice. To him, it means that the choice affects a given ego whose role in a given society is defined by some given economic relations (*Lebenswelt*). Simply put, changing our own existence is not an abstract free choice. Instead, it may be an empirical and practical choice prescribed by our own social role. As a result, the Husserlian “transcendental ego” coincides with the flesh and blood human being. Thảo paraphrased Heidegger’s notion of *in-der-Welt-sein* and thus regards the *world* as the concrete practical and social dimension in which we live (see Heidegger [1927] 2006).

In PDM, Thảo radically changed his perspective and changed his own attitude towards Merleau-Ponty’s insight. To Thảo the phenomenological method of reduction to the sphere of lived experience isolates, by definition, the lived dimension of a phenomenon from its material dimension, that is, its belonging to both the living body and the actual behaviour (cf. Thảo [1951] 1986: 34-36). Thus, against Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1981: xiv), Thảo acknowledged that the Husserlian philosophy was a kind of idealism: the objective conditions of the material world are reduced to a moment of subjectivity.

Thảo did not describe the Husserlian philosophy as the result of the dialectics between the real intentions of the author and their incomplete contradictory and unclear explanation in Husserl’s published writings. This one was Merleau-Ponty’s account – who thus opposed Husserl to idealism (cf. Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1981: vii): to him, phenomenology is not a doctrine but an unfinished task which must not “be taken as a sign of failure” because phenomenology “was a movement before becoming a doctrine or a philosophical system” (id., p. xi)¹⁴. By contrast, to Thảo, the Husserlian philosophy fails to accomplish its own task, that is, to grasp

¹⁴ As Toadvine (2002a: xvi) remarks, “Merleau-Ponty was certainly not a Husserl scholar in any strict sense of the term.” And Seeborn (2002) underlines how Merleau-Ponty disagreed with Husserl’s phenomenological method, ultimately. It seems that Merleau-Ponty agreement with Husserl is highly selective – and the same does not apply to Thảo, whose first part of PDM must be regarded as a detailed commentary of the Husserlian philosophy as a whole.

the things themselves, in so far as phenomenology constantly discover the thing as the product of consciousness' intentional acts. What phenomenology needs is to be transcended by way of a radicalisation of reduction: since the being is constituted, then the subject itself, as being, must be reckoned to be constituted and the subjectivity is the result of a movement for which it is not responsible (see Feron 2017: part ii, ch. 1; cf. Thảo [1951] 1986: 128-130). This movement is nothing but the natural evolution of species and the historical development of societies. And then phenomenological analysis of lived experience could be meaningful only against the background of the monistic and dialectical materialism.

As a consequence, some words need to be spent to explain Merleau-Ponty's materialistic reading of the Husserlian phenomenology. Smyth (2010: 160) suggests that Merleau-Ponty argued for a "phenomenologization of naturalism" – while, interestingly, Benoist (2013) regards Thảo's phenomenological approach as a "naturalization of phenomenology". To Thảo, indeed, phenomenology is transcended by natural sciences and dialectical materialism. Against that, to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology could offer a good keystone in order to correct some philosophical errors in natural sciences. According to Bruzina (2002: 178), "Merleau-Ponty came to phenomenology from an interest in the biology and psychology of human existence." In April 1939, Merleau-Ponty joined the Husserl's Archive in Leuven while he was writing his *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Phenomenology of Perception; see Van Breda 1962 and cf. Bruzina 2002: 175). On the contrary, Thảo came to biology and psychology in order better to justify some phenomenological assumptions. In both cases, phenomenology had been embedded in a naturalistic framework. But the choice to adapt phenomenological account to natural sciences or vice versa exactly marks one of the most relevant differences between Thảo and Merleau-Ponty.

Interestingly, what Thảo and Merleau-Ponty suggested seems to be a dialecticalization of naturalism. Specifically, we should focus on the fact that Thảo and Merleau-Ponty seem to share the same attempt to conciliate the Husserlian phenomenology with life sciences by way of Hegelian dialectical logic. According to Flynn (2011), "the Hegelian influence on *The Structure of Behaviour* should not be underestimated" (Flynn 2011). To Merleau-Ponty, there are some stages of

behavioural structures which can be observed in nature. The hierarchical relation among those forms of life is dialectical. “Each of them has to be conceived as a retaking and ‘new structuralization’ of the preceding one” (Merleau-Ponty [1942] 2013: 278). Indeed, the lower order is cancelled, as independent, and also retained by the following one simultaneously – that recalls Hegel’s notion of *sublation* (Aufhebung), of course. So Merleau-Ponty ([1942] 2013: 232) wrote

the physic-chemical actions of which the body is somehow composed, instead of taking place in parallel and independent sequences, [...] instead of becoming entangled in a set where everything depends upon everything and no cleavage would be possible, they take the shape, in the words of Hegel, of relatively stable “knots” or “whirl” – the functions, structures of behaviour – so that the mechanism doubles as a dialectical.

That may recall Thảo’s description of natural dynamic that conduces from chemical and physical dimension to human societies by way of dialectical shifts (Thảo [1951] 1986: 138). As Thảo ([1951] 1986: 137) put it: “Inasmuch as life *transcends* matter, it *suppresses* matter by *preserving* it – the negation resulting from the preservation, and the preservation being implied in the negation.” Thus, both Merleau-Ponty and Thảo disapproved of Hegel’s idealistic dialectics and, consequently, regarded dialectics as the autonomous movement of life itself.

But one cannot dismiss the fact that Merleau-Ponty (1946) refused to consider the project of the dialectical materialism *à la Engels* as meaningful. To him, the main error of Engels has been to revisit the Hegelian idea of the dialectics of nature. For Merleau-Ponty (1946), indeed, the matter is an almost passive entity that humans alone could transform into a dialectical entity by way of labour, i.e., a peculiar way to interact with nature. In other words, matter does not contain an autonomous principle of production, viz. matter does not contain an inner dialectical dynamism. In turn, there are explanations of humans neither from the point of view of matter nor from the point of view of animals. Human social and practical life is the reason to admit an impassable gulf between beasts and humans.

As a consequence, Merleau-Ponty’s and Thảo’s theories of language were quite different. Merleau-Ponty ([1942] 2013: 180) explicitly asserted that “the animal lacks the symbolic behaviour that it would be necessary to find in the external

object, under its diverse aspects, an invariant [...]” So the symbolic behaviour is the main feature of humans. It consists of the capability of producing concepts, that is, the representation of invariant properties of objects. Thus, “in animal behaviour signs are still signals and never become symbols” (id., p. 183). Against that, Thảo regarded “symbolic function” as the general feature of all mammals. In this way, human language is nothing other than a specific manifestation of the more general symbolic function. And Thảo did not refute that animals have consciousness. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty ([1942] 2013: 191) held that consciousness is a specific feature of humans:

The gestures of the behaviour, the intentions that the behaviour marks in the space around the animal do not target the real world or the pure being, but the being-for-the animal, i.e. a certain environment characteristic of the species. They do not show the conscience, that is, a being whose whole tends to know, but rather a certain way of treating the world, “being-in-the-world” or existing.

As a final point, the fact cannot be ignored that, many years later, Thảo explained how one of the main goals of PDM was exactly to develop and transcend the phenomenological account of Merleau-Ponty:

I tried to develop in a radical and systematic way, and to carry on to its last consequences, what in Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, etc., was only a fragmentary and inconsistent tendency. They were tempted by Marxism, but they did not, or rather did not want, break with the Phenomenology. In my 1951 book, I think I made the break [J’avais essayé de développer de manière radicale et systématique, et porter jusqu’à ces dernières conséquences, ce qui chez Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, etc... n’était encore qu’une tendance velléitaire, fragmentaire et inconséquente. Ils étaient bien tentés par le marxisme, mais n’arrivaient pas, ou plutôt ne voulaient pas, rompre avec la Phénoménologie. Dans mon livre de 1951, je crois avoir fait la rupture.]. (Letter from Tran-Duc-Thảo to Rossi-Landi, Hanoi, 27 January 1972; see figure 14).

Thảo discussed the same topic on another occasion: “It was necessary to choose between existentialism and Marxism. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty fail to decide; or rather they had already opted for existentialism” (Thảo 1991: 6).

6. Thảo’s Criticism towards Existentialism and Physicalism

Thảo ([1951] 1986: xxv) highlighted what he considered the core of Husserl’s

doctrine of consciousness: “the world is ideally in my consciousness when I am really in it.” On the one side, the consciousness cannot be regarded as independent of reality. On the other side, for the phenomenological consciousness, the reality exists and may be lived only inside consciousness itself. According to Thảo, there are three possible developments of that theory: i) the reduction of the objective world to the subject; ii) the reduction of the subject to the objective world; iii) the monist account that assumes the dialectical relation between subject and world. The first solution has been chosen by physicalism. The second one was selected by existentialism. Thảo agreed with the third solution.

The reduction of the world to the subject was the assumption that characterizes existentialism (cf. Thảo [1951] 1986: xiv-xv). It may be useful to remember that in 1948 Thảo wrote a review of *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Introducing to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Spirit, 1947) of Alexandre Kojève (1902–1968). In this regard, Thảo (1988a: 149) wrote:

My article, directed against the existentialist interpretation of Hegel by Kojève, allowed me at the same time to liberate me from the idealistic point of view of Husserl. It was the bridge that made me go from Husserlian phenomenology to dialectical materialism.

The debate between the two philosophers continued in their private correspondence too (see Jarczyk, Labarrière 1990). The main content of Thảo’s criticism regarded Kojève’s existentialist reading of Hegel. Thảo remarked that Kojève’s reading had been influenced by a dualistic insight which supported the ontological difference between nature and spirit, animals and humans (cf. Thảo 1948: 495). To Kojève as well as to Merleau-Ponty, there is no ontological unity of natural and human dimensions and Marxism cannot be anything but historical materialism merely.

Assuming that Thảo’s philosophical project already aimed to achieve a monistic materialism and explore the dialectics between matter and consciousness, Kojève’s assumption makes it impossible to suggest a dialectics of nature which defends the ontological unity of nature and history. Against dualism, Thảo’s monistic project aimed to describe the way the natural material world must be dialectically seen as “*identité de l’identité et de la non identité*” (identity of identity and difference; id., p.

496): that means the human dimension has its own properties without reducing it to mere physical dimension or separating it from natural world (cf. *id.*, p. 519).

In PDM, Thảo examined Heidegger's concept of *being-in-the-world* (cf. Heidegger [1927] 2006: §§ 12-13) and acknowledged that Heidegger reduced the world to a moment of the structure of subjectivity (cf. Thảo [1951] 1986: xxviii). In other words, the world cannot be seen as the condition of subjectivity but rather the world exists as such because there is a preceding subjectivity. As a consequence of the autonomy of subjectivity from material and objective conditions, Thảo explained how Heidegger's (and Sartre's) existentialism "revealed its own inconsistency by giving way to the pure negation of the real conditions of existence in the pure subjectivity of 'resolute decision,' where individual arbitrariness systematically was erected as the ultimate foundation of all true value" (*ibid.*).

Unlike existentialism, Thảo did not consider the world as the other transcendental pole of consciousness. Consciousness could have a representation of the world only because each person is concretely in the world and acts in it. Consequently, Thảo suggested an inversion of transcendental account. We are in the world and we do something in it because we are the result of the self-motion of the world itself. And for this reason, the world is meaningful to us: we are the world becoming conscious of its own self.

The reduction of the subject to the objective material world is the way which had been chosen by the traditional materialist account (or *physicalism*, as it's often known). Thảo distanced himself from this framework and criticised the notion of "matter" implicitly employed by physicalist descriptions which, essentially, conceived matter as a passive entity as well as determined by mechanical chains of causes. That means that a piece of matter does not have the property of self-motion in itself. Then matter cannot be reckoned to be intrinsically dialectical. In Thảo's view, physicalist account cannot justify the origins of consciousness since it cannot explain how both self-conscious and lived experience arose from passive receptive matter. To Thảo, physicalism risked becoming a kind of empiricism. This risk would conduce to relativism and solipsism. Physicalism would assume that values and truths depend upon the psychological and physical constitution of

every individual.

Interestingly, to Thảo phenomenology supported – as it is well known – the emergence of subjectivism and existentialism because of its idealistic assumption, but phenomenology simultaneously involves the same problems of physicalism. Indeed, Thảo’s treatment of Husserl’s last and unpublished writings led him to affirm the relevance of the sensible, empirical, concrete conditions to individuate the origin of meaning and goals of human life – the same went for Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1981: vii-xxi) as well. But Husserl’s phenomenology of lived experience risked reducing the law of logic to psychological mechanisms (the so-called psychologism: see Kusch 2015; Carr 2007; Hanna 2008; Hopkins 2006; Moran 2008). In this regard, Thảo wrote:

But then, once more the ghost of psychologism rears its head. How would it be possible to justify within the framework of material nature, (i.e., animal and social) the *truth* to which the intentions of consciousness lay claim - truth that one can dispute in particular cases but that no-one would know how to deny in principle without at the same time denying himself? (Thảo [1951] 1986: xxiv)

Since Husserl’s latest writings constantly referred to corporeal organization of the body and webs of socio-historical relations among consciousness, other egos, and the world, what Thảo emphasized is the incapability of Husserl to justify the autonomy of truth from time and empirical dimension. So Thảo remarked that Husserl’s account risks paradoxically becoming identical with its enemy: the “sceptical relativism” (id., p. xxii). In other words, Husserl had been incapable of radically separating transcendental consciousness from psychological consciousness.

To Thảo, both physicalism and existentialism cannot solve two questions. Firstly, they cannot explain the origins of the universality of values, meanings, and truth in so far existentialism reduced them to a product of subjectivity while physicalism reduced them to the psychophysical constitution of individuals. Secondly, they cannot explain how matter becomes consciousness and consciousness remains, at the same time, part of the material world. As a result, Thảo had to solve the following task: to justify the origins of truth without dismissing the real and concrete relations between consciousness and material

objective world. To achieve these goals, Thảo defended dialectical materialism as the only viable way to transcend the unproductive opposition between objectivism and subjectivism which entails scepticism and relativism.

7. Thảo's Notion of Matter

In PDM, Thảo attempted to unearth the implications of the notion of materiality by fitting with the dialectical self-development of matter from inorganic dimension to historical world. Thus understood, materiality entails several emergent stages of complexity, each of them characterized by new functions. Far from shallowly reducing more complex functions to chemical interactions, that paved the way to physicalism, Thảo acknowledged the ontological unity of reality and elucidated the peculiarity of each stage of living being. According to Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach* (see MEW XXI), Thảo shed light on matter as subject of its own development. Materiality is not a substrate indifferent to the significations that it involves but entails several different levels of consciousness. Simply put, consciousness is nothing but materiality becoming conscious of its own self.

Together, these considerations, also clarify the way in which Thảo considered dialectical materialism "as the only conceivable solution to problems raised by phenomenology itself" (Thảo [1951] 1986: xxi). In support of his position, Thảo explained that

Materiality is no longer this particular region, which in its abstract meaning, seemed to be incompatible with thought: it is the primordial and *ever present* form of the movement that elevates it to life and consciousness. [...] Since the naïve attitude has been definitively suppressed by the reduction, the *practice* of the description of pure lived experience is necessarily *absorbed* within a dialectical materialism that suppresses it in its properly phenomenological sense in order to preserve it in its resultant form and to *elevate it to a superior level*. It is, indeed, a matter of "bracketing" the world of *constituted appearances*, which the *fetishism* of naïve consciousness takes for realities in themselves, and of returning to true being through the *constituting subjectivity*. But the latter is not the *Heraclitean flux* of pure consciousness: it is the real movement by which nature *becomes conscious of itself* in biological evolution and human history. (id., p. 129)

To Thảo "the absorption of the point of view of consciousness in natural reality is the sole conceivable way to escape from the phenomenological impasse" (id., p.

124). Dialectical materialism transcends phenomenology and its dualism. “The description of antepredicative significations refers back to the conditions of material existence and necessarily places the subject within the framework of objective reality.” That is the biological evolution and human history which are, thus, the conditions for having the human peculiar form of consciousness, i.e. the rational thinking.

Thảo knew that at the heart of the debate lay questions concerning knowledge and truth. And then he tried to suggest a dialectic-materialist explanation of the origins of universality and truth that transcends the risk of solipsism and relativism. We have indeed seen how materialism risks leading to reduce the law of logic to psychological mechanisms. This was the conclusion of the so-called psychologism. Dupont (2014: 12) defines psychologism as “the view that rules of logic are not timeless, universal truths but simply empirical generalization about mental processes, and may therefore be elucidated by psychological experimentation.” To Thảo, the rules of logic cannot be elucidated by psychological experimentation but rather by materialist-dialectic analysis. So the rules of logic are not timeless surely. But they can be understood as empirical generalization only in a broad sense.

Specifically, Thảo regarded the material existence as the conditions for having the generalization of some experience. Given that to Thảo matter should not be considered as passive. Rather “materiality is the authentic origin of all meaning and value” (Thảo [1951] 1986: xxvii); the material relation between humans and nature must be regarded as the source of all meaning and value. Another way of saying this is that intentional significations do not apply to the world as a product of a consciousness that transcends it, but rather they stem from the concrete interaction between humans and nature. “In the real process of production *man is homogeneous with matter*, and it is in that material relation itself that the original relation of consciousness to the object that it perceives is constituted as ‘constituted meaning’” (id., p. xxviii).

According to Hegel’s slave-master dialectics set in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (ch. iv) and Marx’s *Thesis on Feuerbach* (MEW III), humans become conscious of the reality because this one is the result of their practical operations. To Thảo there are

some practical pre-rational skills that entailed the perception of generality and regularity of experience involved in collective practical activities. To illustrate, Thảo ([1951] 1986: 170-172) explained the origin of logical rules and predication in the following way:

Yet, it is clear that the permanent use of the tool has entailed, from the emergence of the very first human horde, the constitution of a number of collective habits as *techniques* that are acquired in the group [...] In short, if we define productive activity as activity that ends with its result according to *rules*, it is clear that these rules are constituted, first of all, outside of consciousness, in the reality of behaviour as an objective consequence of the material conditions of the use of the tool. [...] Thus, the ideal production of the object, in the positing of the judgement, finds its authentic foundation in the *real* production, where articulated sounds are engendered. Universality is but a *result* in which is reflected the indefinite possibility of repetition that is implied in the objective structure of the process of the tool. Thereby, the phenomenon of knowledge, in its historical upheaval and its truth-value, is ultimately justified. [...] Mankind, at its beginnings, had at its disposal, in almost all cases, a purely symbolic mastery by means of the simple exercise of language, which worked an imaginary transposition of the elementary productive schemes upon all the perceptive givenness. [...] All further progress will consist in transmitting the ideal work of the concept from the purely symbolic stage of verbal exercise to the rational stage of logical operations, reproducing the complex organization that assures the efficacy of real labour.

To Thảo, regularities are outside the subjectivity. They depended upon the regularities and rules taking place in the goal-oriented collective cooperative use of tools. Vocalizations fixed those regularities into the mind. Another way of phrasing this is that language mediated the internalization of regularities and fixed concepts. The main feature of concepts is indeed to be general. Thus, the thought reflects the regularities that the subject sees and realizes within the horizon of collective practical experience. And language involves the predication and other logical operations – which combine concepts – to reproduce or fix that regularities. The universal validity of concepts is thus related to the social working context which the subjectivity is embedded in.

To summarise, according to Thảo, human-specific cognitive skills are the result of the internalization of some practical skills and arose from the observation of regularities involved in repetitive collective practices. The repetition of shared actions involves the lived experience of generality, i.e., the actions may be repeated in several different situations and the product of labour may be stored for

a long time. And then language fixes this experience and causes the emergence of rational thinking.

Obviously, some scholars were less than enthusiastic about this solution as far as collective cooperative activities already required the ability of abstract reasoning (see Brouillet 1975). But Thảo did not implicitly assume some cognitive skills for explaining generalization but rather he suggested the existence of some practical skills. The know-how and practical tacit expertise precede the explicit knowledge. For this reason, psychological analysis cannot account human peculiar cognitive skills. Generality is embedded in practical life before being the structure of thought. Labour represents the condition for having human reasoning and is the point of departure of every research concerning both, nature and development of rational thinking.

9. Thảo's Notion of Consciousness

Before concluding this chapter devoted to the main assumptions of PDM, it is necessary to analyse Thảo's notion of consciousness since it shows the way Thảo described how materiality may become conscious of itself. The notion of *consciousness* (Bewusstsein, conscience) was one of the technical terms of Husserl's philosophy (for the relation between intentionality and consciousness in Husserlian works see Chrisholm 1967; Künne 1986; Siewert 2011; also cf. Dennett 1989: Ch. 10; Simons 2004: 581–600). Consciousness and its acts form the field of research of phenomenology. Specifically, the lived experience of consciousness must be regarded as the horizon in which phenomena appear to consciousness. And phenomena are the unquestionable objects of phenomenological description. Then phenomenology assumes the point of view of subjective experience of phenomena and does not investigate if the reality of phenomena it refers to exists outside the dimension of consciousness. In detail, phenomenology describes what kind of acts allows phenomena to appear. For this reason, the subjectivity is a transcendental subjectivity, a subjectivity that transcends reality because is the condition for having phenomena.

Consciousness is not a faculty but rather an intentional function. This means

that consciousness is always about something, it an act that refers to something. Every act of consciousness refers to a given content – what Husserl called *meaning*, *noema*. This one is not the real object outside consciousness, but rather what is given to consciousness as the target consciousness ideally tends to. The way in which consciousness refers to its content is the *noesis*: this is the act of consciousness that makes sense of the content. The noesis is the ability of consciousness to establish synthesis, unify, distinguish, etc. The intentionality of consciousness exactly corresponds to such a noetic-noematic structure. To Husserl, consciousness is simultaneously consciousness of the object (noema) and consciousness of self (noesis).

Thảo refused to regard the intentional character of consciousness as the absolute source of meaning. Assuming that the lived experience of consciousness is always directed to an intentional content, for Thảo there is the risk to assume that this intentional content exists only inside the movement of consciousness and, consequently, that consciousness is the absolute source of meaning. To him, consciousness is the result of the self-movement of matter in biological evolution and human history. Thus, consciousness arose as a result of biological and social conditions. As a consequence, the content of consciousness cannot be seen as detached from their natural and historical sources. In other words, “*lived experience* is but an abstract moment of *real life*” (Thảo [1951] 1986: 129-130).

At the same time, Thảo suggested a new definition of consciousness which had been extensively based on a biological insight. Previously, one cannot refute that, at that time, several scholars refused to employ the notion of consciousness in the field of psychology. The *Vocabulaire de psychologie* (Vocabulary of Psychology, first edition 1951) edited by Piéron refused to consider *consciousness* as a scientific fact: the definition stated that consciousness is an inner and incommunicable phenomenon that cannot be studied from the objective point of view of science (see Piéron 1951). At least, some traces of the consciousness appear at the level of behaviour. Nevertheless, there were some scholars who accept the notion: Paulhan (1887: 53), Bergson (1907: 156), Rey (1908: 256), Ribot (1910: 37), Claparède (1917: 362-363), Piaget ([1936] 1965), Chevalier (1943: 23), etc.

In PDM Thảo described the evolution of the structures of the behaviour. His aim

was to show the way in which different structures of behaviour corresponds to different levels of consciousness. Consciousness is the lived experience of a given organism which depends upon some physiological and psychological mechanisms. Generally, the lived experience of a given stage of the development is the result of the inhibition of a simpler behaviour by way of a new form of behaviour. Consciousness is the experience of becoming aware of the form of the previous behaviour¹⁵. Specifically, Thảo ([1951] 1986: 145) underlined how each behavioural level entails the awareness that was implicitly involved in the previous stage:

Thus, on the condition of taking into account a systematic time-lag, it is possible to make the phenomenological series and the real series coincide in a strict manner, since the intentional forms of each stage are identified with the real forms of the preceding stage. The lived meaning of consciousness comprises nothing more than the abstract movement of by-passed structures in the evolution of behaviour.

A given level of consciousness shows as its own content the unconscious intentional target of the previous behaviour. The consciousness, in other words, is not aware of the content of the present behaviour but rather of the content of the previous stage exactly because it has been inhibited and is now a conscious content. But it means that the real target of the present behaviour constantly escapes all consciousness. At the same time, the real meaning of the present behaviour is accompanied by a consciousness which is always late and disconnected from actual goals. What consciousness grasps as its own consciously intended content is the target of the inhibited behaviour.

From a physiological standpoint, Thảo insisted that a more sophisticated nervous system can inhibit the previous behaviour and allows the awareness of the real content of the previous behaviour:

15 We cannot undermine the fact that, when Thảo described behaviour, he did not support behaviourist account. Behaviourism was a psychological framework very popular in the first half of 1900 whose leading *spokespeople* were Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936), John B. Watson (1878–1958), and Burrhus Skinner (1904–1990). Against behaviourism, Thảo regarded behaviour as the conceptual key to describe consciousness and subjectivity without excluding any research into inner psychological processes. Thảo did not consider the *mind* as a black box whose mechanisms are irrelevant. Nevertheless, he deemed behaviour to be the ontological and epistemological point of departure for every analysis of consciousness (cf. Thảo [1951] 1986: 166). Indeed, consciousness is nothing but the result of the dialectic of behaviour.

Consciousness is the movement of *deferred behaviour*, which sends us back the *deferred circuits* in the course of the nervous influx. [...] but we know that, at each level, the inferior centre is inhibited by the superior centre, and this fact corroborates the definition of consciousness as an outlined and repressed movement. Thus, subjectivity is but the formal aspect of the real dialectical process, in which each new structure represses the one that precedes it and absorbs it in a lived interiority. (id., p. 145-146)

Thảo affirmed that consciousness refers “back to the structure of the *real subject*, namely the living body as the centre of movements” (id., p. 139). And he added that “it is not originally consciousness that determines behaviour, but rather behaviour that produces consciousness” (id., p. 166). Thus, the lived body is the condition for having consciousness. Specifically, the lived body reacts to external stimuli. Then the external stimulus involves some bodily reactions. When lived body inhibits the reaction, it gives rise to consciousness as a result of the stop of the reaction at the level of the nervous system. Indeed, “consciousness, as consciousness of *the object* [the target of the act], is precisely nothing but the very movement of these repressed outlines” (id., p. 140).

Thus, the phenomenological intentional noetic-noematic relation is the abstract and idealized inner result of inhibition (cf. id., p. 152). More specifically, since the nervous system keeps the outline of the previous inhibited behaviour, the target of the inhibited behaviour becomes the content consciousness tends to (noema). It is consciousness of the object. On the other side, the noesis corresponds to the inhibited behaviour which is reflected into consciousness. It is consciousness of the self. As Thảo put it:

I am necessarily conscious *within myself* of the meaning of the object for me [consciousness of the object], since this meaning, because it is actually lived, is nothing but the very movement of forms of behaviour that have been repressed in me [consciousness of self]. (ibid.)

The new behaviour with all of its moments is conserved as learned behaviour. “Every act, once accomplished, leaves its trace in the form of a disposition of the living organism to repeat it; not, of course, in its particular details, but in its general structure” (id., p. 141). And Thảo highlighted that each level of the

biological evolution results from a modification of nervous system:

The structure of the nervous system that results from the whole evolution does, indeed, reproduce the different stages that we have just outlined. The hierarchy of centres in the higher animals (spinal cord, cerebral trunk, and cerebellum, *corpus striatum*, cortex) does, indeed, correspond to the genetic series of behaviour: reflex displacement, locomotion or orientation, affective automatism (apprehension), voluntary activity (detour and manipulation). (id., p. 145)

This is the outline of Thảo's proposal to integrate (and save) phenomenological analysis of lived experience within the framework of dialectical materialism. What phenomenology describes is a moment of the real development of consciousness in biological evolution. In this way, phenomenology effectively reflects the real movement of becoming subject of matter and translates it in philosophical terms. However, since phenomenology ignores that the intentional relation and lived experience of consciousness are nothing other than the results of the dialectics of behaviour, phenomenology must be regarded as a form of idealism. The transcendental account of phenomenology must therefore be absorbed and integrated into dialectical materialism which describes how consciousness arises from a real bodily relation between the organism and the environment.

As consciousness is the result of the negation of the by-passed inhibited behaviour, the field of phenomenological research seems to be the result of the negation of real interactions between subject and reality (see Benoist 2013: 36). Phenomenological analysis of consciousness and its transcendental account has been transcended, suppressed, and conserved by dialectical materialism. It offers the fundamental principles to correctly interpret the results of phenomenology. But we should add that phenomenology offers dialectical materialism the key to analyse the subjective lived experience beyond the description of natural and social conditions of consciousness and inner experience.

What must be still explained is how human-specific cognition arose in biological evolution. In dealing with the transition between the dialectics of nature and human history, between animal consciousness and human consciousness, Thảo's interest in language and its origin, along with tool-making, arose for the first time.

Chapter Two

The Symbolic Function in Animals and Humans

Seele des Menschen Wie gleichst du dem Wasser!
Schicksal des Menschen, Wie gleichst du dem Wind!
(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

1. Introduction. - 2. Some Terminological Issues. - 3. The Physiological Foundation of the Symbolic Function. - 4. The Semiogenesis. - 5. The Process of Understanding. - 6. The Dog Barking. - 7.1. Communication Skills in the Chimpanzee. - 7.2. The Development of Language in the Child. - 8.1. The Role of Labour. - 8.2. The Objective Value of Language. - 8.3. The Formation of Language. - 9. Concluding Remarks on Human Language.

1. Introduction

In PDM, Thảo regarded human language as rooted in animal communication systems. For this reason, we must deal with the slow development of animal communication systems before focusing on human language. Nonetheless, Thảo's theory of symbolic behaviour raises two problems. Firstly, He described the development of the symbolic function in a few dense pages. Secondly, the treatment of symbolic behaviour follows the detailed description of animal behaviour and consciousness. We decided to introduce the reader to the core of Thảo's theory after having focused on its more general elements, along with the treatment of some topics related to animal behaviour in general. As a consequence, the first pages of the present chapter can seem to be too abstract. But we believe that there are clear advantages in this approach, especially when we will tackle the detailed analysis of symbolic behaviour in its different forms. In this case, the reader will have at disposal all the elements which are needed to understand the more sophisticated issues of Thảo's approach to symbolic function and human

language.

2. Some Terminological Issues

Thảo suggested that “the universal notion of expression or symbolic function [fonction symbolique]” (Thảo [1951] 1986: 166) refers to the more general act of signification we can observe in both animals and humans. And then he added that “from this point of view it [the symbolic function] seems to be presented for the first time in mammals.” The symbolic function exactly associates a given expression with a signification. In his words: “we obviously understand ‘expression’ here in its strict sense as intentional expression that consciously intends a signification” (ibid.).

The symbolic function paves the way for a new form of intentionality in the process of animal kingdom. The *intended meaning* (sens visé, noema) is not experienced in the subjectivity of consciousness, but simultaneously appears on the behaviour itself as the meaning it expresses. Simply put, the symbolic act is a real act which gives the subject the consciousness of signifying and showing the own purposes. The intended meaning acquires an objective value.

Some terminological remarks are now needed. Thảo divided the products of the symbolic function into *symbols* and *signs*. When Thảo talked about symbolic function in non-human animals, he used the notion of *symbol*. In this case, the plane of expression partially represents some aspects of the signified. Instead, when Thảo used the notion of *sign*, he described human language. In both cases, the structure of the symbolic function remains untouched: a given expression intends a signification. To put it another way, the relation between expression and signification is the *symbolic function*. Added to this, by the semiotic notion of *expression*, Thảo minded a behaviour that evokes a *signification* (signification). Thảo said that the *expression* cannot be regarded as an act that merely accompanies body movements. In fact, the expression is an explicit communicative behaviour.

In Thảo’s pages devoted to communication and language, one can read words such as *intention*, *intentionality*, *expression*, *signification*, *consciously*, *consciousness*, *sense*, etc. Thảo seems to employ a phenomenological terminology. But he

suggested a theory of expression that has little to do with Husserl's one. The phenomenological terminology is frequently at odds because Thảo also employed those terms in a psychological and ethological way.

Certainly, Thảo seems, however, to accept some Husserlian assumptions. Firstly, to both, Husserl and Thảo, the expression tends to a signification. Husserl (2001: 188), wrote, for instance, that “*meaningful signs, i.e. expressions.*” And Thảo set out that the expression refers to a signification because there is the intention to signify, i.e., the act is oriented to the signification. Husserl (2001: 189) wrote that “the articulated sound-complex [...] first becomes a spoken word or communicative bit of speech, when a speaker produces it with the intention of ‘expressing himself about something’.” Then Thảo argued that the expression has the function to show the intention of the ego to the alter-ego. Thus, the communicative function of the expression requires the presence of an alter-ego that understands the intention of the ego. In this regard, Husserl (2001: 189) set out that “speaking and hearing, intimation of mental states through speaking and reception thereof in hearing, are mutually correlated.” Nonetheless, Thảo disagreed with Husserl in many respects.

To Thảo, the word *signification* has two meanings. Firstly, it means the symbolic act, the function of intentional expression (*l'acte symbolique de signification, the symbolic act of signification*). And, secondly, it means what signs and symbols evoke, i.e., the intended meaning. Assuming that the signification only exists at the level of the behaviour, the symbolic act is the act that produces signification, the act of signification.

In general, the function of intentional expression is to manifest a signification (an intention, a desire, etc.) to another individual. In this vein, the signification coincides with the (presumed) purpose of the ego, i.e., the reason why the symbolic act takes place. In effect, the symbolic function takes place within a communicative circle that presupposes at least two partners. But it does not necessarily mean that the real purpose of the ego necessarily coincides with the intention signified by the expression. And, in the case of human language, the signification coincides with a concept or a system of concepts.

In the most elementary form, the expression is a sensible datum that reveals the purpose of the addresser by way of a motivated relation with the signification. For

instance, the barking of a dog is an expression that evokes the act of the attack and thus reveals the purpose of the dog to chase a stranger away. A more sophisticated behaviour is the simulation. It entails the use of a gesture to communicate an intended meaning that is not the real purpose of the performer of that gesture. Lastly, there is also the ability to universalise experience. That is a language-specific skill. And, in this case, we transcend the narrow limits of communication and enter the cognitive role of symbolic function. That is, when Thảo described human language, he did not take communication into account, but he rather preferred to describe the way symbolic function opens the dimension of rational thought.

What immediately stands out when we consider Thảo's theory of the symbolic function among mammals other than humans is the fact that he regarded the expression as a means of communication. The expression indeed communicates the intention, the desired target of the actions of the ego. The expression, in turn, depends upon practical purposes to be fulfilled or environmental problems to be solved. The pragmatic function of the expression subordinates the communicative one. That is to say, the expression is a way to influence the others and to affirm the own intention by way of communication. Human language is no exception, since it arose during collective and cooperative activities. But human language also supports the emergence of the consciousness of those activities in the form of conceptual intentional contents.

Thảo affirmed that the intentional expression is the act that *consciously tends to a signification*. It means that the act is accompanied by consciousness and, at the same time, it tends to a signification. Unlike mechanical responses to external stimuli, the symbolic act entails a more or less sophisticated consciousness of the act as well as the intentional relation between the expression and the signification. As we will see, the intentional expression presupposes a peculiar form of inhibition that involves the consciousness of the intentional expression as such. In this vein, the symbolic function arises from the suspension of the action and its transition into a symbolic behaviour rather than being a co-product of the action. But caution must be paid to the fact that intentionality does not always mean voluntary acts but rather directness and consciousness of the act. A more detailed description of that

mechanism of inhibition is now required.

3. The Physiological Foundation of the Symbolic Function

In Chapter 1, we have already described the extent to which Thảo thought of the inhibition as the most essential mechanism which is the precondition for having consciousness of the actual life. The inhibition is still at work at the level of the symbolic behaviour.

The intentional expression depends upon the physiological mechanism of inhibition (for the notion of “inhibition” see Buser, Kaufmann & Widlöcher 2016). Some environmental or behavioural conditions inhibit the reaction of the organism at the level of the behaviour and then the behaviour itself becomes the expression of both, the repressed action and its intended meaning. For this reason, the intentional expression cannot be characterized in terms of mechanical co-products of some actions. For instance, Thảo ([1951] 1986: 166) suggested that fishes do not show symbolic skills. “Even though the production of sounds is already encountered in certain fish, it can only be a matter, at this level, of a simple accompaniment of action itself.” By contrast, the condition for having symbolic function exactly depends upon the inhibition of the act at its first stage of accomplishment. And, thus, the partially inhibited act becomes a symbolic act that communicates the purpose of the organism.

Thảo regarded the inhibition of a given action as the starting point of the development of the symbolic intelligence. Once the achievement of the real purpose by way of the corresponding behaviour is inhibited and the organism does not accomplish the action but simply sketches it out, a part of the unaccomplished act is transformed into the plane of the expression of the purpose. Thus, the organism performs a symbolic intentional behaviour which communicates its intentions. The inhibition transforms the real purpose into an intention that may be communicated. That means that there is no communicative intention before the inhibition of the behaviour.

Thảo illustrated the difference between the notion of “sketch” (*ébauche*) and the notion of “outline” (*esquisse*). The sketch is the movement at the first step of its

accomplishment. The outline is the general shape of the total sequence of movements. The organism usually employs a certain amount of nervous energy to accomplish a given act. While the accomplishment of the act is inhibited after its beginning, the remaining nervous energy is still at work at the level of the nervous system and involves the outline of the inhibited act as a whole. Thus, there are two moments: i) the sketched-out act is the act which is stopped at its first stage because of some inner or environmental constraints, and ii) the outline is the continuation of the repressed act at the level of the nervous system. The sketched-out act becomes the plane of the expression of a signification that is lived at the level of the nervous system by the organism.

Because of the repression of the act, the real purpose of the sketched-out act is lived by the subject at the level of the nervous system. The individual, then, experiences the act as the signified intention – as if the act was accomplished. In this way, the outline may be reckoned to be the idealized form of the unaccomplished act. The repressed act may then become the object of consciousness. Specifically, the repressed outline gives the subject the consciousness of signifying his intention by way of the sketched-out act. So Thảo ([1951] 1986: 167-168) stated:

It should be noted that we are clearly distinguishing the two notions of *sketch* (*ébauche*) and *outline* (*esquisse*). Outline stops at the level of nervous commands, and so is reflected as intentional movement. Sketch is, on the contrary, a real act that begins at the muscular level, but cannot be accomplished because of an external obstacle or previously ingrained conditions. Or even because the stimulus is itself but sketched out and does not reach the threshold necessary for a complete response. Yet, the sketched-out act implies precisely its very accomplishment in the form of a repressed outline that is experienced as an intentional movement in which there is defined the *signification* whose sketch becomes *expression*.

Thảo insisted that the nervous stimulus that causes a given reaction cannot be accomplished because of an external obstacle or ingrained conditions. The external obstacle and ingrained conditions involve both the stop of the reaction at its beginning and the sketched-out movement. That dynamic involves a new kind of behaviour: the sketched-out act becomes a symbolic act that evokes a given bodily schema (the outline). The new behaviour (the symbolic act) is “experienced as an intentional movement in which there is defined the *signification* whose sketch

becomes *expression*” (vécu comme un mouvement intentionnel où se définit la *signification* dont l'ébauche devient l'*expression*). So, the symbolic act becomes a goal-oriented communicative behaviour. That behaviour becomes the expression whose function is to evoke a signification. But signification is not something that exists before the expression but rather is defined by the expression itself.

The expression is symbolic exactly because it refers to the unaccomplished act. If the act would be completely accomplished, we observe a complete and realized relation behaviour-target. And in this case, there would be no intentionality or consciousness. Since the accomplishment of the behaviour is sketched out, the actual behaviour-target relation is only lived by the subject in the flow of inner experience. Furthermore, that lived relationship between the behaviour and the target is also communicated by the symbolic behaviour itself as the signification it expresses. To put it another way, the expression is lived as if it would be the accomplished act. Thus, the expression is lived by the organism as a noesis-like experience. Moreover, the expression tends to a signification that is nothing but the intentional content of noesis, the intended meaning consciousness tends to, i.e., the noema.

As in the case of other intentional relations, in the case of the symbolic act, too, inhibition transforms the practical purpose of the unaccomplished act into the content of consciousness. But the symbolic act shows a peculiar feature. Since it is an inhibited behaviour, the symbolic sketched-out act determines the emergence of consciousness of the outline of the inhibited behaviour. This is the first-degree of the intentional noesis-noma relationship, i.e. the lived experience of the outline of the unaccomplished behaviour. Furthermore, since the symbolic behaviour is addressed to the alter-ego, the symbolic behaviour also communicates the lived experience of the organism. That is the second-degree intentional relationship, i.e. the intentional relationship between the expression and the signification it tends to.

Nonetheless, the actual content of the meta-intentional act cannot be lived before the emergence of a new and more complex intentional behaviour that suppresses, preserves, and transcends the previous one. In other words, consciousness as consciousness of the signification is not the origin of the symbolic

act but rather its result. In the following paragraph light will be shed on that point.

4. The Semiogenesis

Thảo regarded the inhibition of a given action as the starting point of the development of symbolic skills. Exactly because the organism does not accomplish the action but simply sketches it out in front of the alter-ego, that organism could perform a symbolic behaviour. Then he introduced several different symbolic acts which mark the transition from symbols to signs. Previously, it could be useful to remember that the sequence of symbolic skills corresponds to the development of symbolic skills in the child. Thảo analysed three main stages and two intermediary stages of the evolution of the semiotic skills. The following pages will schematically describe the stages of the different semiotic skills we can observe in animals as well as their development in the child. Along with these factors, we should also consider different forms of interaction with the surrounding environment. In this regard we can highlight that, according to Rossi-Landi (2016), one of the main contribution of Thảo's theory of symbolic function was the homology between the symbolic behaviour and practical and manipulating skills.

A1. The first stage (manipulation): the barking dog, the nine-month-old child.

The expression means the action that it sketches because the expression displays only the first step of the sequence of movements of the unaccomplished act whose intention is meant by the expression. In turn, the signification corresponds to both, the unaccomplished act and its intended meaning, i.e. its target. In this case, the symbolic function follows the principle of the *synecdoche*. The *synecdoche* is an expression in which a term for a part of something refers to the whole of something or vice versa. Obviously, the expression shows a natural bond with the action that it represents. Then, as an example, the dog barking is the repressed act of the attack which now evokes the intention of driving away the stranger. The symbolic function is employed by the barking dog to involve changes in the environment, to manipulate the behaviour of someone else. In this way, the

organism, which produces the symbolic act of the first level, is not aware of the meta-intentional value of the symbolic function. The dog is conscious of the intention of the repressed act, i.e., to drive away the stranger by way of its behaviour. But the dog is unaware of having accomplished it by way of a communicative behaviour. See below § 6 for more details.

A2. The first intermediate stage (intermediary): lower apes, the one-year-old child.

The plane of expression would appear as an intermediary that can serve organism's own purposes. To Thảo, the stage of intermediary is characterized by the consciousness of the efficacy of a given symbolic behaviour of the first stage. The use of a given intermediary symbol establishes an actual (material) relationship between the symbolic behaviour and its environmental effects. The intermediary symbolic behaviour is perceived as a voluntary act. See below § 7.1 for more elaborate treatment.

B1. The second stage (instrument): the chimpanzee, the 13–17-month-old child.

Chimpanzee employs symbolic acts as instruments. This new behaviour appears only sporadically and is determined only by the immediate situation within the limit of perceptual field. In these cases, the symbolic act is understood as a real substance with its intrinsic efficacy. For this reason, from the point of view of the symbolic function, the stage of the instrument entails a new symbolic behaviour: simulation and lying. Individual's intention determines to what extent a symbolic act is employed for laying or not. Thus, the difference between the general symbolic function and the instrumental function does not concern the nature of signs/symbols but rather their use. Indeed, the instrumental use of symbolic acts requires the understanding of the intrinsic meaningfulness of the expression independently of the real intention of the user. See below § 7.1 for more details.

B2. The second intermediate stage (efficacious mediation): the chimpanzees, the

18-month-old child.

At this level, symbols become signs. They are means of communication within a given community. Generally, the symbolic behaviour is employed as means to influence the others. Before being a countersign of thought, symbols are means of acting in the world. In this vein, before being a means of reasoning, language in a wide sense is a mode of action. But in this case, the symbol becomes a sign, i.e., cultural based voluntary behaviour whose symbolic function does not depend upon the motivated link between expression and signification. In the child, the behaviour displays vocalizations that have multiple meanings (polysemy). The arbitrary bond between reference and vocal sign is the condition for having changes of designation. The flexibility of reference outperforms some linguistic skills: the child can employ the same vocal signs in different contexts. In this way, the child can generalize the experience. But, assuming that the vocal signs in the child remain instruments to flexibly communicate the own intentions, vocal signs remain related to the private and contingent desires of the child. See below § 7.2 for more elaborate treatment.

C. The third stage (tool): human language.

Human language has an objective form. In other words, languages transcend the desires of individuals and exist before the birth of a given individual. Indeed, the precondition of language is the existence of previous social habits. In this vein, Thảo argued that language arose from protolinguistic interjections which were a determinate moment in the general process of production and using of tools. They were vocalizations that rhythmically coordinate collective efforts. Slowly, they became the meaningful expression of the corresponding action. In this case, human-specific cognition shows the cognitive and semiotic mechanism of *metonymy*: the semantic transfer is based on the relation of contiguity between the effect and the cause. Thus, our ancestors employed working interactions to refer to the corresponding activity. In order to explain the referential power of human language, Thảo argued that the cognitive and semiotic mechanism of the

metaphor: imaginary transposition of the elementary productive schemes upon all the perceptive givens. This metaphor follows the rules of *analogy*. The analogy establishes a relation of similarity between two different terms by virtue of the morphological resemblances of the objects. In this instance, the first words of human language – that meant actions and productive schemes – began to refer to several different things.

To summarise, human language could have three functions:

- a. Pragmatic function: the protolinguistic interjections rhythmically coordinated common purposive activities.
- b. Social function: language enables the member of a given community fixing and sharing significations.
- c. Heuristic function: language began to refer to things and allows knowing and acting upon different things in different situations.

Thus, languages are originally rooted in practical life. And practical life gives language its objective form. Consequently, physiological and anatomical conditions do not play a direct causal role in the origins of human language. As the tools, language behaviour is no more used simply in the present situation, but also produced, preserved, cared for. In a phrase, language is a collective habit, namely a technique that is acquired within the community and transmitted from generation to generation. The peculiar signification of linguistic words is called *concept*, that is, the symbolic form in which a determinate moment of production is outlined. In this way, the concept is nothing other than the internalisation of a given behavioural schema. But this schema has a social value in so far as it arose from common goal-oriented activities. Because of the mechanism of analogy, a given concept could be realized, in principle, in an infinite number of occurrences. Consequently, the world became anthropomorphic as a result of productive activities and language. See below §§ 8.1-3 for more details.

5. The Process of Understanding

Before describing the previous schematic outline of the main stages in the development of symbolic function, some remarks concerning Thào's theory of communication are needed. He described the production and understanding of a symbolic act in the following way:

The appearance of the visitor releases in the animal a sudden movement that is at once stopped and repressed by the presence of an obstacle or by reason of previous conditioning. Thus the reaction is only sketched out by the barking, and it is achieved by a simple outline of attack that is not actually realized, but which thereby gives to the subject the consciousness of *signifying* its intention of driving away the stranger. The latter [the stranger], on his part, responds by sketching out a movement of flight, but without really accomplishing it, since the animal itself had only sketched its movement of attack. The flight thus is sketched out, and just as soon arrested, is achieved in the form of an outline that is experienced as an ideal movement in which the subject perceives the behaviour of the animal as, to be sure, an attack, but as an attack that is simply signified, but not actually realized. In other words, the barking of the dog appears to the visitor as an expression whose meaning he *understands*. Thus since the phenomenon of expression has been defined as a sketched-out behaviour, understanding results immediately from the response, since it itself consists only in a sketching out that is repressed at once. We should note that this sketch, in its turn, functions as an expression whose signification refers back precisely to understanding itself: by sketching his movement of flight, the visitor *signifies* that he has understood the behaviour of the animal. In its turn, the animal responds by redoubling its barking, demonstrating thereby that it understands that the other has understood it and should be prepared to flee. In this way the primordial correlation, in which the foundation of reciprocity is defined, is constituted. Since the symbolic act, or the sketched-out act, provokes a response that is itself sketched out and in which is expressed the manner by which the other is affected by the expression of the first, it is this being affected itself which, in its turn, affects the first subject and arouses in it a new expression. Thus the real movement of sketched out behaviour is experienced as an exchange of intentional acts of reciprocal understanding, each affecting the other in the very same manner in which he himself is affected: *the other affects me by means of the affect by which I have affected him* (Thào [1951] 1986: 166-167)

Seemingly, Thào described a circle of communication which is composed of four moments: i) expression; ii) reception; iii) expression as a response; iv) reception. These four moments implies two subjects: i) the sender and ii) the receiver. These two subjects change their roles during the communicative dynamic: i) the ego communicates his/her intentions; ii) the alter-ego understands what the other has communicated; iii) the ego, too, communicates her understanding and, thus,

becomes, in turn, sender; iv) the ego understands both the communicative intention of the other and the fact that her own intention has been understood.

To Thảo the process of signification requires the presence of two interlocutors, who explicitly evoke each other their intentions by means of symbolic acts, i.e., sketched-out reactions. Since communication is essentially based on sketched-out behavioural reactions, Thảo highlighted the role of the body to trigger the process of mutual understanding and explained understanding in terms of behaviour. The understanding is not a cognitive event that happens independently of the corporeal experience of the world. There are a number of serious implications arising from this assumption.

Interestingly, understanding a symbolic act is not an unconscious mechanical reaction to stimuli. The reaction is merely sketched-out: the understanding is not simply realised but rather symbolised. The stranger does not simply run away but rather communicates her own intention to run away. The inhibition is the condition for understanding the other: according to Thảo, the alter-ego understands the intention of the other because of the lived experience of the own sketched-out behavioural reaction to the symbolic behaviour of the other. Once again, “understanding results immediately from the response” because “it is not originally consciousness that determines behaviour, but rather behaviour that produces consciousness” (Thảo [1951] 1986, 166). On this view, the stranger understands the intention of the dog and attributes a given mental state to the dog by living the own behavioural reaction.

The symbolic act is a goal-oriented action that evokes the intentions, desires, etc., of the addresser. Thus, the symbolic act already offers some indications that may be the basis for further inferences of one or more unknown mental states of the other. But there is no guarantee that could *a priori* justify the success of communication. Only the mutual exchange of behavioural responses confirms the hypothesis on the intentions of the alter ego.

The *reciprocity* appears at the end of the first communicative circle message-understanding-response-understanding. In support of his position, Thảo argued for a theory of communication as the condition for having reciprocity. Thảo’s behavioural theory of reciprocity may be elucidated against the background of

some psycholinguistic trends of the epoch (see Damourette and Pichon 1930 and especially Bloomfield ([1933] 1973: 22-23; see Chapter 12 for more details about Watson and Naville). But the topic of the correlation of reciprocity was one of the main issues of the Husserlian phenomenology (see Zahavi 1996, Römpp 1992, Kozłowski 1993, Iribarne 1994). This one is not the right place to deal with the question of Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity (Intersubjektivität; see Hua XIII; XIV; XV; IX: 431; XVII: 243; VI: 469). But what needs to be underlined is the fact that Husserl focused on the transcendental subjectivity as the functional centre of sense-giving. To Husserl, the intersubjectivity is already given in the primordial structure of the subjectivity. To Husserl, the intersubjectivity is a pre-given and pre-linguistic structure of consciousness. In this vein, the intersubjective function of consciousness is the preconditions for having communication (cf. Kozłowski 1993: 273; Patočka 1998: 184). Against that, Thảo affirmed that the reciprocity is not something that is pre-given, but reciprocity is rather the result of the circle of communication.

6. The Dog Barking

Now, we have a disposal all the elements to deal with Thảo's description of the symbolic function in greater detail. First, he described how the simplest form of intentional signification can be traced back to the dog barking:

On the other hand, it would be difficult to deny the presence of intentional signification in the barking of a dog opposing the entrance of an unknown visitor, or in the behaviour by which it manifests its desire to play at returning a thrown object, or to lead its master towards a definite place. (Thảo [1951] 1986: 166)

The barking (expression) evokes a given action (signification) by sketching out it:

One could not very well speak, here of a simple accompaniment of action, since the very action in question (e.g., to chase the stranger away or to return the ball) is not really accomplished, but simply *sketched out*, and is only valid qua sketched out in this barking or this coming and going in which the animal has the air of being precipitated toward an imaginary object. The sketch of the act appears as the precise *expression* that symbolizes the act itself that has been left unfinished

As a result, the sketched-out symbolic act of barking displays only the first step of the sequence of movements of the attack and evokes the action as a whole. In other words, the barking follows the principle of *synecdoche*: the synecdoche is an expression in which a term for a part of something refers to the whole of something or vice versa.

Thảo partially followed Darwin's theory of the expression of the emotions set out in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). Indeed, Darwin (1872: 50-51) gave the example of the behaviour of a dog in front of "a strange dog or man in a savage or hostile frame." Interestingly, the example of the dog was very popular in French psychological handbooks at the time of Thảo (for instance, cf. Rabier 1884: 590; Cuvillier 1937: 249-250). More interestingly, the example of the dog had been frequently regarded as an argument in favour of the theory of sketched-out expressive signs. Before Cuvillier (1937: 249-250) and Chevalier (1943: Ch. 7), Rabier (1884: 590) had argued for the so-called *Bell's theory* in his handbook. In his *Essays on the Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression* (1824), Charles Bell (1774-1842) suggested that *natural signs mean the actions that they sketch* (les signes signifient les actions qu'ils ébauchent). Contrarily to conventional signs that previously require the knowledge of the social convention that establishes their meaning, natural signs are universal and understandable by all.

As a result, the dialectics of behaviour of the barking involves two levels: i) the dog wants to attack; ii) the dog communicates that she wants to attack. A physiological mechanism involves the transition from (i) to (ii). The symbolic act did not accidentally symbolize a signification but rather it transforms a given behaviour into its intended object (the signification). Thus, one of the conditions for having communication (symbolic acts) is the repression of the first intention: to chase the stranger away by way of the attack. The first intentional relation does not disappear but becomes the object of a higher intentional relation. The barking dog reveals meta-intentionality. The barking intends a signification that was the intentional structure of a previous behaviour. But this does not mean that the dog is aware of this meta-intentionality: "the *intended meaning* in its consciousness is, evidently, concerned only with the very act of chasing the stranger away" (Thảo

[1951] 1986: 168).

Thảo affirmed that the *real content* of the barking is the following: “the dog that barks chases the stranger away through the intermediacy of its barking” (ibid.). The truth of behaviour is the symbolic act as an intermediary. Nonetheless, the dog’s lived experience “does not yet refer back to the truth of behaviour” (ibid.). From the perspective of dog’s lived experience, the barking is simply a goal-oriented action as any other – the dog acts as if the attack has taken place. In a phrase, the dog is merely aware of having chased the stranger away but is not aware of having produced a symbolic act. The dog gains the experience of the intended meaning of the attack but not perceived it as a symbolic act.

In short, the symbolic act suppresses, preserves, transcends the intentional act of the attack. The dog becomes explicitly aware of the lower intentional act. But the dog cannot be explicitly aware of the symbolic act as such. The real experience of the content of an intentional act cannot be lived before the emergence of a new and more complex intentional act that suppresses, preserves, and transcends the previous one.

7.1. Communication Skills in the Chimpanzee

From 1917 to 1937, several studies devoted to chimpanzees have been published (see for instance Köhler 1917 and 1921; see also Guillaume & Meyerson 1987) and Thảo mentioned those studies explicitly: cf. Thảo [1951] 1986: 163-165, 237 (Köhler); id., p. 164 (Guillaume); id., p. 169 (Crawford). The question facing anthropoids’ communicative skills had had a problematic history between the 19th and the 20th century (see Radick 2007 and Gensini 2013). In any case, the interest in animal communication and especially in communication behaviour in anthropoids was stated by several scholars during the 19th century (see Darwin 1872; cf. Romanes 1882: 471-498; Morgan [1894] 1903: 59).

To Thảo chimpanzees employ symbolic acts as instruments:

The symbolic function is constituted in mammals, in its roughest form, as a simple result of the interruption of the real act. It thus appears only in a sporadic manner within the framework of direct behaviour. Its conscious utilization is produced only

at the level of the instrument. (Thảo [1951] 1986: 168)

Thảo had already explained what he meant by “the level of the instrument”. Firstly, we should remember that among the anthropoids, the utilization of the instrument is the development of intermediary behaviour (cf. Thảo ([1951] 1986: 162). The intermediary behaviour consists of the inhibition of direct manipulation by way of an intermediary object: “the displacement of an object brings closer another one that was beyond the reach of the subject” (id., p. 161). After this intermediary behaviour is established, the same movement tends to be reproduced and takes the shape of a new intentional behaviour. “In this use of the instrument, the anterior movement is repressed and experienced as an intentional movement in which the subject is conscious of getting hold of the object through the intermediacy of the stick” (id., p. 162).

This new behaviour (the level of the instrument) is determined only by the immediate situation within the limit of perceptual field. The instrument could be only sporadically perceived as a real substance with its *intrinsic efficacy* (id., p. 162-163). Thus, care should be taken because the “instrumental function will be understood only at the following stage, with the employment of the tool” (id., p. 163). That is to say, only humans understand the instrument with its intrinsic and permanent efficacy. The fact that anthropoids have a horizon that is limited to the immediate situation does not enable them to be aware of the constancy of the instrumental function. Like the dog was not aware of the symbolic function as such, the chimpanzee is aware of the symbolic function but is not aware of the instrumental function as such. As we have already seen, the dialectics of behaviour entails the fact that the awareness of the real content of a given behaviour could be effectively gained only against the background of more sophisticated conducts.

A case of intrinsic efficacy of a symbolic behaviour is the lying. The idea Thảo developed offers the tools to advocate a theory of lying from a semiotic perspective:

[...] with anthropoids, where one sees the behaviour of *simulation* being developed. Everyone knows that chimpanzees in captivity love to play tricks on visitors by pretending to give them an object and quickly withdrawing it as soon as someone extends his hand in order to grasp it. We then see them enjoying the discomfiture of

the naive visitor, and sometimes even profiting from the situation by hitting him or stealing something from him. (Thảo [1951] 1986: 168-169)

Like the barking dog, the chimpanzee displays a communicative behaviour (symbolic act). In contrast to the dog barking, the chimpanzee does not mean what really want by his own behaviour. For the chimpanzee, the symbolic act is not an “immediate expression” as the dog barking which means the intention to attack the stranger. The intention of the dog and the intention intended by the symbolic are the same. For this reason, the dog is not aware of the potential meta-intentionality of its act. Instead, the chimpanzee produces a conduct (to give visitors an object) whose goal does not coincide with chimpanzee’s real intention (to hit the visitor or stealing something from him). From the point of view of chimpanzee’s lived experience, the communicative behaviour is something that is at disposal and can be employed for producing some effects. Another way of phrasing it is that the chimpanzee is aware of the meta-intentionality of the symbolic act. The symbolic act is understood as an instrument.

Among chimpanzees, “vocal emissions”, as Thảo put it, “can already take on the symbolic signification of an efficacious mediation.” In Thảo’s view, the instrumental function of signs employed by chimpanzees cannot be reduced to simulation. Chimpanzees may also use signs as shared means of communication. Specifically, they benefit from the instrumental function of signs in order to coordinate their common activities. In this vein, signs serve as instruments to influence the others. For this reason, Thảo talked about an “efficacious mediation” of instrumental signs. Readers are invited to note the use of the notion of *sign*. In this case, in fact, vocalizations are means of communication withing a given community. This phenomenons anticipates what will happen in the second intermediate stage in the development of the symbolic function.

7.2. The Development of Language in the Child

The second intermediate stage of the symbolic function pertains to the language of the child. Thảo was extremely careful as far as human language is concerned. He was aware of the fact that the analogy between communicative behaviour among

chimpanzees and vocal signs in the child is superficial. Thảo was aware that the child grows up in a linguistic context and exercises her own linguistic skills from the very early stages of life. But this fact does not prevent him to compare the instrumental use of verbal signs in the child with the cooperative cries of chimpanzees. In both case, signs are employed as instruments to carry out a desire. “Vocal emissions of the child [...] appear as symbolic forms of instrumental efficacy.” The child employs vocal emissions as “means of acting upon the object.” Thus, from the point of view of the child, vocal emissions have an instrumental efficacy. Before being a countersign of thinking, words are means of acting in the world. Before being a means of reasoning, language is a mode of action. The same assumption had been suggested by some anthropologists of the period such as Mauss (1968: 358) and Malinowski (1923: 450).

Thảo ([1951] 1986: 169) mentioned some examples from Piaget ([1945] 1991: 216-218) to suggest that the child does not directly act in the world but speaks in order to persuade the partner to do what the child cannot yet do alone. Thus, the partner can be defined as “the most efficacious instrument of the child’s desires.”

More specifically, vocal signs can be instruments exactly because they name the instrument. Vocal signs have the double function of naming the instrument and to be instruments. The two aspects are not mutually exclusive. To the child, the partner (grandfather, mother, father, etc.) is an instrument. In turn, the child employs vocal signs in order to name those instruments: “Panana” means the grandfather – or anyone else – and refer to the instrument. So “Panana” does not mean a flesh and blood person but rather a function: vocal signs “refer to concrete means of acting upon the object” (Thảo [1951] 1986: 169). At the same time, vocal signs have an instrumental efficacy because they influence the partner. The child employs vocal signs as instruments for satisfying her own desires. Indeed, the vocal signs have no effects on reality directly. They, however, can be employed as instruments for persuading the partner to do what the child wants the partner does. The vocal signs are “symbolic forms” that have an “instrumental efficacy”.

According to Thảo, one cannot forget that the child can outperform the effectiveness of vocal signs by displaying some gestures: “showing his father a lamp.” Thus, the vocal signs are still supported by motivated signs. In the same

way, the physical context in which the child speaks plays a relevant role in order to individuate the object of desire. The communication in the child is therefore still related to the perceptual field.

To Thảo, vocal signs have multiple meanings (*polysemy*). As a matter of fact, the symbolic function of the dog barking was totally embedded in the plane of the expression. The meaning of the barking is suggested by the barking itself and the intention of the dog coincides with the meaning of the barking. By contrast, the simulation of chimpanzees already shows the ability to differentiate the meaning of a given symbolic behaviour from the intention of the users. In the child, vocal signs are polysemous because the plane of expression does not always mean the same referent, but rather an abstract function. The independence of the reference from the plane of expression allows the child to use vocal signs in different situations and to achieve different ends. The arbitrary bond between the reference and the verbal sign is the condition for having changes of designation. Indeed, vocal signs can have their own peculiar instrumental function exactly because the child can flexibly adapt them to several different situations.

The child is not aware that vocal signs can be employed as tools. As a consequence, the child continues to use vocal signs as if they are instruments. To explain, Thảo ([1951] 1986: 174) wrote

Thus in the case of the child who does not yet know how to construct phrases, the verbal sign is already the object of true production and so takes the form of a tool defined by an objectively determined structure, even though its intentional meaning bears only on its mode of effectiveness for its instrumental function.

8.1. The Role of Labour

Thảo affirmed that human language arose during collective activities (tool making and using) among our human ancestors. To coordinate collective efforts and transmit practical knowledge, our ancestors ejaculates some sounds (working interjections). Thảo implicitly suggested that sociability is not enough for having language. What is required is the fact that social behaviour must take the shape of *labour* (travail). In fact, among mammals, one may observe social behaviour and

cooperation in general. Among humans, instead, social life takes the shape of labour. To Thảo, labour is the main condition for having human language. Instead, physiological and anatomical conditions do not play a direct causal role.

Thảo followed Engel's theory of tool making as a key notion in order to explain the specific features of humankind. Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* in its general outline yields a view on the applicability of laws of dialectics at the most recent scientific findings. In spring 1876, Engels wrote a short essay entirely devoted to *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man* (Anteil der Arbeit an der Menschwerdung des Affen; see MEW XX: 444-455; written in May-June 1876, firstly published in 1895 by the German review *Die Neue Zeit* n. 6; now the ninth chapter of his *Dialectics of Nature*). As the title shows very well, Engels set out the thesis that transition from apes to humans had been allowed by collective labour.

Preliminary, Engels pointed out that humanity is a part of nature. Consequently, human peculiar skills do not essentially differ from those possessed by other mammals. Thus, the first explanation of the difference between humans and other mammals should be sought in anatomy. And right after, what Engels began to emphasise is the idea that erect posture is “*the decisive step in the transition from ape to man*” (MEW XX: 444; trans. in Engels 1934). To him, erect posture freed hands from the task of walking. Our pre-human ancestors – “a particular highly-developed race of anthropoid apes” – began use hands to attend new tasks. Unlike apes, they have always their hand at their disposal and gradually attained “ever greater dexterity.” In turn, more complex movements implied the gradual emergence of anatomical modification concerning muscles, ligaments, and bones. And, in turn, new anatomical features facilitated ever new tasks.

But what did those free-hands do? To Engels, hominid began to make tools. Indeed, among hominids, a rudimentary ability to consciously anticipate actions and goals began to raise. Interestingly, Engels stated that “the animal merely uses the environment, and brings about changes in it by simply presence; man by his changes makes it serve his ends, *masters* it” (id., p. 452). In addition, Engels called *labour* (Arbeit) the skill of consciously mastering the environment with tools. “Labour,” he writes, “begins with the making tools [Werkzeugen]” (id., p. 449).

Engels does not say much more than this. Engels rather focused on the

consequences of the development of labour. Firstly, labour “necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together” (id., p. 446). Secondly, labour and social life brought out the necessity to communicate with others. “Men in the making arrived at the point where *they had something to say to each other.*” In this manner, Engels explained “the origin of language from and in the process of labour.” But Thảo explicitly rejected that language arose from the need to communicate. And he did so by polemically quoting Engels:

In other words, it is true that man has spoken because he “has something to say.” But what he “had to say” was not presented originally in an intentional form: the human ancestor did not say what he thought because he thought it, but thought it because he said it, and he said it because he stopped doing it. (Thảo [1951] 1986: 169-170)

Thảo assumed that language involuntary arose during social goal-oriented actions among our human ancestors, while Engels suggested that the need to communicate was the main reason that forced our ancestors to speak.

8.2. The Objective Value of Language

Thảo ([1951] 1986: 163) wrote that the tool making and using radically changes the ontological status of the mediating object. “The mediating object will no longer be used simply in the present situation, but also produced, preserved, cared for.” That is the development of a tradition and stable collaboration. The collaboration partially appears among chimpanzees but achieves its complete form only among humans (id., p. 165; Thảo quotes Köhler 1927: 158-159). Traditions appear only with the humankind. Among humans, tradition and collaboration take the shape of organization and education. Then tool making must be seen against the background of communal activities and is accompanied by other collective habits. Specifically, collective habits are techniques that “are acquired within the group and transmitted from generation to generation” (Thảo [1951] 1986: 165). The same goes for language.

Interestingly, Thảo stated that “productive activity” (*activité productrice*) is an activity that follows some rules. Those rules are constituted “*outside consciousness*,

in the reality of behaviour as on objective consequence of the material conditions of the use of the tool” (id., p. 171). The formation of language from protolinguistic interjections follows the same logic. In the same manner, protolinguistic interjections were originally assimilated into a determinate moment in the general process of production. As a result, earliest protolinguistic interactions were constituted outside of consciousness. And for this reason, language can be defined as a collective product.

Our ancestors unintentionally emitted some sounds during their efforts to coordinate their movements. Then those sounds began to be expressed to mean the corresponding movements. In this way, the emission of sounds reinforces the stabilization of the representation of those movements. Thus, language reinforces cognitive skills and involves the conceptualisation of productive rules it is embedded in. “Productive activity” is reflected “in the symbolism of language” (id., p. 175). In this vein, according to Thảo, language is nothing but the internalization of the actual behaviour of tool making and using.

According to Thảo, the “objective form” of language depends upon a particular form of social relations that are the conditions for having a given linguistic system. The dimension of social and practical life is what Thảo calls objectivity. It is the same for all of the members of a given community and exists at the level of the behaviour before being translated into the forms of subjective lived experience. As a result, language specifically conveys meanings that are shared and objective rather than being an instrument to communicate individual’s intentions. In this instance, “objective” means three things at least: i) languages transcend individual’s desires; ii) languages exist before the birth of individuals; iii) languages are rooted in practical life. The “conceptual forms” (*formes conceptuelles*) differs from the signification conveyed by the instrumental use of vocal signs because language conveys meanings that are quite stable and generally intelligible.

Here what Thảo began to emphasise is the way in which techniques and education deeply modified the life of our ancestors. To him, new collective habits arose from tool making activities:

Yet, it is clear that the permanent use of the tool has entailed, from the emergence of the very first human horde, the constitution of a number of collective habits as

techniques that are acquired in the group and which do not solely concern the fabrication of each tool, but also the modalities of its use. (id., p. 170)

The question facing Thảo at this juncture is how older behaviour became part of the process of production and changed its meaning. To him, natural behaviour became a collective habit:

Thus, though the function of the tool, the form of production extends to the totality of human activities, inasmuch as they are henceforth objectively determined by the technical habits of the group. [...] The same is true for the behaviour that originally concerned only the body itself, such as the acts of walking, running, climbing, etc., as they are integrated as determined moments in the general process of production. (170-171)

Then tool making as established social activity marked the beginning of human culture. And the same goes for sounds: “the animal cry becomes human language by being articulated within the structure of productive labour” (id., p. 171). The sounds produced by all of the members of the group during the production of tools lost their natural value and became linguistic sounds.

8.3. The Formation of Language

Thảo’s hypothesis on the origins of language may recall the tradition that properly begins with the German philosopher Ludwig Noiré (1829–1889). Noiré suggested a very successful theory. Noiré’s theory theory was meticulously described by Steinthal ([1851] 1888), Plekhanov ([1907] 1976), Mauthner (1912²), Bogdanov ([1923] 2015), Cassirer (1980¹³), Jespersen (1922), Janet (1934), Révész (1946), to mention just few scholars. Noiré cleared his theory in a book entitled *Ursprung der Sprache* (Origin of Language, 1877). The major premise of that book was the thesis that language arose gradually. But the minor premise was that only humans had the skills for creating language. According to Noiré, the necessary skills for creating language did not depend on rationality but rather on sociability. To some extent, Noiré’s stand regarded the idea of considering cooperation as a human-specific feature that entailed an unprecedented form of cooperation already at an early stage of human evolution. Before speaking, our ancestors

already cooperated to achieve common ends. What Noiré considered his own contribution to the debate on language origins was his assumption that language (and reasoning, of course) originally arose during collective purposive activities. In his words: “Language and life of thought arose in the context of *shared and common goals* posed by *common action*, that was the original *work* of our ancestors [Es war die auf einen *gemeinsamen Zweck* gerichtete *gemeinsame Tätigkeit*, es war die urälteste *Arbeit* unserer Stammeltern, aus welcher Sprache und Vernunftleben hervorquoll.]” (Noiré 1877: 331). Consequently, Noiré reasoned that language arose in the context of cooperative tasks. The efforts made in the context of those tasks produced involuntary vocalizations. The involuntary vocalizations performed during cooperative tasks constituted the earliest words of human language. Over time, these involuntary vocalizations became shared and recognised by the group. They originally mean some aspects of the action.

In a similar vein, Thảo ([1951] 1986: 169-170) wrote:

We now have the elements that are necessary to re-embark upon our development and to define, in an adequate way, the intentionality of language. Inasmuch as the symbolic act is a sketched out act whose meaning consists in its very outlined and repressed accomplishment, *the utterance of the verb* results from rhythmic halts in the collective use of the tool, as *a sketched-out movement of production*, ideally ending in the productive operation itself, and experienced as a *signified intention*.

When Thảo employed the notion of “rhythm”, he probably alluded to the debate concerning the relationship between language and music. That debate began in the 19th century when Darwin insisted that human use of voice has its natural roots in animal courtship. But the theory of the German economist Karl Bücher (1847–1930) set out in his *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (Labour and Rhythm, 1899) deserves a special mention. To him, singing, collective working, and body movements are intimately linked among primitive peoples who rhythmically coordinate their collective efforts. It is, then, understandable why several scholars tried to conciliate his theory with Noiré’s one. Noiré (1877: 360), too, considered music, dance, singing as simultaneous to speech at the beginning. The core of Noiré’s theory– i.e., language arose during cooperative tasks – remains untouched in such a rhythmical version. Bücher, however, never quoted Noiré’s theory. And the stress on pragmatic

function of language/singing was more evident in Bücher's theory.

To Thảo, collective activities entail some vocalizations. Those vocalizations rhythmically coordinate collective efforts. The needs of collective production and reproduction of tools entail those rhythmical vocalizations. If those vocalizations are performed without the corresponding productive action, they could become a symbol that evokes the productive activity. In this case, vocalizations are a sketched-out movement of production: they are a moment of the production that is used to evoke the total process of the production. And those vocalizations could be understood by all the members of the group because all of them share the same productive experience. So, he wrote that “the *ideal work of the concept* is but the very movement of real work being interrupted for an instant by virtue of its objective structure and being continued on the symbolic plane by the use of the word” (Thảo [1951] 1986: 169-170).

Thảo talked about the general mechanism of symbolic transposition in the following way: the reproduction of working interjections when the work is interrupted entails the emergence of a conceptual correlate, i.e., the outline of the corresponding operation. That conceptual correlate becomes the meaning of the working interjections which, in turn, becomes a word in a linguistic sense. What Thảo describes is the transposition of practical action into the form of thought. Such a transposition is mediated by vocalizations, i.e., a part of the collective use of tools which can be performed independently of the act itself and evokes that act. The lived experience of linguistic significations, i.e., the intended meaning of language, then corresponds to the outline of collective production of tools.

With *concept* Thảo ([1951] 1986: 183) meant “the symbolic form in which a determinate moment of production is outlined.” Vocalizations support a determinate moment of production and become the sketched-out act that symbolically evokes a moment of production. According to Thảo, the fundamental feature of the concept is that it could be “realized, in principle, in an infinite number of occurrences” (id., p. 59). The *metaphor* seems to be the cognitive mechanism that allowed our ancestors employing the same words to mean different states of affairs (according to Aristotle it is the metaphor of the third type, see *Poet.* 1457B, 1- 1458, 17). Thảo wrote that “mankind, at its beginnings, had

at its disposal, in almost all cases, a purely symbolic mastery by means of the simple exercise of language, which worked an imaginary transposition of the elementary productive schemes upon all the perceptive givens” (id., p. 172). To clarify, language was originally the internalization of productive schemes. The earliest words mean a certain productive schema. Later, they began to be employed in order to mean new state of affairs.

Thảo quoted the following example: “Thus children who are beginning to speak identify clouds with the smoke of a pipe” (the example can be found in Piaget 1945: 241). This metaphor is based on the mechanism of the *analogy* in the sense of Bartha (2013): analogy “is a comparison between two objects, or systems of objects, that highlights respects in which they are thought to be similar.” Thus, analogy establishes a relation of similarity between two different terms: the smoke of a pipe is similar to clouds, or vice versa. Interestingly, the comparison conduces from the term that is more known by the subject to the term that is less known. For this reason, establishing similarities may have a heuristic function.

Further, the similarity between clouds and the smoke of a pipe is possible by virtue of their morphological resemblances. In detail, their morphological resemblances are based on their gaseous state. The similarity is composed of three terms: smoke of a pipe → nebulous, cloudy, foggy, indefinite, dense, etc., → clouds. The intermediary term reveals the properties that the other two terms have in common. One may also underline, however, that the similarity highlights what two terms have in common but at the same time does not make explicit their dissimilarities.

Thảo ([1951] 1986: 237) suggested that the verb had had an essential role in primitive languages:

It goes without saying that work resumes in principle soon after the emission of sound. We still have the opportunity of reliving these original experiences in practical life. Thus the cry “heave ho!” [“ho...hisse!”] arises from the objective structure of a collective effort of traction and is immediately comprehensible in that very work. We know, moreover, that the verb occupies a privileged place in primitive languages.

It may be interesting to highlight that an interjection such as “ho...hisse!” might

mean the corresponding action by virtue of a cognitive mechanism very similar to the *metonymy*. Usually, metonymy is a figure of speech in which the semantic transfer is based on the relation of contiguity. In the case of the “ho...hissel”, metonymy expresses the effect in order to mean the cause. Thus, our ancestors employed working interaction in order to refer to the corresponding activity.

Thảo’s assumption implies three problems at least. Why did Thảo take it for granted that “the verb occupies a privileged place in primitive languages”? In effect, he considered such a view as widely shared. What does it mean “primitive language”? Sure enough, it is not quite clear what kind of language Thảo talked about. Why did he regard the verb as the most relevant linguistic element? Some historical factors could help to answer these questions.

On the one side, the issue of primitive thinking was deeply debated at the epoch. A wide range of anthropologists dealt with that question: for instance, Thurnwald (1922, 1928, and 1938), Levy-Bruhl (1910, 1922, and 1949), Leroy (1927), Malinowski (1923: 310-312). And, generally, the tradition, which stressed on the primacy of verbs, implicitly underlined the primacy of action over thinking.

On the other side, to Noiré (1877: 342; cf. also id. 1885: 135, 143), the earliest words originally designated the action (*Verbum*) and the patient (*Objekt*) simultaneously (as Geiger 1868: 386; see also Steinthal [1851] 1888: 295). But the supporter of Noiré’s theory did not always suggest the coexistence of verbs and names at the level of primitive language. For instance, Bogdanov (2015: 15), Buxarin (1925: ch. 6d), and Janet (1936: 64) quoted Noiré and the 19th-century comparative-historical linguistics (cf., for instance, Müller 1887: 272) to support the theory of the verbs as first linguistic roots.

9. Concluding Remarks on Human Language

Generally, Thảo described the socio-psychological preconditions of language rather than the anatomy-physiological ones. But one cannot dismiss that, to Thảo – even if he was a little bit reticent to admit that, from the point of view of ontogeny, language is an acquired/innate faculty. This remark is based on Thảo’s assumption that the ontogeny recapitulates the phylogeny (see Chapter 1 for more details).

According to Thảo, language is the result of two conditions. First, human language conveys meanings which are the internalization of modes of production. Second, human language depends upon the culturalization of a more general symbolic function that humans share with other mammals. At the beginning of human phylogeny, language surely was a part of a more general structure of the human-specific behaviour, i.e., labour as the practical horizon of common activities, traditions, habits, and techniques.

Thus, Thảo set out that language arose from protolinguistic working interjections that rhythmically coordinated common goal-oriented activities. In other words, those interjections were part of the collective use of the tool. In this way, the objective structure of labour transformed animal cries into linguistic words. When the interjections are emitted independently of the actual process of labour, they begin to mean the part of the productive activity they usually are associated to. Working interjections thus evoke the productive activity in the form of a cognitive correlate, that is, the concept, the outline of that activity, its behavioural schema.

To Thảo signification is not a mental entity which exists before being produced by the speech. For this reason, Thảo said that language did not arise from the need to communicate. The sign produced its signification: then, Thảo implicitly criticised the semantic theory set out by Husserl in his *Logical Investigation* (see Benoist 2013). There are no significations without and beyond the real production of signs. Nonetheless, we must add that Thảo was talking about the origins of language rather than the full-fledged language.

After the formation of speech, what characterises human language is the possibility to designate conceptual structures. They are the same for all the members of the community because they reproduce the operative structures of the actual process of production. We must note that the actual and objective process of tool production is a collective habit that can be reproduced countless times. As the conceptual structures reproduce that process of production in the form of thought, the conceptual structures, too, can refer to several different situations and are thus free of constraints and space-time influences.

The symbolic behaviour of mammals shall ensure the mediation from practical

behaviour to consciousness. Specifically, the sketched-out act mediates the translation of the target of practical behaviour into the intentional content of consciousness. Since the direct behaviour is repressed, a sketched-out act is performed and becomes the symbolic act that tends to an intended signification, i.e., the target and the intention of the inhibited act. The motivated bond between expression and signification exactly shows that the mediation took place. In the same way, working vocalizations had still the role of mediation from practical life to consciousness. By contrast, full-formed language seems to be more independent from practical life. Once conceptual structures are at disposal of the speaker, she can produce a chain of concepts independently of the immediate situation. Another way to say this is that full-fledged language entails arbitrary signs whose production is independent of the immediate working situation. A clear advantage of this ability is the fact that consciousness can orient behaviour, even if the behaviour is still determined by the objective conditions of actual life. That is, consciousness can orient the behaviour towards more sophisticated modes of production, even if the need to put in place those sophisticated modes of production depends upon the objective conditions of actual life. In other words, full-fledged language enables humans to freely and consciously reproduce in the form of thought possible or impossible actions. Reasoning emerges every time when humans stop doing something and imagine other ways to do it.

Nonetheless, Thảo's theory raises some problems. First, we must note that human semiotic behaviour could be hardly reduced only to conceptual language, of course. We cannot dismiss the fact that there are also other functions of language which depends upon the need better to communicate. But Thảo neglected to deal with those other means of communication. Does the human-specific semiotic behaviour employ other semiotic abilities? Human language is the result of the development of certain semiotic skills (immediate expression, simulation, vocals schemes, etc.) but it is not clear if Thảo admitted that those semiotic skills continue to be effective in fully-developed languages. In a phrase, he did not explain if there is a coexistence of more semiotic skills next to the fully-fledged language. It would have been interesting if Thảo had spent some words in this regard.

The universal value of both conceptual knowledge and language is only the

result of the reflection in consciousness of the indefinite possibility of repetition implied in the objective structure of the process of the tool-making. And language merely reflects what already exists at the level of the behaviour. That means that labour already depends upon some practical skills which allow producing, reproducing, and storing tools. These practical skills are then internalized by way of language and become cognitive skills, i.e., concepts and conceptual operations. One could ask if there is a kind of practical and pre-linguistic know-how that is already at work in production. As we have seen, at the level of thought and consciousness, the mechanism of generalisation of concepts is under the influence of the metaphor. One could ask if the metaphor is a result of the internalization of proto-metaphorical practical ability or it is rather something that emerges with language. Is there a relationship between metaphor and tool-making? Is the metaphor a mediation between actual life and reasoning? How could metaphor conduce to the ability to generalise the experience in the form of thought? Unfortunately, Thảo did not answer these questions.

The mechanism by which the structure of practical life becomes a conceptual structure is entirely based on the conventional association between some sounds and a given moment in the production process. Those sounds mediate the transition from practical life to the life of conscience. When sounds are part of the production process they have only a functional and pragmatic value. Therefore, they are understandable by all those involved in the production process. Thus, the linguistic meaning of linguistic sounds exists only at the level of consciousness in the form of conceptual structures. These conceptual structures are shared by the whole social group because they have a social value as they reproduce a collective habit – which is also a universal moment in human history. But can we really deal with language when dealing with expressions associated with the production process and without conceptual signification? It seems that in this case we are dealing with pre-linguistic expressions. These pre-linguistic expressions could have a linguistic meaning only because the production process has been interrupted. And, therefore, language in the strict sense is separated from practical life.

Thảo well described how language allows conceptual universal knowledge, i.e., a

system of intended concepts which are independent of space and time. But it is questionable whether the fully-fledged language could be also context-related and effectively refers to reality itself. In effect, the fully-fledged language merely refers to mental contents. Those contents are the abstract moment of real practical relation with the environment. In other words, the intended meaning the symbolic function refers to is the negation of the reality of behaviour.

It seems that Thảo's theory of language exacerbates the isolation of consciousness from practical life. Given that human reasoning depends upon language, humans cannot know the reality itself but contents of consciousness. At the same time, humans still operate in the real concrete world. In this vein, Thảo involuntarily argued for an irreconcilable fracture between symbolic consciousness and the real individuals. The problem facing Thảo at this juncture is how to conciliate the linguistic ego and the real subject of practical life.

Thảo was acutely aware of that conundrum. Here is who he described the point in 1974:

[...] the method so defined, namely, the analysis of lived experience practiced on the basis of dialectical materialism, only seemed to yield effective results for understanding animal behavior, as exhibited in the first chapter of part two. [...] Which is to say, the project, so attractive as an *Aufhebung* offered practically no assistance for the essential task, namely the analysis of human realities. (Thảo [1974: 37] 2009: 297-298)

There was nothing to do but take the work up from the beginning, to pose the problem not as a *lived, phenomenological analysis of consciousness, pursued on the positions of dialectical materialism* [une analyse vécue, phénoménologique, de la conscience, pratiquée sur les positions du matérialisme dialectique], but rather an *application of dialectical materialism to the analysis of lived consciousness* [une application de la dialectique matérialiste à l'analyse de la conscience vécue], and to solve it through its very content, namely through the orderly reproduction of the actual, material process, where the movement of subjectivity is constituted. (Thảo [1974: 38] 2009: 299)

A few years before, in a letter, Thảo explain that, in PDM,

In reality, I lacked to understand Marx's indications about language as a mediation between social practice and consciousness [En réalité il me manquait d'avoir compris les indications de Marx sur le langage, comme médiation entre la pratique sociale et la conscience.]. (to Rossi-Landi, Hanoi, 27 January 1972; see fig. 14)

In Thảo's following works, language still represents the core of the mediation between social practice and consciousness. But he seriously changes his own conception of language. In this vein, we must better understand why he said that "Marx's indications about language" explain the mediation between practical life and consciousness. To clarify this point, the following chapters will be devoted to the description of the new theory Thảo suggested after he had published PDM.

Chapter Three

The Semiotics of the Language of the Real Life

Die Produktion der Ideen, Vorstellungen, des Bewußtseins ist
zunächst unmittelbar verflochten in die materielle Tätigkeit
und den materiellen Verkehr der Menschen, Sprache des wirklichen Lebens.
Das Vorstellen, Denken, der geistige Verkehr der Menschen
erscheinen hier noch als direkter Ausfluß ihres materiellen Verhaltens.
(K. Marx)

1. Towards a New Semiotic Model. - 2. Saussure and Structuralism(s). - 3.1. The Object of Semiology. - 3.2. Arbitrariness versus Motivated Signs. - 3.3. Saussure's Mentalism. - 4.1. Saussure's Notion of Value (I). - 4.2. Saussure's Notion of Value (II). - 4.3. Similarities between Mercantilism and Saussurism. - 4.4. Rossi-Landi's Theory of Value. - 5.1. The Language of Real Life (I). - 5.2. The Language of Real Life (II).

1. Towards a New Semiotic Model

In PDM, Husserl's phenomenology was accused of being a kind of idealism (cf. Thảo [1951] 1986: 7). The major constraint of phenomenology, and in particular of the practice of transcendental reduction to the dimension of lived experience, was that Husserl was not radical enough, and hence oscillated between a trend towards realism and the retreat to an idealistic insight. In particular, the reduction to transcendental subjectivity as a pole constituting phenomena would have had to be much more radical: in this case, the phenomenologist would have shown i) that the transcendental ego itself would be nothing but the historical and concrete ego, ii) that transcendental subjectivity is itself constituted in the movement of natural and social history that precedes it, iii) that consciousness is always preceded by the life of the organism and its activities, iv) that the pre-categorial experience should be reckoned to be an experience taking place at the level of animal life and is not peculiar to humans, v) that lived experience would be the abstract aspect of real

life.

To the extent that Thảo's purpose is to describe from a monistic perspective the emergence of consciousness from matter, no form of dualism can be defended. This is far from enough, however, to reject the Husserlian philosophy in every respect. Thảo admits that certain concepts and research carried out by Husserl could be successfully integrated into his theoretical project. This is particularly true of the analysis of lived experience described in the second volume of the *Ideas* (Hua IV), which shows how the individual psychic dimension corresponds to the experience of animal life and how the same transcendental constitution would follow and reproduce dynamic that goes from matter to life and from life to spirit in the sense of social existence (cf. id., §§ 1-34).

Thảo did not consider dialectical materialism as a radical alternative to Husserl's philosophy, but rather, in the second part of his PDM, he attempted to incorporate some phenomenological ideas and certain results of the phenomenological method into a dialectical materialist framework. Specifically, Thảo's aim is to explain the origin of the specific form of consciousness observable in humans from the point of view of a monistic metaphysics, and more particularly a materialist one. For this reason, PDM seems to be the continuation of the Engels' *Dialectic of Nature* by other means.

Nonetheless, Thảo's theory of human consciousness set out in his PDM seems to overshoot the target. The symbolic behaviour of mammals, as well as first human vocalizations, are supposed to ensure the mediation from practical behaviour to consciousness. Instead, the human fully-fledged language is a system of abstract operations which lacks a middle term that explains how they could be seen as the reflection of practical life and socio-historical condition. And, since human consciousness depends upon language, humans cannot know the reality itself but contents of consciousness merely. The fully-fledged language refers to a content of consciousness, i.e., the abstract moment of real practical relation with the environment. Assuming that linguistic signification is nothing other than the result of the negation and idealization of the real relation with reality and material things, language only refers to abstract idealized contents.

Given that the main interest of Thảo is to explain the origin of human

consciousness, he understood that his main subject of research must be the human language. The problem facing Thảo at this juncture is how i) to conciliate the linguistic ego and the real subject of practical life, and ii) justifying the link between language and consciousness. To achieve his purpose, Thảo must reorganise his semiotic model in order to explain i) how human language could interact with the external world from the beginning and ii) how the fully-formed language might still mediate the internalisation of social practical life into consciousness.

In the 1960s, Thảo was again engaged in a vast research project on the origin of consciousness and language, as evidenced by a series of articles that will be collected in his ILC. In this book, Thảo sought to explain human cognition – following the indications of the classics of Marxism – through the practical and collective life of our ancestors. Given the relevant role of language, then, to Thảo, i) consciousness emerges in and through the language considered in its materiality and in its practical and operational function; ii) language is not an object, but it is mediation between humans and reality, between humans, and between the individual and the won self; iii) language cannot be studied as an autonomous reality, but it must be observed within the social and practical life - this is the first condition that must be satisfied so that a discourse on language could be considered as scientific.

To establish the main principles of his new semiotic model, Thảo polemically criticised certain passages of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique générale*, 1916; henceforth CLG) and aimed to develop a materialistic semiology. This chapter will be especially devoted to explaining structure and consequences of Thảo's criticism of Saussurean semiological model.

2. Saussure and Structuralism(s)

The reception of the CLG inseparable from its drafting and especially its circulation (Puech 2013a, see also the *vulgata* which Lepschy 1966 talks about), and the history of European structuralisms must be seen against such a background (Puech 2013b). In Saussure's posthumous book, indeed, very famous pairs of

concepts – such as diachrony/synchrony, *langue/parole* or signified/signifier – had been introduced. From the 1950s, these notions became the keywords of so-called structuralism (see Dosse 1991; 1992).

Structuralism could be previously regarded as a manifold intellectual movement that saw the concept of “structure” as the starting point for research in several different fields. A structure is a non-empirical system of elements whose meaning depends upon their reciprocal relations. And every element of the structure does not exist before the others and has a primacy over the others in no way. Beginning in the 1950s, there was a particular phenomenon to report. According to Chiss et al. (2015) and Léon (2013), the term “structure” is crystallized within the French human sciences and, in the 1960s and 1970s, a generalized structuralism took place and was characterized by the trans-disciplinary value of the term “structure”.

In the France of the 1960s and 1970s, there was opposition to the structuralist thesis and, in particular, to the structuralist reading of certain hypotheses of the CLG. Among them, criticisms that came from the Marxist front was particularly significant historically in establishing a relatively homogeneous position of strategic, ideological and theoretical opposition to the dominant structuralist discourse. To quote only two examples, we should recall a few articles by Lucien Sève – dear friend and editor of Thảo – and some works by Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991) (see Sève 1984 and Lefebvre 1971).

We may sum up the disagreement between generalised structuralism and dialectical materialism by two main points: i) first of all, our authors criticise the absence of a dialectical relation between synchrony and diachrony, between the structure and the process, and condemned the resurgence of the old opposition between Eleatism and Eraclitism (see especially the criticism of Lefebvre 1971: 70); ii) the autonomy of structures leads one to think of structures as metaphysical entities, to identify the ideal with reality, the products of science with affective reality (the same ontological structuralism denounced by Eco 1968).

Thảo’s criticisms towards Saussure must be regarded against the background of this debate. We cannot dismiss that Thảo was deeply interested in French cultural world and knew that structuralism was broadly successful in France during the 1950s and 1960s, understanding that Saussure was the main source of that

theoretical framework. Thảo ([1974: 39] 2009: 301) wrote: “In 1964 I heard the first echoes of the resounding success of structuralism in the west. A study of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* became an urgent necessity”¹⁶. Thảo understood that a theory concerning the first linguistic signs and the formation of language had to contend with the most influential available semiotic model. It was Saussure’s semiotics whose applications extensively transcended linguistic sciences.

The CLG in itself was not Saussure’s first-hand writing but rather the result of the adjustments made by the editors after his death. The analysis of Saussure’s manuscripts showed the content of Saussure’s thought in a more faithful way (see Godel 1969; see also De Mauro in Saussure [1967] 2011: 285-456). Nonetheless, Thảo did not know such studies. To him, Saussure’s thought totally coincided with the theories set out in the CLG. But Thảo did not consider structuralism the only possible way for reading Saussure.

Thảo offset what could be safeguarded of the CLG and what cannot. Accordingly, Thảo decided to begin his discussion of the CLG with the concept of “arbitrariness” employed by Saussure to describe the unmotivated link between signifier and signified. After that, Thảo took Saussure’s notion of “value” into account so as to reveal the ideological assumptions and conundrums that lead to neglect a correct evaluation of the nature of linguistic signs.

3.1. The Object of Semiology

Between 1974 and 1975 Thảo published two articles entitled *De la phénoménologie à la dialectique matérialiste de la conscience* (From phenomenology to the materialistic dialectic of consciousness; see Thảo 1974, 1975) which served as an introduction, partly biographical and partly theoretical, to the ILC. In the first article Thảo

¹⁶ For instance, see Jakobson 1963, Barthes 1964, Todorov 1965, Althusser et al. 1965, Greimas 1966, Foucault 1966, Lacan 1966, and Piaget 1968. According to Chiss et al. 2015 and Léon 2013, the term “structure” crystallized itself in the field of humanities in France already during the 1950s. In 1959 two conferences took place in Cerisy-la-Salle entitled of *Sens et usage du terme de structure* and *Genèse et Structure*. In this regard, see also Goldmann 1970. Lévi-Strauss (1959) and Merleau-Ponty (1960) need mentioning in this regard. Finally, for Eastern Structuralism see Sèriot 1999.

almost exclusively dealt with the theory of the sign proposed in the CLG. Thảo believed that both, his hypothesis about the origin of language as well as the semiology which was its theoretical support, were radically in disagreement with certain hypotheses of the CLG taken up by structuralism.

Thảo regarded the notion of “arbitrariness” as the key concept of Saussure’s semiotics (as De Mauro 2011: note 138). The CLG introduced the notion of “sign” (signe) to designate the combination of the two faces of every linguistic term, the signifier and the signified: “The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (CLG: 98; trans., p. 66). Saussure proposed “to retain the word *sign* [signe] to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by *signified* [signifié] and *signifier* [signifiant]” (CLG: 9; trans., p. 67). To him, the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, viz. the signifier is not linked by inner bond to the signified. “The bond between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary*” (CLG: 100; trans. p. 67).

In Thảo’s view, the attention that Saussure has constantly accorded to the arbitrariness obscured a wide range of signs that may be hardly reduced to linguistic signs.

Saussure conceived linguistics as part of a more general science of signs that he called “semiology” (CLG: 100; trans., p. 68). To Saussure “linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system.” Indeed, semiology concerns “the whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign”. Assuming that linguistic signs are totally arbitrary, they “realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process”. Therefore, language is the most characteristic of all systems of expression and must be assumed as the classification principle in semiology.

In the same passage, Saussure devalued “completely natural signs” (CLG 100-101; trans., p. 68-69). Those signs are based on “the rudiment of a natural bond between signifier and signified” and, consequently, have an “intrinsic value”. Saussure called such signs “symbols” and regarded them as the signs that are “never wholly arbitrary”.

Thảo called into question the primacy of linguistic signs in semiotics. More precisely, in CLG, Thảo saw traces which can be a support for a semiology that is no longer centred on the model of verbal language:

However, the author [Saussure] himself, in an early part of the book, had recognised the existence of an entire class of signs, introduced as “natural signs”—either entirely natural, like pantomime, or partially so, like signs of politeness, symbols, etc. All these signs are characterized by “a certain natural expressiveness” that lends them “intrinsic value.” (Thảo [1974: 39] 2009: 301)

We can thus read, clearly and even highlighted throughout the *Course in General Linguistics*, the possibility and the necessity of another semiology. (id., p. 303)

Thảo refused to assimilate all kinds of signs to arbitrary signs: “I was surprised by the boldness with which the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign, taken from the study of spoken language, was extended to all signs in general for the establishment of semiology as a general science of signs” (id., p. 301). Consequently, Thảo engaged in an analysis of the nature of non-wholly arbitrary signs and the intrinsic motivation of speech acts: “Already, ordinary language seeks to attain – through intonation, word and phrase choice, sentence order – a certain expressive quality, which is, as such, unregulated by the conventional codes and contributes, sometimes decisively, to meaning” (id., p. 302).

In this respect, Thảo’s semiotic project reevaluated symbols and partially motivated signs within the real life. Indeed, his theory of the origins of language must begin with the analysis of the fundamental and early signs that were the precursors of developed linguistic signs. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to transcend the representation of linguistic systems and analyse two kinds of links: the bond between signifier and signified and the link between symbols and reality.

3.2. Arbitrariness versus Motivated Signs

Thảo disagreed with the primacy of arbitrariness and condemned the extension of the properties of linguistic signs to all kinds of signs. In detail, he did not agree with Saussure’s assumption that semiology should merely be addressed to arbitrary features of signs. Though semiology would have also to study natural

signs, Saussure affirmed, it must solely focus on their conventional aspects.

Against that, Thảo even doubted that languages could be regarded as systems of arbitrary signs at all. To Thảo ([1974: 39] 2009: 302), scientific language may be seen as the best example of a wholly conventional system. “The semiotic ideal based on the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign seems to achieve full value only for scientific language, which aims primarily to clearly express distinct ideas, and to that end uses conventional language as much as possible.” But ordinary language employs certain motivated means, such as onomatopoeias, inflexions, stress, syntactic reversal of the normal order of words and phrases in a sentence, indexical, and so forth. Those means of expression are not always codified by the conventional rules of the speech, but they contribute to understanding the intentions of the partner.

Thảo mentioned other examples of symbols: miming, gesturing, pantomime, artworks, facial movements, and so forth. What they have in common is the tendency to establish a direct link between the meaningfulness of the signifier and the signified. As a consequence, those signs have an intrinsic value even if they could be partially arbitrary, of course. And this is the point that Thảo’s semiotics focused on:

[The dialectical semiology] would study the immense variety of modes of expression and that is oriented toward an ideal – opposed to the scientific ideal of conventional distinction founded on the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign – that we might call the aesthetic ideal: mimicry, ritual, symbol, various figurative processes, the infinity of gestures and physiological games that precede, but always accompany and sometimes substitute for speech – all finding their greatest fulfillment in art. (Thảo [1974: 40] 2009: 303)

Thus, Thảo stressed the need to take what he called “the general system of intrinsic signs” into account. As he stated, that system is opposed to “the general system of arbitrary signs”. The structure of the system of intrinsic signs is based on the intrinsic meaningfulness of the signifier. But Thảo went much further and suggested that the system of intrinsic signs is the condition for having the system of arbitrary signs. This is the core of Thảo’s theory:

Quite clearly, the first system [the system of intrinsic signs] founds the second [that

of arbitrary signs], since it directly demonstrates in sensible intuition the content of meaning to which the second gives a conventionally formally more distinct expression, in order to develop it at the discursive level. (Thảo [1974: 40] 2009: 303).

To illustrate, the system of intrinsic signs directly exhibits the meaning of a given expression to perception. For instance, the sight of a person staring at something is enough to understand what she means. In the same way, an aggressive and threatening tone is enough to understand the intention of the partner. At a subsequent stage, the system of arbitrary signs gives the message a conventional and discursive expression.

So Thảo stated that it would be quite wrong to equate the system of intrinsic signs with the system of arbitrary signs. Consequently, it is also wrong to reduce the structure of whatever sign to linguistic signs. In Thảo's view, language in a wide sense is "the movement of signs in general". With regard to the origins of speech, language took the shape of gestures and vocalizations whose performance conveyed meaning because of the "intrinsic expressiveness" of those signs.

It seems that Thảo regarded Saussurean arbitrariness more in terms of the conventional relationship between signifier and meaning than in terms of non-motivation. And his argument seems to rest precisely on such assimilation of arbitrariness to conventionality: conventionalism must necessarily assume a pre-existing communicational, cognitive and social layer. Such a remark may seem trivial, given the philosophical reflection on language since Plato's *Cratylus* at least, and much has been written about the vicious circle implicit in conventionalist positions. As indicated in the ILC, Thảo was well aware of this debate and what interests him is rather to take a position against tautologies and pleonasms proper of a semiology which takes a system of signs that refer to each other as its subject matter:

It is quite clear that if the whole meaning of signs merely consists in their referring to one another, without ever referring directly to things, then we are practically enclosed in a world of signs, so that we no longer see what speaking of things could mean. [...] (Thảo [1973] 1984: 33)

However, the importance of Thảo's thesis rests elsewhere: in fact, it wants to clarify the genetic development of the arbitrariness of signs.

3.3. Saussure's Mentalism

One of the most interesting aspects of the remarks proposed by Thảo is the reproach of mentalism and idealism to the ashamed of Husserl and Saussure. The CLG reckoned that “the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (CLG: 98; trans. p. 66). And the sound-image (signifier) “is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses.” Of course, Saussure had argued that the mental nature of the sign depended on previous perceptual experience, although the linguistics took the psychic aspect of linguistic phenomena alone into account. However, Thảo ([1974: 42] 2009: 309) constantly highlighted how the “modeling of the signifier on the material conditions of social practice” – that is, the concrete semiotic act that takes place in practical life – remains the essential starting point to explain every psychic entity.

For Thảo ([1975: 25-26] 2009: 314-315), indeed,

It is obvious that this idea, placing language on the pure ideal plane of consciousness, separates it completely from the material activity of human beings in the social production of their existence. However, such a theory is obviously inspired by a psychology that is no longer acceptable today: “The psychic character of our acoustic images,” says Saussure, “appears well when we observe our own language. Without moving the lips or the tongue, we can talk to ourselves or mentally recite a piece of verse” (*ibidem*) [see CLG: 98-99, trans., p. 66]. In reality we cannot separate internal language, as a pure ideal operation, from actual movements more or less outlined – from voice and gesture. These movements are always being accomplished, even when we do not see this clearly from the outside. The ideal operation is accomplished only on the basis of material signifying acts, and merely to stop some of them – for example to press the tongue between the teeth – is sufficient to slow intellectual activity considerably.

[...]

The ideal signifier, as a “psychic imprint” experienced in consciousness, thus rests necessarily on a material signifier, of which that “imprint” is precisely the ideal reproduction, and it is in virtue of this material signifier that language serves as the mediation between the material social practice and the interior life of consciousness [...]

Thảo (1975: 26-27) mentioned Husserl and the notions of noema and noesis in order to explain the psychic nature of the signified and the signifier described by Saussure.

Husserl would be the clearest and coherent example of “subjective reflection”

(Thảo 1975: 24) and the Husserlian phenomenology would be a theory of knowledge which excludes from its research horizon the material and bodily relation between the subject and the external object to the mind. According to Thảo, the Husserlian distinction between noesis (intentional act) and noema (intentional object) – they are the two terms of every intentional structure – precisely neglected the role of the external material world in the cognitive process (cf. Hua IV: § 87-127).

The noema would therefore not be the image of the real object that exists outside the subject of knowledge and with which the subject establishes a relationship before any intentional lived experience. The noema exhausts the reality of the knowable object (Hua III: §§ 87-96). In support of his position, Thảo equated the Husserlian theory of knowledge with the empirio-criticism targeted by Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908). For the empirio-critics (Avenarius, Mach, Bogdanov) – by putting aside the various aspects of the issue – knowledge of the world depends on the knowledge of the complexes of sensations which refer only ideally to the existence of external objects.

Thảo added that, given the coincidence of the object of the mind (image, idea, representation, etc.) with the real known object or only knowable one, Husserl would support an anti-realistic thesis. Dialectical materialism, on the contrary, would imply an epistemology for which sensations is the manifestation of a real interaction with material objects which are independent of the subject – whose sensations are precisely their images. Since humans are natural beings which adapt to a natural world that precedes their existence, they can know the objective material reality – although in an incomplete manner.

For Saussure, the object of linguistics is not, as Thảo wrote, the concrete individual act of speaking (*parole*), but the arbitrary system of signs taken in its psychic nature (*langue*). Thus, Thảo declared that the sound-image (signifier) would not be very different from the noesis as well as the concept (the signified) could be reckoned to be the Husserlian noema. Another way of saying this is that the Husserlian theory of intentionality as a noetic-noematic relation does not differ essentially from the Saussurean description of the signs from the point of view of the *langue*. Here is how Saussure described the *langue*:

Whereas speech is heterogeneous, language, as defined, is homogeneous. It is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological. (CLG: 32; trans., p. 15)

Given that Thảo dismissed Saussure's assumption of the social nature of the *langue*, he tried to demonstrate that the noesis and the noema – and the same goes for the signified and the signifier – are nothing more than the interiorised psychic epiphenomenon of the actual semiotic movement. The latter is first presented as an objective semiotic behaviour – namely, social, embodied and preconscious – that supports the collective practices and activities of a given community. As a complex of gestural and verbal motivated signs shared by the group and rooted in the context in which they are produced, the system of intrinsic signs precedes and promotes the emergence of individual cognition, consciousness, concepts, and psychic images.

As a matter of fact, for Thảo, human consciousness must be regarded as the product of following factors: a certain anatomy (in particular, the bipedal posture), certain neuro-physiological mechanisms (to be placed in the brain), but, above all, the particular characteristics of collective life of our ancestors which have marked the evolution of our species. The name given by Thảo to the latter is “material behaviour” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 17).

According to Thảo (1975), the psychic nature of the signified-noema and the signifier-noesis is the result of the individual's internalization of a social practice that takes place, first and foremost, in the biological body and in the social life. And it is this social and linguistic practice that will serve to explain the phylogenetic and ontogenetic origin of consciousness.

4.1. Saussure's Notion of Value (I)

Thảo's project also aimed, among other things, to define in a detailed way, on the one hand, the relationship between value and arbitrariness and, on the other, the relationship between value and signification. In relation to the first point, the question is particularly important because, without surprise, the history of

Saussurian philology was marked by a debate on the logical dependence between value and arbitrariness (cf. CLG 157; trans., p. 113). On the one hand, some say that Saussure deduces arbitrariness from value (see Engler 1962: 62; Derossi 1965: 83; Jäger 1976: 237; Wunderli 1981: 225); on the other, there are scholars who claim that Saussure followed the inverse approach (cf. De Mauro 2011: fn. 138).

In relation to the second point (namely, the relation between value and signification), we cannot forget that, like the debate on the notion of arbitrariness which became particularly animated after the articles of Pichon (1937) and Benveniste (1939), around the concept of value a rich bibliography arose over the years (for the debate on arbitrariness cf. De Mauro 2011: 413-416; for the debate on value, see Sofia 2013). In this corpus, it is possible to highlight two tendencies that are particularly relevant to the present work.

The first one concerns the relationship between value and signification. The debate on this point has been revived recently after the publication of Saussure's *Ecrits de linguistique générale* (2002; henceforth ELG), and in particular a passage of the manuscript on the double essence of language (1891; see ELG: 17-88) in which Saussure seems to identify value, meaning, function and usage (cf. ELG: 28). The identification of value and signification (sustained by some even before the publication of the ELG: for instance, see Jäger 1976: 216; see also Malmkjær 1991: 437; Bright 1992: III, 406; Bouquet 1992: 91; id. 1997: 317; Rastier 2002) entailed the reaction of those who argued that signification cannot be completely reduced to value. This is in agreement with both the handwritten notes of the course auditors (CLG / E: 1854 B, C, E, D) and with what is said in the CLG itself (CLG: 158).

On the other hand, the second trend concerns the debate on the sources of the Saussurean notion of "value." There have been those who have tried to identify the economic sources of Saussurean notion of value (cf. Koerner 1973: 68; Sljusareva 1980: 541; Ponzio 2005: 2; Ponzio 2015; Joseph 2014), or those who have challenged this approach (cf. Godel 1957: 235), and, finally, those who have argued for the linguistic sources of this notion (cf. Auroux 1985: 295; Swiggers 1982: 329; Haßler 2007). Scholars have pointed out that the comparison between language and economics was a long-time theoretical operation long before Saussure and its traces can already be found in Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz (see Kilic 2006; cf. also

Aarsleff 1979: 42; Cerquiglioni 1989: 36) or Turgot (cf. Auroux 1985: 296).

De Mauro (2011: fn. 165) had already stressed that Saussure knew the debate in political economy and, especially, he had knowledge of the *Methodenstreit* between Carl Menger (1840–1921) – who was one of the greatest theorists of *marginalism* – and the historical school of Gustav von Schmoller (1838–1917). De Mauro did not exclude that Saussure had read the *Manuale di economia politica* (Handbook of Political Economics, 1906) by Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) who was, along with Leon Walras (1834–1910), an eminent member of the school of Lausanne. As Ponzio (2005) has pointed out, Saussure shared with several theoreticians of marginalism and neo-classical economics several methodological principles¹⁷.

Thảo was one of the few scholars who attributed a particular significance to the eminently economic source of the Saussurean notion of value. And, along with other Marxist scholars, Thảo was fascinated by the comparison between language and economics. This comparison was further developed by other Marxist authors who also disagreed with the self-enclosed conception of value in Saussure and tried to deepen the economic homology between signifier / signified and use value / exchange value (see Lefebvre 1966; Goux 1968; Schaff 1968: 207; Baudrillard 1972; Latouche 1973; Rossi-Landi 2016: 180-181; see also Bourdieu 1977; Rossi-Landi 2003 [1968] and id. 1977). For Thảo's part, he did not reject the validity of the concept of value in itself. He admitted that the differential relation among signs is essential for expressing nuances of meaning, for articulating precisely the several different meanings of the same word, for defining more accurately certain concepts and to make them clear and distinct. On the other hand, Thảo believed that the semiology of the CLG was too weak to clearly establish the boundaries between the two notions, that of signification and that of value.

What Thảo criticised was the reduction of signification to value, since, according to him, the signification also concerns i) the intrinsic value of signs which are not

17 A short list is given below (these analogies, of course, imply a certain reading of the CLG): i) political economics must use mathematical tools; ii) the choice of the static point of view and criticism towards the historical school; iii) the analysis must refer to the level of the market itself as an already constituted entity; iv) the value of a product or service is determined by its marginal utility, i.e. the degree of satisfaction from the point of view of the buyer (subjective perception); v) the overall price of the commodity is fixed by the interaction of supply and demand and is necessarily imposed on all individuals.

totally arbitrary; ii) the differential value of arbitrary signs (the Saussurean value); iii) the relationship between signs and the transcendent entity (material reality, pre-linguistic experience, etc.). In the next pages, we will see how Thảo tried to define the nature of signification starting from the criticism – in the Kantian sense of delimitation of limits and legitimacy – of the Saussurean notion of value.

4.2. Saussure's Notion of Value (II)

According to Thảo, Saussure's fallacies are in particular clear when Saussure affirmed that "in language, as in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it" (CLG: 168; trans., p. 121). Firstly, Saussure established that language represented the touchstone of any semiological system. Secondly, in that way, Saussure introduced the notion of "value" as a differential relation among signs of a given linguistic (or semiological) system. Thirdly, a system of intrinsic signs is neglected by Saussure and thus excluded from the field of semiotics.

The discussion of the notion of value in the CLG (see Chapter IV) follows the introduction of the famous diagram of the amorphous mass which was supposed to explain the nature of the language as a *form*. For Saussure, thinking before language would be an "amorphous and indistinct mass" (CLG: 155; trans., p. 112). A given language orders the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas and the equally vague plane of sounds by articulating them into psychic segments (signifiers and signifieds).

In this passage, according to Thảo, the semiotics of Saussure would be defective, since it would show the idealistic hypothesis that supports it. Linguistic signs alone would be the condition of the possibility of rational thinking. It follows that reasoning after language requires no attachment to the sensible, bodily, and material world external to the knowing subject. To Saussure "language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term result solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (CLG: 159; trans., p. 114). As a result, each sign has its peculiar value by virtue of differential relations with the other signs of the system.

Consequently, for Saussure, “within the same language all words used to express related ideas limit each other reciprocally” (CLG: 160; trans., p. 116). To Thảo, then, Saussure fell into the same error of Husserl. To him, the object of thought (in this case, the signs) corresponds to the real object of all knowledge. To Thảo (1974: 41), that of Saussure, more than a “linguistic theory of verbal meaning” (i.e., a semantics), is a “gnoseological theory of the concept” (i.e., a theory of knowledge).

If Thảo succeeds in demonstrating the coincidence of value and signification, he could show more forcefully the idealism implicit in the theory of language as *form*. Saussure, however, explicitly rejected that assumption:

When we speak of the value of a word, we generally think first of its property of standing for an idea, and this is in fact one side of linguistic value. But if this is true, how does *value* differ from signification? Might the two words be synonyms? I think not, although it is easy to confuse them [...]. (CLG: 158; trans., p. 114)¹⁸

Evidently, Saussure did not admit the coincidence of value and signification. The signification concerns the inner and arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. The value, on the contrary, concerns the relationship of a given sign with the other signs of a linguistic system.

But assuming that linguistic signs do not express pre-existing ideas but rather concepts that are influenced by the linguistic systems (CLG: 161; trans., p. 118), “the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system” (CLG: 160; trans., p. 117). According to Thảo (1974), if the linguistic value entirely determines the conceptual content of thought, the link between knowledge and state of affairs is totally dismissed. Thus conceived, the knowledge completely depends upon the relations among linguistic signs. Thus, Thảo questioned the validity of the autonomist conception of the linguistic system that Saussure seems to support.

Remarkably, Thảo (1974) regarded that consequence of the theory of linguistic value as contradictory. To Thảo, at the very beginning of the book, Saussure had reasonably affirmed that “I have defined things rather than words” (CLG: 31; trans.,

¹⁸ Cf. De Mauro 2011: footnote 231. This hypothesis is confirmed by ms. notes of the students relating to the course of December 7, 1909 (CLG/E 1854 B, C, D, E). There have been scholars who have noticed that Saussure’s position seems different in the ELG: 28.

p. 14). Thus, Thảo suggested that Saussure had implicitly admitted a certain relation between language, knowledge and the state of affairs, even if Saussure seems to neglect it when he described the relationship between languages, thinking, and reality¹⁹.

Thảo's arguments (cf. Thảo [1974: 41-42] 2009: 303-305) started with a commentary on the CLG passage (159-160; trans., p. 115-117) in which Saussure explains the analogy between economic and linguistic values in relation to the difference between linguistic value and signification. Thảo then underlined a certain ambiguity in the way in which Saussure had put the difference between value and signification. It must be remembered that this CLG passage is particularly affected by the work of the editors. Most of the epistemological implications would disappear if the interventions of the editors are left aside. Much of Thảo's argument, at least from a philological standpoint, cannot, therefore, be considered as pertinent.

4.3. Similarities between Mercantilism and Saussurism

Thảo highlighted the conundrum that, in his opinion, was implicit in Saussure's theory of value. As Saussure put it:

[All values] are apparently governed by the same paradoxical principle. They are always composed: (1) of a *dissimilar* thing that can be *exchanged* for the thing of which the value is to be determined; and (2) of *similar* things that can be *compared* with the thing of which the value is to be determined.

Both factors are necessary for the existence of a value. To determine what a five-franc piece is worth one must therefore know: (1) that it can be exchanged for a fixed quantity of a different thing; e.g. bread; and (2) that it can be compared with a similar value of the same system, e.g. a one-franc piece, or with coins of another system (a dollar, etc.). In the same way a word can be exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea; besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word. (CLG: 159-160; trans, p. 115)

Thảo's aim was to show the identity of value and signification in the text of the CLG. Assimilated to economic value, the linguistic value is at the point of

¹⁹ By the way, Thảo neglected the whole issue of "the point of view" Saussure ([1916, 1995] 2011: 8) talked about.

convergence of the signified-signifier relation (in the terms of the CLG: word-idea) and the relation among the signs (words). But the CLG added that the value of a word is not fixed so long as one merely indicates that it can be “exchanged” with this or that concept, namely that it has such and such a meaning. One must compare the word with other words, or similar values. It follows that the content of the word in question is not really determined only by the opposition with other words that are part of the same system. On this basis, Saussure introduced the distinction between value and signification: the value of a word depends on the relation of comparison with different words while the meaning depends on the relation of exchange with a concept.

From this, Thảo introduced his criticism towards the notion of value on these lines of the CLG, showing how exchange and comparison are, in fact, a single relation:

[...] The relation between the word and the idea that determines its signification is introduced as a relation of exchange, homologous to the relation of exchange between money and merchandise, and the relation between words is introduced as a relation of comparison homologous to the relation of comparison between various currencies. And here again these two relations amount in reality to the same thing. (Thảo [1974: 42] 2009: 307)

Thảo’s argument develops in three moments. First, he wanted to show that the comparison between words supposes the relation of exchange sign-idea. On the other hand, the sign-idea exchange supposes the relation of comparison between words. In the first case, to define the value of a word by comparing it with other words, one needs to know, preliminarily, the meaning of the other words with which one compares the word in question. In the second case, in order to define the meaning of a word, one must make a comparison with other words which allow us to offer a definition. Thus, Saussure’s argument for the difference between value and signification is invalid because in both cases there is a differential relation between the signs: the signification supposes the value and, in turn, the value supposes signification.

We cannot explain how the signs differ from each other, except by appealing to a meaning that would be already assumed. For instance, to Saussure, if someone

asks what the French word *redouter* (dread) means the answer would be based on the differential relation of *redouter* with other words such as *craindre* (fear) and *avoir peur* (be afraid). Consequently, Saussure said that “if *redouter* did not exist, all its content would go to its competitors” (CLG: 160; trans., p. 116). To Thảo, such an assumption involves a vicious circle: if one says that *redouter* is not *craindre*, thus, one already knows the meaning of *redouter*. The differential relation among signs does not explain the meaning of a given sign. The signification depends upon the value only apparently²⁰.

Interestingly, Thảo (1974: 42) brought out similarities between Saussure’s notion of value and the Marx’s criticism set out in his *Capital* (cf. MEW XXIII: 49-160) of the 19th-century vulgar political economy. To clarify Thảo’s criticism, one must bear in mind Marx’s theory of merchandise: merchandise – whether money or not – can be exchanged with other goods and may be compared to all others. Each product has a value that manifests itself in the comparison (exchange value, *Tauschenwert*) with other products. The goods in question are comparable on the basis of the same unit: the working time required for their production. Thus, exchange and comparison would not be the source of value. The origin of the value of the merchandise is, in fact, the necessary time for its production. Nevertheless, the relationship among goods is necessary to know the value of the merchandise. For this reason, a particular form of merchandise, the money is considered the general equivalent of all other goods. In this sense, not only is money merchandise, but all goods are potentially currency. Thus, the Saussurian relation between money and merchandise and money-money are in reality the same. And according to Marx, although the value of a commodity does not show itself outside the exchange with other goods, that is to say, in the form of the relative value of exchange, each product has a solid core that transcends the world of the exchange.

Similarly, to Thảo, without a reference to the real world of communication and production of signs, no explanation of the value of a sign could be possible. The abstract system of signs needs to be traced back to the real acts of communication taking place in collective cooperative activities. For Thảo it is, therefore, necessary,

20 Godel (1957: 221) and De Mauro (1965: 129-130) had already highlighted that aporia. In any case, Thảo describes a *dictionary* conception of value: to define the value of a sign one must define it by means of other signs of the system (cf. Eco 1984: 74).

so as to solve these difficulties, to distinguish the value which has a sign in the system – exchange value – and the value which has a sign in itself – the value in a strict sense, i.e., the intrinsic signification. To Thảo the intrinsic signification is, indeed, an original datum because it is a prerequisite for any comparison or exchange between signs.

Before concluding, it seems quite relevant that even the recent readers of Saussure have brought to light the same conundrum:

What is dissatisfying in Saussure’s discussion of value is that he is so insistent on its difference from meaning that he never gets to grips with their complex interrelationship. He points out that value is a part (and only a part) of meaning, but leaves us to infer what the rest of it is. He ignores the fact that, even in his own examples, the only way we know that the value of *mouton* is different from that of *sheep* is that the former has a broader range of meanings. While it appears to be implicit in his discussion that value emerges from meaning, he does not say so, let alone explain how it happens. (Joseph 2004: 67)²¹

4.4. Rossi-Landi’s Theory of Value

An argument similar to that developed by Thảo against the notion of value was used by the Italian Marxist semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi for very different purposes and with another evaluation of the CLG:

It is clear that he [Saussure] is not here investigating what each of these words may mean, what can be its *signification*, that is, what particular linguistic labour could have formed those three relationships of *signans-signatum (signifiant-signifié)* [the three relations are those between *redouter*, *craindre* and *avoir peur*]. If the problem of Saussure was posing was the second one, he could not deny that the words in question have a value independent of their opposition and which precedes them. Saussure is asking what the value of those words is, specifically the value in the field to which they belong. And it is represented by their mutual opposition, that is, by their exchange value. (Rossi-Landi 2016: 234-235).

For Rossi-Landi (2016: 208) “the meaning of a word is its value or rather its values in the language.” He argued for the idea that “these values must be traced back to human labour that makes them what they are.” Referring to Marx’s theory, Rossi-Landi distinguished between three different meanings of the word *value*: i)

21 However, it should not be forgotten that a limit to the principle of *absolute arbitrariness*, which the notion of value depends on, had already been indicated by Saussure himself and identified in *relative arbitrariness* (see CLG: 181-182; trans., p. 131-132).

use value: the result of differentiated human labour that produces a sign, namely the union of semantization of the link between a signified and a signifier, the function that the sign has to respond to a need for communication, the signification; ii) value: the amount of undifferentiated human labor necessary for the production of a sign considered in isolation from others and taking its position in a given language into account; iii) exchange value: the phenomenal form of the value that appears only in the moment when the sign is in the opposition to other signs (e.g., exchange between equivalents) with other signs in a sentence, in a field of signs or within a given language.

Unlike Thảo, Rossi-Landi thus excludes that in the CLG it is a matter of determining the origin of meaning. In this case, indeed, Saussure “could not deny the words in question a value independent of their opposition and the former” (id., p. 235). Interestingly, Rossi-Landi highlighted that the signification of a word genealogically precedes the opposition to the other signs. Thus, signification is previously assumed before every theoretical analysis of exchange value. In the meantime, the analysis should actually ignore signification because its aim is to grasp value (and its phenomenal manifestation, the exchange value) as the result of undifferentiated human labour (cf. id., p. 238).

As D’Urso (2014: 57) wrote, Rossi-Landi “has limited its reflection at the phenomenal moment of the mercantile comparison of values, omitting what the *Capital* has taught. The exchange in the broad sense is also the production and, therefore, the production that needs to be analysed and demystified [ha limitato la propria riflessione al momento fenomenico del confronto mercantile dei valori, tralasciando quanto gli aveva insegnato il *Capitale*, ossia che lo scambio in senso lato è anche produzione e che perciò è quest’ultima che bisogna analizzare e demistificare]” (the same remarks could be addressed to both Schaff [1968: 207], and Bourdieu [1977: 24]). From this point of view, a great advantage of Thảo’s theory is that he had not reduced the value of signs only to the differential relation and at the same time suggested to investigate the field of social production of intrinsic signs and fundamental significations. But unlike other Marxist intellectuals who have tried to reflect on the notion of linguistic value through the model of economic value proposed by Marx, Thảo did not develop the unsuccessful

homology between the sign and the merchandise through the dichotomy use value/exchange value (see, for instance, Lefebvre 1966, Goux 1968; Baudrillard 1972, Latouche 1973).

Thảo's aim was thus to denounce the fetishism of the *langue*: he wanted to show historically determined social relations in which relations between words only appear. Indeed, Thảo considered language as a differential system of signs which are the product of past social labour. As such, whether one separates the practical relationship between the real practice of language and the external world, the *langue* becomes the object of new linguistic practices such as the inter-definition of terms in the case of technical languages. In the latter case, what Thảo seems to think of is a sort of metalanguage (or metasemiotic) which, to the extent that it applies to the semio-linguistic matter already produced, cannot be considered the primary function of language. There would, therefore, be a hierarchy in the production of signs ranging from the semio-linguistic relationship with reality in practical and social life to disciplinary metalanguages.

5. The Language of Real Life (I)

Thảo's main aim was to determine the outlines of a semiology which deals with a set of several systems of signs that is wider than that of arbitrary verbal signs. In turn, such semiology will serve as a theoretical and methodological basis for addressing the problem of the origin of language and consciousness. More relevantly, assuming that there are some signs whose signification depends upon their performance in a social working context, Thảo suggested that the internalization of such significations allows the mediation between practical life and consciousness.

These assumptions lead Thảo to assume a critical attitude towards the Saussurean notion of value. The notion of value reveals a cognitive mechanism that supports rather sophisticated language practices: the ability to distinguish and define words in a given language. But because such linguistic practice needs to be explained, according to Thảo, it is necessary to suppose a more original linguistic practice which is constantly oriented towards the world and essentially linked to

other social practices at the same time.

Given that Thảo assumed the primacy of practical life over thinking, he must investigate linguistic practices in the context of the needs determined by history. Thus, there would be a continuum of systems of signs within a community and stem from each other. Nonetheless, it is necessary to admit a kind of primordial ground which is at the base of the edifice of the arbitrary signs as well as the more sophisticated linguistic practices such as the technical and scientific languages. This layer is in harmony with practical life and as such is inseparable from the relationship with the physical and social environment.

It could be useful now to spend some words about a notion extensively employed by Thảo. It is the notion of “language of real life” (*langage de la vie réelle*). And in this regard, Thảo (1974) called his own semiotic project the “semiotics of real life”. What does “language of real life” exactly mean?

The main source of that notion is a passage of Marx and Engel’s *German Ideology* (*Die Deutsche Ideologie*; MEW: III, 11, 26 and 30-31). The lines in which they introduced that notion, however, are not very easy. Thus, the quotation from *German Ideology* preliminary requires a brief remark.

The German philosophers held that ideas and conceptions arise from concrete social relations and practices. The mind is not a separate substance independent of matter but rather the embodied capability of producing representations. More specifically, the mind obtains the contents of its representation from interactions with the surrounding environment and the intercourse with the others. Consequently, there are not *a priori* concepts. In the same way, representations are never totally disconnected from social practice. Furthermore, representations always require the support of signs. And linguistic signs essentially take the shape of material sounds. As a result, human symbolic cognition arises from the real intercourse of men and takes place because of the materiality of sounds. Given the pragmatic origins of both cognition and linguistic utterances, Marx and Engels suggested that language is part of social labour and allows the material intercourse of men. For this reason, Marx and Engels called that language *the language of real life* (*Sprache des wirklichen Lebens*).

As Marx and Engels (1998: 42) put it:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, at this stage still appears as the direct efflux of their material behaviour.

[...] man also possesses “consciousness”, but, even so, not inherent, not “pure” consciousness. From the start the “mind” is from the outset afflicted with the curse of being “burdened” with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men as well, and for that reason alone it really exists for me; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men. Where there exists a relationship, it exists for me: the animal does not “relate” itself to anything, it does not “relate” itself at all. For the animal, its relation to others does not exist as a relation. Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all. (id., p. 49-50)

Interestingly, Thảo’s translation differed from the French translation of *Éditions sociales* (see Marx & Engels 1968: 50). He translated:

La production des idées, des représentations, de la conscience, est tout d’abord immédiatement entrelacée *dans* l’activité matérielle et les relations matérielles des hommes, *dans* le langage de la vie réelle. La représentation, la pensée, les relations spirituelles des hommes apparaissent encore ici comme l’émanation directe de leur comportement matériel. [italics ours]. (Thảo: 1975: 27)

The *Éditions sociales* translation was:

La production des idées, des représentations et de la conscience, est d’abord directement et intimement mêlée à l’activité matérielle et au commerce matériel des hommes, *elle est* le langage de la vie réelle. La représentation, la pensée, les relations spirituelles des hommes apparaissent encore ici comme l’émanation directe de leur comportement matériel. [italics ours]

The German version was:

Die Produktion der Ideen, Vorstellungen, des Bewußtseins ist zunächst unmittelbar verflochten in die materielle Tätigkeit und den materiellen Verkehr der Menschen, Sprache des wirklichen Lebens. Das Vorstellen, Denken, der geistige Verkehr der Menschen erscheinen hier noch als direkter Ausfluß ihres materiellen Verhaltens.

Thảo regarded the language of real life as identical to (or coextensive with) the material activity and the material intercourse of humans. By contrast, the French translation identified the language of real life with the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness. The German version was elliptic effectively. In any

case, to Thảo, the language of real life does not immediately coincide with the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness but it is rather what production of ideas arises from.

In order to better understand the special attention paid by Thảo to his own translation of the passage from the *German Ideology*, we have to note that his translation of the same passage in his ILC differed from that he suggested in 1975. In ILC, he mentioned the translation in the *Éditions sociales* version:

“La production des idées, des représentations et de la conscience, dit Marx, est d’abord directement et intimement mêlée à l’activité matérielle et au commerce matériel des hommes, elle est *le langage de la vie réelle*. La représentation, la pensée, les relations spirituelles des hommes apparaissent encore ici comme *l’émanation directe de leur comportement matériel*.” (Thảo 1973: 35)

The fact that Thảo was concerned about the translation of the passage of the *German Ideology* seems to be clear if we consider the errata corrigé of the ILC that he sent to Antoine Spire, along with a letter dated 20 Juin 1973 – three months after the publication of the ILC. First, Thảo said that the reference to the German edition must replace the reference to the *Éditions sociales* translation. Secondly, he added:

The German text is elliptical and admits several possible translations. We followed that of the Soviet edition of Marx-Engels *Works* (in Russian) t. 3, p.24. Moscow. 1955. - We emphasize “in the language of real life.” [Le texte allemand est elliptique et admet plusieurs traductions possibles. Nous avons suivi celle de l’édition soviétique de *Oeuvres de Marx-Engels* (en russe) t. 3, p.24. Moscou. 1955. - C’est nous qui soulignons “dans le langage de la vie réelle.”]

The text says: “Die Produktion der Ideen, Vorstellungen, des Bewußtseins ist zunächst unmittelbar verflochten in die materielle Tätigkeit und den materiellen Verkehr der Menschen, Sprache des wirklichen Lebens.” [Le texte porte: “Die Produktion der Ideen, Vorstellungen, des Bewußtseins ist zunächst unmittelbar verflochten in die materielle Tätigkeit und den materiellen Verkehr der Menschen, Sprache des wirklichen Lebens. ”]

The translation of Social Editions reports “Sprache” to “ist” and not to “in”, and gives: “... elle est le langage de la vie réelle.” [La traduction des Editions sociales rapporte ‘Sprache’ à ‘ist’ et non pas à “in”, et donne: “... elle est le langage de la vie réelle”.]

According to our interpretation of the concept of the “language of the real life”, it has two moments: a first, simply material, when it projects a meaning *without consciousness*, and a second when, reflecting on itself, it *produces the consciousness* as consciousness of this meaning. If, then, we do not link “Sprache” with “in” but rather

with “ist”, the text would speak of the language of real life *taken at its second moment*, as “the production of consciousness.” [Suivant l’interprétation que nous proposons du concept du “langage de la vie réelle”, celui-ci comporte deux moments: un premier, simplement matériel, où il projette une signification *sans conscience*, et un second où, se réfléchissant sur lui-même, il *produit la conscience* comme conscience de cette signification. Si donc l’on rapporte “Sprache” non pas à “in” mais à “ist”, le texte parlerait du langage de la vie réelle *pris à son second moment*, comme “production de la conscience”.]

As we have here the only classical text in which this concept is discussed, its elliptical syntax might well indicate that Marx’s thought, at the time of writing it, was not yet entirely fixed on this point. It is even more necessary, and interesting, to use it, since in this case it should be considered in some way as a typical example of the *language of real life*. [Comme nous avons ici l’unique texte classique où il soit question de ce concept, sa syntaxe elliptique pourrait bien indiquer que la pensée de Marx, au moment où il l’a rédigé, n’était pas encore entièrement fixée sur ce point. Il en est d’autant plus nécessaire, et intéressant, de l’utiliser, puisqu’en ce cas il devrait être considéré lui-même, en quelque manière, comme un exemple typique du *langage de la vie réelle*.] (see fig. 15).

Some remarks are needed. First, in 1973, Thảo realized that the French translation of the *Éditions sociales* he had mentioned was inaccurate. For this reason, Thảo (1975) directly reported his own new translation – which is the same he suggested in the errata corrigé. Second, the all of the above shows that, before 1973, he did not realize that the French translation of the *Éditions sociales* did not fit very well his own understanding of the notion of the language of real life. It might depend upon the fact that Thảo’s theory of the language of real life has been developed independently of the French translation – which appeared only in 1968. As a matter of fact, Thảo (1966: 14) – which was the first version of Thảo (1973: 35) – chose his own translation of the passage of the *German Ideology*: “La production des idées, des représentations et de la conscience, dit Marx, est tout d’abord immédiatement entrelacée dans l’activité matérielle et les relations matérielles des hommes, *dans le langage de la vie réelle*.” In other words, Thảo’s theory did not change between 1966 and 1975. He just made a bad choice in 1973 since he took for granted the *Éditions sociales* version.

Third, Thảo insisted that language arises outside and before consciousness. In this way, he transcended the following traditional conundrum: if language supposes the existence of consciousness as its source and consciousness needs language to arise, the question of language origins is impossible to solve because

“consciousness presupposes language and language, consciousness” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 19). Against that, Thảo suggested that the meanings of fundamental and motivated signs does not depend upon a pre-existing consciousness that voluntarily gives them such meanings. Relevantly, the internalisation of signs of this kind allows the rising of consciousness as a social product.

From the point of view of the formation of human speech, Thảo (1973, 1974, 1975) asserted that language arose from the collective labour among our pre-human ancestors. He invoked the notion of the language of real life in order to explain how language initially took the shape of a practical social tool. Thảo was interested in precisely define the nature of first signs employed by our human ancestors to coordinate their collective activities and joining their common attention. Thus, he introduced his semiotic project and called it *semiotics of the real life*.

5.2. The Language of Real Life (II)

The history of the relationships between Marxism and language sciences has been largely debated for the last one hundred years. Although a relatively small amount of Marx and Engels’s writings were devoted to language (cf. Marx and Engels 1974), philosophers, linguists, sociologists, and semioticians tried various ways to put in place a Marxian trend in language sciences. Nonetheless, historians and philosophers of language sciences rarely drawn attention to the fascinating notion of *the language of real life*. The present paragraph is not intended to be “complete” or to record all of the examples of scholars who mentioned the notion of the language of real life. It will simply explore some questions about that notion, comparing Thảo’s approach with assumptions of other Marxist scholars. Before that, it could be nonetheless interesting to add that the question facing the notion of language of real life transcends the narrow limits of the history of Marxism. For instance, that notion was also employed by Charles Bally (1865–1947; cf. Curea 2015: 74). Maybe independently of Marx, by *langage de la vie réelle*, Bally meant the everyday’s life forms of communication whose main feature is to be non-wholly arbitrary.

For our purposes, we should take note that the language of real life was seen by Marx as the practical, real consciousness (cf. MEW III: 31). That raises the question whether the language of real life was a sort of metaphor employed by Marx to describe real interactions between humans against the background of praxis. The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre seems to accept this understanding of the notion. In his words:

The representations, the ideas, have their origin in the “commerce” of individuals among themselves, in exchanges, in the communication of consciousnesses, in the real activities which constitute *praxis* (social practice). To formulate them, theorists are needed. They are individuals who think according to a group or a social class. These *idéologues* clarify and sum up the vague meanings, which appear here and there in praxis. They derive general, coherent, systematized theses as much as possible: ideologies, including religions, philosophies, morals. They therefore start from the “language of real life” to elaborate their representations and create “the language of politics, laws, religion, morality, philosophy” [Le représentations, les idées, ont leur origine dans le “commerce” des hommes entre eux, dans les échanges, dans la communication des consciences, dans les activités réelles qui constituent la *praxis* (pratique sociale). Pour les formuler, il faut des théoriciens. Ce sont des individus qui pensent en fonction d’un groupe ou d’une classe sociale. Ces *idéologues* dégagent et unissent entre elles les significations vagues, écloses ça et là dans la praxis. Ils en tirent des thèses générales, cohérentes, systématisées autant que possible: les idéologies, y compris les religions, les philosophies, les morales. Ils partent donc de la “langue de la vie réelle” pour élaborer leurs représentations et créer “la langue de la politique, des lois, de la religion, de la morale, de la philosophie”.]. (Lefebvre 1966: 93)

In a phrase, the language of real life is nothing but the social praxis which embodies certain significations, certain ways of thinking. The role of ideologies is to suggest general theories of that praxis. It seems that Lefebvre did not link *la communication des consciences* with the language of real life. To him, the language of real life is nothing other than a metaphor which serves to oppose real life to ideologies. In a similar way, Rossi-Landi argued that “Marx described a *Sprache des wirklichen Lebens* as the *material behaviour* of humans in working relations [Marx infatti parlava di una *Sprache des wirklichen Lebens* riferendosi al *comportamento materiale* di uomini in rapporto di lavoro]” (Rossi-Landi 2016: 70). And he added that “the principle that the individual does not communicate only by the verbal behaviour but also by the whole non-verbal behaviour is a heuristic fundamental instrument [uno strumento euristico fondamentale è il principio che l’uomo

comunica non solo con il suo comportamento verbale, ma anche con tutto il suo comportamento non-verbale]” (ibid.). According to Rossi-Landi, the language of real life is a more general behaviour than verbal language. The language of real life is a *language of things* (linguaggio delle cose), ie., the semiotic structure of the non-verbal behaviour of humans in working relations. Against that, the French linguist Jean-Jacques Lecercle wondered

whether the expression “the language of real life” is a simple metaphor, since ‘real life’ is no more liable to possess its language than flowers. And I would like to think that Marx’s formula goes further. At first sight, this text repeats the materialist thesis that ideas have a material origin, in “real life” understood as a material activity – i.e. labour and production – and material relations – i.e. social relations: language is the product of social relations which it helps to fix and develop. But why characterise this real life as “language” or attribute a “language” to it? Because the materialist thesis is, in fact, two-fold: it affirms not only that ideas have a material origin, but also that they have a material existence. And the material existence of ideas precisely takes the form of language and of the institutions constructed around it. (Lecercle 2006: 94)

It is a little-known fact that Thảo suggested a semiological project under the sign of the notion of language of real life. He was one of the few Marxists to have taken the notion of language of real life seriously. According to him, the language of real life was not a metaphor.

In previous paragraphs, exploring Thảo’s attempt to work out a position in which the notion of language of real life plays a relevant role has enabled us to better understand that notion. We have investigated the way Thảo gave significant attention to the language of real life, laying out a fascinating chapter in the history of the interactions between Marxism and linguistics. Readers have been introduced to Thảo’s approach to the study of language behaviour.

The main element in the approach Thảo suggested to the problem of the language of real life is the need of investigations into linguistic interaction in everyday life. This approach interfaces in multiple ways with sociology and sociolinguistics, because the language of real life must be regarded as a substantial part of social life. For this reason, Thảo disagreed with every kind of cognitive analysis of language behaviour. He preferred to point out the socio-historical conditions of language behaviour, insisting that language cannot be divorced from

the concrete forms of social intercourse.

At this juncture, we would like to shift attention to fact that the language of real life is a social activity, a material behaviour, along with the intercourse with other individuals and production and reproduction of the means of existence (see below Chapter 6). As a result, the language of real life is largely influenced by the social and practical behaviour within a given society. Additionally, the fact cannot be ignored that the language of real life is radically embodied. But we have not to do with the embodied approach to language suggested by Lakoff and Johnson (2003). The embodied nature of language must be complemented by the social and practical life. According to Lecercle (2006: 182), the speaker of the language of real life is “the ‘labouring’ body of praxis.”

During the 1970s, social determinations in language behaviour were widely acknowledged. In the same, social constraints on body’s activity were largely recognised. According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), languages “exist only in the practical state, i.e. in the form of [...] linguistic habitus [...]” (Bourdieu 1991: 46). The British sociologist John B. Thompson (born in 1951) described the notion of *linguistic habitus* in the following way: “the habitus is a set of *dispositions* which incline agents to act and react in certain ways” (Thompson 1991: 12). In turn, “dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes [...] without being consciously co-ordinated or governed.” They reflect the social conditions within which they were acquired and become a second nature. And the partially-unconscious language behaviour seems to involve a peculiar form of what Bourdieu (1991) calls *hexis corporelle*, a long-lasting organization of dispositions. However, it is not enough to say that the language of real life is embodied. The body of the speaker cannot be reduced to a natural fact.

We can complete this picture by way of assumptions set out by other scholars. According to Thompson (1991: 1), “linguistic exchanges can express relations of power” in many ways. Along the same line, Bourdieu (1991: 86) set out that “language is a body technique [...] in which one’s whole relation to the social world, and one’s whole socially informed relation to the world, are expressed.” In this way – over and above the individual differences which exist, Thảo’s approach to language seems to be very close to that set out by Bourdieu. He argued that

language is the product of a complex set of social, historical and political conditions of formation. For this reason, the traditional semiological analysis of languages reduced the language behaviour to an abstract and self-sufficient system of signs, rather than focusing on socio-historical conditions of production and reception of messages.

In a similar way, the French linguist Marcel Cohen (1884–1974) regarded language as

body technique and intellectual invention, spoken language is incorporated into the physiological function of the normal life of humans in society. He asks for a muscular learning which we hear and to some extent see the results. This learning is accompanied by a storage of possible reactions in the cerebral substance, in a way that the texture entirely escapes us until now. We know that all of the operations are carried out in a defined social context. We also know that virtual voluntary connections are established in such a way that different externalizations (consisting of spoken language fragments) can correspond to different social situations [technique du corps et invention intellectuelle, le langage parlé est incorporé au fonctionnement physiologique de la vie normale de l'homme en société. Il demande un apprentissage musculaire dont nous entendons et dans une certaine mesure voyons les résultats. Cet apprentissage est accompagné d'un emmagasinement de possibilité de réactions dans la substance cérébrale, d'une manière dont la texture nous échappe jusqu'à présent entièrement. Nous savons que le total des opérations s'effectue dans un cadre social déterminé. Nous savons aussi que les connexions à réalisation volontaires virtuelles sont établies de telle sorte que des extériorisations différentes (consistant en fragments de langage parlé) peuvent correspondre à des situations sociales différentes.]. (Cohen 1971: II, 110).

As we have just seen, the relationship between language and social structures was largely debated in France in the mid-20th century (see also the works of Mounin, Marcellesi, Gardin, Dubois, Calvet, Encrevé). But we must also add that Thảo showed the desire to explain the origins of human consciousness. The consciousness depends on the forms, conditions, and types of the language of real life. To put it another way, the language of real life provides the form and the contents of conscious experience. As we will see in next chapters (see especially Chapters 5 and 6), consciousness is nothing but inner speech, the inner reproduction of language interactions. Firstly, consciousness arises from the internalisation of language behaviour, along with brain activity and body movements. Secondly, conscious contents take the shape language gives them. Thảo argued that we speak on the basis of background knowledge, more or less

diffuse, mostly unproblematic, background convictions, customs, modes of behaviour and of ethics, tradition, and common sense. The language of real life is not an instrument at the speaker's disposal, there is no transparency of language, or of meaning at this level. The subject, rather, becomes a speaker by appropriating a language that is always-already collective. Thirdly, in so far as the language of real life is a creation within a social milieu and takes the shape of an interchange, what the subject internalises is not just the bodily form of language behaviour and relevant social meanings communicated through this interchange, but also the form of the dialogue itself (see below Chapter 6). From a philosophical standpoint, the language of real life is the existence of our ideas, it is the means by which we can conceptualise our existence. In this regard, it would be useful to mention Lecerle's (2006: 96) own suggestion linking language, consciousness, and social relations. On the one side, the language of real life is the means for thinking our real life and having conscious representations of it. On the other side, it "freezes and veils" that same representation. Indeed, the language of real life also imparts false consciousness, unconscious mistaken ideas which distort and invert reality.

On the basis of the previous lines, we can state that Thảo provided a more concrete definition of the collective consciousness described by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) in his *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, 1912). Thảo's approach to the language of real life seems us to be too close to Durkheim's theory of symbols. According to Durkheim, collective consciousness cannot be seen as an abstract and ideal dimension, but it rather takes the shape of concrete things (the symbols) which can be assimilated by individuals' consciousnesses. Nonetheless, collective consciousness is not regarded by Thảo in the same way Durkheim did. Thảo seems to accept the suggestions of some scholars to free the notion of consciousness from every metaphysical element. To mention just an example, the collective consciousness is conceived by the Russian sociologist Georges Gurvitch (1894–1965) as the mediation between the economic structure and the superstructure. Thảo gave the same function to the language of real life. Moreover, according to Thảo, the language of real life is an a posteriori entity that is produced by the lived activity of collective labour. At the same time, it seems to be an a priori principle

from the point of view of the individual, as it precedes and involves the individual's consciousness.

We should now highlight that Thảo was eminently interested in the cognitive and gnosiological value of the language of real life. Thus, we have seen that not only does language of real life convey un- and preconscious significations, it also supports every intellectual activity. We are thus able to develop some elements present in the notion of language of real life. We are now entering the domain of the philosophy of science. We cannot neglect the fact that the real practice (including available knowledge, technologies, working relations, institutions, etc.) largely orients our ways of thinking. In this way, science does not differ from any other ideological form. Interestingly, assuming that the language of real life is the basis of systems of arbitrary signs, we can reason that it is the base of scientific metalanguages, including that of linguistics. Another way of saying this is that the scientific metalanguage of linguistics arises from linguists' real working practice, along with ambiguities, inaccuracy, unconsciousness, and so forth.

In this regard, Samain (2007) could help us to better understand some consequences of Thảo's approach. According to Samain, the language of a given scientific discipline is not only composed of terms but also of various language habits (jargon of trades, argumentative modes, words that are meaningful only in a specific discursive context and that cannot be reduced to a terminological network, etc.). Specifically, systematic terminology networks are the result of abstractions and arise from the real practice of scientists. First, there are discourses and practice in which words have an instrumental nature. After that, the abstractions involve the production of terminologies and notions. In this vein, understanding the real origin of scientific terminology compels us to trace back the function of scientific vocabulary to its genesis. In the final analysis, this was one of the main aims of the Husserlian notion of *Lebenswelt*. And Thảo seems to have accepted and developed this aspect of the phenomenological method. Nonetheless, we have to add that, for Thảo, the *modus operandi* of symbolic production cannot be reduced to the activity of consciousness. Rather, it stems from the social intercourse.

What Thảo described under the label of the language of real life is a sort of collective intelligence, a shared group intelligence emerging from cooperative

activities. Thảo seems to develop an idea which had already been proposed by Merleau-Ponty in the early-1950s:

Articulated language is itself only the highest point of concentration of a duller language that humans speak to each other by the symbols that their economic, political, religious and moral coexistence creates. [...] A theory of truth would, therefore, be superficial if it did not take into account, along with the speaking subject and the linguistic community, the living subject, wanting, evaluating, creating and working in the historical community, and the reports of truth that individuals can and can tie with that historical community [le langage articulé n'est lui-même que le plus haut point de concentration d'un langage plus sourd que les hommes se parlent les uns aux autres par les symboles que crée leur coexistence économique, politique, religieuse et morale. [...] Une théorie de la vérité serait donc superficielle si elle ne prenait en considération, outre le sujet parlant et la communauté linguistique, le sujet vivant, voulant, évaluant, créant et travaillant dans la communauté historique, et les rapports de vérité qu'il peut et pourra nouer avec elle.]. (Merleau-Ponty 2010: 1828)

We cannot rule out the possibility that both Merleau-Ponty and Thảo had been seriously affected by Husserlian notion of *Lebenswelt*. They developed that notion and explained the social and embodied origins of conscious contents. And in a similar way, they tried to avoid the risk of idealism, relativism, and solipsism which was more or less implicit in Husserlian account (see below Chapter 4). And the way chosen by Thảo was the notion of the language of real life. As a matter of fact, the language of the real life is the mediation between social practice and consciousness; it is something that we can place in the dimension of social relations as well as in the dimension of consciousness; it is simultaneously a social fact and the base of subjectivity; it mediates both the relationship between the subject and the object and the relation between the subject and the own self; it is a real behaviour, a learned or inherited disposition which can be adapted to individuals' needs; it conveys social meanings which, in turn, enables the subjective lived experience; it is the intersubjective base of our thoughts as well as the shared framework of our thinking; it translates the empirical conditions of existence into the background of our higher mental activities. Consciousness shows an impersonal dimension which is the sign of the presence of the social dimension in us. But this social dimension is not an abstract entity, it is rather marked by social differences and conflicts. In any case, the subject is not an abstract and isolated entity that can be analysed independently of social dimension. We are the

result of present and past social relations with the others. And those social relations take the shape of language behaviour. As a result, the understanding of human consciousness asks us to examine the formation of language behaviour.

Chapter Four

Signs, Intentionality, Reality

Autrement dit, d'une simple définition du concept de signification, présentée dans le cadre de la science du langage, on passe sans peine à une position philosophique qui consiste, sinon à nier, du moins à déclarer inutile et dénuée de sens la réalité du monde extérieur.
(T.D. Thảo)

1. Thảo's Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions. - 2. Lenin's 'Materialism and Empiriocriticism'. - 3.1. Husserl's Subjective Idealism (I). - 3.2. Husserl's Subjective Idealism (II). - 4. Thảo's Theory of Semiotic Intentionality. - 5. Language and Reality. - 6. Naïve Realism. - 7. Thảo's Theory of Semiotic Cognition. - 8. Beyond the Phenomenological Approach?

1. Thảo's Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

Not only did Thảo's semiotic project try to transcend and complete Saussure's semiology, it also sought to overcome the Husserlian theory of consciousness. To Thảo, the Husserlian theory of consciousness, indeed, betrayed the same idealism of Saussure's notion of value because both Saussure and Husserl had dismissed any relation between thinking and mind-independent reality.

It would be useful to remember that Thảo's PDM did not codify dialectical materialism as an alternative to Husserl's phenomenology but rather Thảo integrated phenomenology into dialectical materialism. Thảo tried to rehabilitate Husserl's approach and showed a desire to conciliate Husserl's analysis of consciousness with descriptions of animal cognition. Against that, the general outline of ILC yields a materialistic and dialectical view on origins of human language and consciousness. Despite what he wrote in the first book, in ILC, Thảo regarded dialectical materialism as the alternative to phenomenology. In

particular, he felt certain dissatisfaction with Husserl: Husserl's idealistic account cannot represent a touchstone to investigate the origins of consciousness. The point is that Thảo addressed the difficulties of phenomenology to explain the origins of consciousness. Then we find Thảo suggesting that investigations into the origins and structures of consciousness must be conducted in conjunction with the assumption of dialectical materialism without any support of phenomenological approach.

A brief analysis of Thảo's remarks against Husserl will allow us to introduce a relevant philosophical topic: the link between language, cognition, and reality. But we must previously pay special attention to the fact that Thảo's theory of consciousness depended upon some ontological and epistemological assumptions. Schematically, they are:

1. Matter is a philosophical concept that means the objective reality:
 - 1.1. The objective reality exists prior to the knowing subject and exists independently of the knowing subject (= naïve realism);
 - 1.2. Nothing exists outside matter (= materialist monism);
 - 1.3. Consciousness depends upon matter: consciousness is the product of the activity of the brain;
 - 1.4. Humans are the products both of the biological evolution and of social history.
2. Humans can know the objective reality:
 - 2.1. Sensations are the result of the interaction between the organism and the environment;
 - 2.2. Sensations link thinking and reality – they are the starting point of knowledge (= sensationalism);
 - 2.3. The criterion of knowledge is the practice, i.e. the ability to reproduce the laws of reality.
3. There are no things in themselves:
 - 3.1. The thing-in-itself is not absolutely unknowable – it is momentarily unknown;
 - 3.2. The difference between phenomena and things in themselves can be reduced to the difference between what is known and what is not yet known.
4. There are three relations between the knowing subject and objective reality:
 - 4.1. The relation of presence between objective reality and the perceiving subject to which the objective reality is given in sensations;

- 4.2. The relation of belonging between the perceiving subject and its sensations;
- 4.3. The relation of conformity between sensations and objective reality.

And it seems quite relevant that Thảo's ontological and epistemological assumptions we have just enumerated may have been stimulated by the reading of some dialectic-materialist theoreticians' writings. At this point, we must say a few words concerning Engels' description of the debate on epistemology in his *Ludwig Feuerbach* (cf. MEW XXI: 274-275) which Thảo seems to refer to by way of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908). But before coming to the core of Thảo's criticism towards Husserlian phenomenology, we will place Thảo's theory in the context of philosophical debates on human cognition. The reason for this digression is the fact that it is important to emphasise that he questioned the validity of phenomenology because, in Thảo's view, the Husserlian method did not differ from the longstanding tradition of subjective idealism. So conceived, phenomenology could be criticised on the base of the same arguments already employed by Engels and Lenin to support their materialistic and realist account.

2. Lenin's 'Materialism and Empirio-Criticism'

In his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* Lenin (1972) wrote:

In his work *Ludwig Feuerbach* Engels divides philosophers into 'two great camps' – materialists and idealists. Engels [...] sees the fundamental distinction between them in the fact that while for the materialists nature is primary and spirit secondary, for the idealists the reverse is the case. (id., p. 22-23)

Specifically, the opposition between materialism and idealism could be explained in the following way:

Are we to proceed from things to sensation and thought? Or are we to proceed from thought and sensation to things? The first line, i.e., the materialist line, is adopted by Engels. The second line, i.e., the idealist line, [...]. (id., p. 34)

Specifically

Materialism is the recognition of “objects in themselves,” or outside the mind; ideas and sensations are copies or images of those objects [see Engels’ theory of *Abbilder* in his *Ludwig Feuerbach* in MEW XXI: 292-293]. The opposite doctrine (idealism) claims that objects do not exist “without the mind”; objects are “combinations of sensations”. (Lenin 1972: 14)

But there are some philosophers who are placed by Engels and Lenin between these two great camps. They are the *agnostics*: “the agnostic does not go beyond sensations and asserts that he cannot know anything certain about their source, about their original, etc.” (id., p. 118; see also Engels’s *Über historischen Materialismus* in MEW XII: 287 ff.). Among them, we should mention David Hume (1711–1776):

[Hume] says the same thing in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (part IV, sec. II, *On Scepticism Towards Sensations*): ‘Our perceptions are our only objects.’ (p. 281 of the French translation by Renouvier and Pillon, 1878.) By scepticism Hume means refusal to explain sensations as the effects of objects, spirit etc., refusal to reduce perceptions to the external world, on the one hand, and to a deity or to an unknown spirit, on the other. (id., p. 25)

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), too, must also be reckoned to be a philosopher whose thought cannot be reduced to idealism merely:

The principal feature of Kant’s philosophy is the reconciliation of materialism with idealism, a compromise between the two, the combination within one system of heterogeneous and contrary philosophical trends. When Kant assumes that something outside us, a thing-in-itself, corresponds to our ideas, he is a materialist. When he declares this thing-in-itself to be unknowable, transcendental, other-sided, he is an idealist. Recognising experience, sensations, as the only source of our knowledge, Kant is directing his philosophy towards sensationalism, and via sensationalism, under certain conditions, towards materialism. Recognising the apriority of space, time, causality, etc., Kant is directing his philosophy towards idealism. (id., p. 232)

But Kant’s philosophy could entail a kind of *fideism*: “fideism positively asserts that something does exist ‘beyond the world of perception’” (id., p. 128).

The idealist trend could assume several shapes. One of them is relevant for our purposes. That is the *subjective idealism*. Some remarks concerning George Berkeley (1685–1753) are here needed. As Berkeley affirmed in his *A treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge* (1710), besides the ideas or objects of knowledge there is someone who perceives them, i.e., “mind, spirit, soul or myself” (cf. Berkeley

1710: § 2). Ideas cannot exist outside of the mind that perceives them. As a result, Berkeley affirmed that *to exist* means *to be perceived* (“Their esse is percipi”; cf. id., p. § 3). And Berkeley considered the notion of the existence of “matter or corporeal substance” (§ 9) as a “contradiction,” such an “absurdity” (§ 14). To him, the thing is a collection of sensations marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing.

After having discussed Berkeley’s subjective idealism, Lenin (1972: 68) mentioned “the work of a classical representative of subjective idealism, Johann Gottlieb Fichte [1762–1814], published in 1801 [*Sonnenklarer Bericht an das größere Publikum über das eigentliche Wesen der neuesten Philosophie*]”:

[...] the fundamental philosophical line of subjective idealism. The world is my sensation; the non-*self* is “postulated” (is created, produced) by the *self*; the thing is indissolubly connected with the consciousness (ibid.)

Against the subjective idealism, Lenin highlighted the existence of the so-called naïve realism. It “consists in the view that things, the environment, the world, exist independently of our sensation, of our consciousness, of our self and of man in general” (id., p. 69). And “materialism deliberately makes the ‘naive’ belief of mankind the foundation of its theory of knowledge” (ibid.).

Thảo’s philosophical assumptions correspond to the description of materialism set out by Lenin on the basis of Engels’ writings. To Thảo, matter is primary and consciousness secondary (see also Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach* in MEW XXI: 277-278). Thảo did not assume consciousness as the starting point of the process of knowledge (as Engels already stated in his so-called *Anti-Dühring*; see MEW XX: 32-33). Instead, he affirmed that we must proceed from things to sensation and then to consciousness. Things must be seen as objects of the world which exist prior to consciousness and independently of consciousness. In support of his position, he admitted that experience and sensations are the only media of our knowledge, but we can know something certain about their source (see also Engels’ English introduction to *Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft* in MEW: XXII: 297). And the source of sensations should not be reckoned to be a thing in itself which is unknowable on principle (see also ibid.). Rather the slow process of knowledge of the objective reality is the task of humans. Nonetheless, it is always

partially and historically related (see also Engels in MEW XX: 78).

As a consequence, we can understand why Thảo saw his own materialism as a radical alternative to every kind of subjective idealism. Specifically, Thảo's materialism – as well as Lenin's one – is presented as a reaction to subjective idealism. Consequently, it could be useful to describe the scope of Lenin's criticism of subjective idealism in order better to understand the reasons why Thảo called the phenomenology “subjective idealism” and refused it.

Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* focused one of the most popular theories of knowledge of the epoch. It was the so-called *empiriocriticism* whose main Russian supporter was Alexander Bogdanov (1873–1928). Bogdanov was a Bolshevik politician and militant during the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 (for bibliographic information see Biggart, Dudley and King 1998, Biggart, Glovelli, Yassour 1998, White 1998, Adams 1989, Kremmentsov 2011). In 1904–1906, he published the three volumes of his philosophic essay *Empiriomonizm* (Empiriomonism).

In his *Empiriomonizm*, Bogdanov merged the main assumptions of Marxism with Ernst Mach's empiriomonism (1838–1916) and Richard Avenarius's (1843–1896) empiriocriticism. The German-Swiss philosopher Avenarius supported a kind of radical empiricism. He admitted the indissoluble co-ordination of the self and the environment (Avenarius 1905: §§ 83-84). To him, the sensation is taken as primary; it is the sole entity we know (id. 1876: §§ 89-90). Similarly, Mach defended the idea that what we call things are complexes of sensations: “‘The thing’ is rather a mental symbol for a complex of sensations of relative stability” (Mach 1897: 473). Thus, he esteemed the question concerning the existence of bodies beyond sensations superfluous. To him, as a matter of fact, the notion of “body” is a heuristic device.

We must add that Avenarius (1876: § 95) tried to purify Kantism of the assumption of the thing-in-itself. But, according to Lenin, the thing-in-itself Kantian assumption was the core of Kant's materialism. Thus, Avenarius empiriocriticism seems to be close to Berkeley's subjective idealism. It is no coincidence that in a similar vein, Fichte refused the notion of thing-in-itself (cf. Lenin 1972: 230). In a similar way, Mach (1922: 299) set out that his own philosophy

was closer to Berkeley's and Hume's ones than to Kantism. The empiriocriticismists then explicitly based their analysis upon the refusal of Kantian thing-in-itself and it seems they referred to both Humean scepticism and Berkeleian subjective idealism.

Lenin grimly recounted empiriocriticism. He first showed how empiriocriticism leads to solipsism. Assuming that bodies are complexes of sensations, "it inevitably follows that the whole world is but my idea" and "it is impossible to arrive at the existence of other people besides oneself" (Lenin 1972: 34). Then Lenin linked empiriocriticism with the tradition of subjective idealism – according to which the external reality is nothing other than subject's sensation and the thing is indissolubly connected with consciousness (id., p. 68). He stated:

There is nothing but a paraphrase of subjective idealism in the teachings of Mach and Avenarius we are examining. [...] The different methods of expression used by Berkeley in 1710, by Fichte in 1801, and by Avenarius in 1891-94 do not in the least change the essence of the matter, viz., the fundamental philosophical line of subjective idealism. The world is my sensation; the non-self is 'postulated' (is created, produced) by the self; the thing is indissolubly connected with the consciousness; the indissoluble co-ordination of the self and the environment is the empirio-critical principal co-ordination; – this is all one and the same proposition, the same old trash with a slightly refurbished, or repainted, signboard (Lenin 1972: 69)

Lenin eventually argued that empiriocriticism failed to justify naïve realism: "thought and reality are inseparable, because reality can only be conceived in thought, and thought involves the presence of the thinker" (id., p. 72). He had already written:

For every scientist who has not been led astray by professorial philosophy, as well as for every materialist, sensation is indeed the direct connection between consciousness and the external world; it is the transformation of the energy of external excitation into a state of consciousness. This transformation has been, and is, observed by each of us a million times on every hand. The sophism of idealist philosophy consists in the fact that it regards sensation as being not the connection between consciousness and the external world, but a fence, a wall, separating consciousness from the external world – not an image of the external phenomenon corresponding to the sensation, but as the "sole entity". (id., p. 45-46).

Against that, as we have seen, Lenin argued that matter must be taken as

primary, as the starting point of the process of knowledge. Thus, sensations are the effects of the interaction between a given organism and mind-independent material things. In detail, sensations are nothing other than the effect of the action of mind-independent object on the body of the knowing subject. To Lenin, dialectical materialism alone could offer a satisfactory justification of naïve realism as far as it leads to regard matter as the epistemically mind-independent reality.

3.1. Husserl's Subjective Idealism (I)

Previous observations pave the way for understanding how Thảo questioned the validity of phenomenology against the background of Lenin's criticism towards subjective idealism in general and empiriocriticism in particular. In this way, indeed, Thảo could radicalise his materialistic opposition to the Husserlian idealism.

Thảo (1974, 1975) explained his own perspective on phenomenology after the publication of PDM. He said that, with his first book, he had wanted to offer Marxism a tool to analyse the lived experience and answer existentialist trend back. As we have previously seen in the first chapter:

I hoped in so doing to provide Marxism with an analytical instrument to investigate the interiority of lived-experience [le vécu] and thus to oppose some constructive response to objections from philosophies on the subject. I took aim at existentialism in particular, which, at least in its Sartrean incarnation, sought to take over the Marxist problematic and which, while recognizing to a certain extent the truth of historical materialism for the domain of social facts, accused it of denying the specificity of the problems of consciousness. (Thảo [1974: 37] 2009: 297)

So Thảo wrote that the first chapter of the second section of PDM – that was devoted to the origins of consciousness – could be seen as an example of the way in which phenomenological investigations may be “absorbed in some affirmative way into Marxism” (Thảo [1974: 37] 2009: 297). But he wrote that despite positive results – namely, the description of the material origins of consciousness – the phenomenological method and its assimilation into dialectical materialism “offered practically no assistance for the essential task, namely the analysis of human realities” (id., [p. 37] p. 298).

Thảo was sure that Hegelian notion of *to sublata* (*aufheben*) enabled him to successfully embed the Husserlian approach into Marx's framework. Nevertheless, the attempt of adapting Husserl to Marxism thanks to Hegelian notion of *Aufhebung* was not easy. Thus, Thảo wondered if Husserl's philosophy had actually been abolished, preserved, and transcended by dialectical materialism. The answer is no. "Marx had not subjected Hegel at all to the characteristic steps of Hegelian dialectic itself" (Thảo [1974: 37] 2009: 298). In other words, since Marx did not sublata Hegelian dialectic, Thảo would have improperly pretended to sublata the Husserlian phenomenology. To sublata, as a matter of fact, entails the fact that "the denied and surpassed moment remains stable with respect to its over- all structure and is absorbed in the moment that transcends it" (*ibid.*). As a result, he had improperly tried to assimilate the general structure of phenomenological analysis into dialectical materialism.

Now, to Thảo, although Marx seems to employ the same concepts of the Hegelian dialectic, "they are *homonymous concepts* insofar as they refer, in fact, to the same dialectic of things, but they are only related through a theoretical content that is not only *opposed*, but moreover *intrinsically heterogeneous*" (*ibid.*). Specifically, while Hegel neglected the material dialectic of reality, Marx described "this process [the process of movement of reality] in its own reality, which involved an entirely original elaboration of the dialectical method – a radical creation where the categories of movement are directly defined according to the very movement of matter in its actual structure" (Thảo [1974: 37] 2009: 299). In the same way, Thảo argued that in ILC he still employed phenomenological notions such as *intentionality*, *consciousness*, *lived experience*, etc., but he meant by them a different content:

As the subjective method [of phenomenology] is unutilizable by reason of the very principle of its progression, the analysis of consciousness will only be possible by a strictly objective method. It is true that we always speak of lived experience; we describe its structure and analyse it in its movement and in its signification, since it is precisely this that we want to know. But at *no moment can there be a question of directly analyzing it as such*. Self-consciousness, as all consciousness in general, must proceed at the level of the object. (Thảo [1975: 29] 2009: 323)

The question is what exactly Thảo reproached to the Husserlian phenomenology

and what he meant when he called phenomenology *subjective method*.

Thảo (1975: 24) argued that the Husserlian phenomenology represents the clearest and most coherent account of “subjective reflection”. That is because Husserl reduced the triadic relation among the knowing subject, sensations, and the external world to a double one. To Thảo, indeed,

Thus we have three terms: (1) *objective reality* as matter, or the outside world; (2) our *sensations*, which are [its] images, in other words, the *sensible images* in which objective reality is given [to us]; and finally, (3) “we” or “the human being”, in other words, the *perceiving subject* who has these sensations or sensible images and to whom objective reality is given in those images. Between these three terms, three relations arise: the relation of presence between objective reality and the perceiving subject to which it is “given” in his sensations, the relation of belonging between the perceiving subject and “his” sensations; and finally the relation of conformity (*Übereinstimmung*, Engels [see MEW XXII: 297]) between sensations and objective reality of which they are “the image”. And it is the simultaneous movement of all three relations which defines the epistemological dialectic of an *actually lived relationship of the consciousness and the object*: objective reality is given to the human being in his sensations that are the *image* of it. (Thảo [1975: 24] 2009: 310)

Thus, the Husserlian theory of consciousness had dismissed mind-independent things since Husserl dealt only with the relation of belonging between the transcendental subject and the contents of its lived experience. Since phenomenology merely described the lived experience of the subject and neglected the real relation between the subject and the material external reality, the Husserlian philosophy is a kind of subjective idealism. Provisionally, the subjective idealism is when the knowable world is reduced to the content of consciousness of the knowing subject.

Thảo’s criticism may be partially justified. Phenomenology started from the observation that the phenomenon is what is absolutely given to consciousness and is unquestionable. What is doubtful, however, is the transcendent existence of the object which experience refers to. The consciousness and the totality of lived experience, therefore, constitute the field of phenomenology (see Hua III.I: § 33). And the belief in the existence of the world is suspended (i.e., the so-called *phenomenological reduction*; see Hua III.I: § 32).

Thus, it is no coincidence that Husserl considered Humean sceptical doubt about the existence of the world independent of the subject as his philosophical starting point (for the philosophical continuity from Hume to Husserl see Mall 1973 and cf. Husserl 1953: 198). As a consequence, he refused to adopt a Kantian perspective. According to Zhok (2012: 112), “it is important to observe that the question that Fichte raised while criticising the Kantian notion of ‘Thing-in-itself’ remains alive for Husserl.”

We have seen that the same criticism towards Kant was shared by subjective idealists such as Avenarius and Mach. They argued for a development of Humean agnosticism and dealt with the contents of consciousness merely. According to Lenin, the refusal of Kantian things-in-itself leads to agnosticism or to Fichtean-like subjective idealism. And from agnosticism to subjective idealism, it is short road. The sceptical doubt about both, the existence of mind-independent things and the possibility to know them, lead researchers to take interest in the subjective reflection of the subject on its own sensations, representations, etc.

3.2. Husserl’s Subjective Idealism (II)

For Husserl phenomenology must deal with intentionality, understood as the property of lived experience to be about something. To Thảo, the Husserlian distinction between *noesis* (intentional act) and *noema* (intentionally held object) lead to dismiss the external world (cf. Hua III.I: §§ 87-96):

This appears with particular clarity in Husserl, whose work brought subjective reflection, under the title of “phenomenological reflection,” to its most refined. Without denying the existence of the real object to which a consciousness is actually oriented, he leaves it aside to focus solely on the “given” that seems to him absolutely certain: immanent lived experience as such. It appears that this “given” includes two moments: first, the subject with his lived acts, or *noesis*; second the object intended as intended, or “intentional object,” the *noema*. The intentional object is from the outset distinguished from the actual object, since it is only the intended object as intended in opposition to the external, actually intended object—in other words, in materialist terms, it is only the image of the actual object. But it is “revealed” in the course of phenomenological analysis that the external, actually intended object was, precisely, only the intended object as intended. In other words, in virtue of the phenomenologist’s self-reflection, the actual object is assimilated to the intentional object, which is in fact only its image, and as a result the external world is reduced to “intentionalities” of my consciousness. (Thảo [1975: 24] 2009:

In Thảo's view, it is important to emphasise the similarities between the Husserlian philosophy and the tradition of subjective idealism. He highlighted that Husserl did not refute the existence of the world, but he rather suspended the belief in the existence of the world (for instance cf. Hua III.I: § 31). Given that, lived experience is what remains after phenomenological reduction, it is a field of objects which existence is indubitable. Phenomenology must firstly describe lived experience as such. As a consequence, to Thảo, Husserl did not put in relation the lived experience of consciousness with real relations between the knowing subject and external reality. Once again, in Lenin's terms, Husserl merely dealt with the relation of belonging between the perceiving subject and its sensations and neglected the other two relations: the relation of presence between the objective reality and the perceiving subject and the relation of conformity between sensations and the objective reality.

Thảo was a bit unfair to Husserl. Husserl had in fact tackled the problem of conformity between lived experience and external object since he described how the own body can actively confirm the lived experience through movements in the space (cf. Hua III.IV: § 38). And this does not oblige Husserl's account to fall into the Fichtean alternative (cf. Zhok 2012: 114). Anyhow, the noetic-noematic intentional relation between the intentional act and the intended object is in danger of turning phenomenology into idealism – as Husserl's pupils had already noticed (see Tedeschini 2014). As a result, Thảo ([1975: 24] 2009: 311) stated that

Husserl had in reality mutilated and deformed the actually lived relation of consciousness to its object. This relationship, which is in fact constituted on the basis of three terms [the subject, the object, and the sensations], now, under the gaze of the phenomenologist, only includes two: *noesis* and *noema*, so the three relations outlined above are confused in the syncretism of the “noetic-noematic” relation. It follows that the actual object that in the actually lived experience of consciousness was given to the subject in its subjective image, namely sensation, is now brought to ideal and more or less mythical constructions within the noetic-noematic relation [...]. Such a definition amounts to replacing the actual object with a complex of sensations, the famous synthesis of *Abschattungen* (silhouettes) that, although regulated by laws introduced as a priori, can never reach the object itself as existing outside of consciousness and independently of it.

To explain, by “noesis” (or *intentional morphé*), one must understand the act by which consciousness interprets sensations (or *sensitive hyle*) as a manifestation of the same object. In this sense, the object is the “noema”, the meaning of the object, the object as understood, as a result of constitutive operations of consciousness. Further, Husserl set out in his *Cartesian Meditations* that being and consciousness belong together (cf. Hua I: 84). In this way, it would seem that he suggested a theory very close to “the principle of the correlation” set out by empiriocriticismists.

As a consequence of the subjective method of phenomenology, according to Thảo, Husserl cannot explain the relation with other egos. Since the reality is reduced to the phenomena constituted by the activity of the ego, then phenomenology becomes a kind of solipsism – just as empiriocriticism done:

In reality, with the subjective method, the relation of self to self is necessarily introduced in the pure abstract formalism of I=I, a kind of internal mirror that immediately returns to the subject his own image as himself, such that it becomes impossible for any question to be posed as to its origin and its foundation. And being locked in the circular emptiness of such an abstraction, the ego no longer conceives of others except as on this narcissistic mirror-image model, as if as fixed monads, each on its own internal mirror, of which the content causes a same egological form to be indefinitely reproduced. (Thảo [1975: 27] 2009: 318)

Now it could be useful to remember that for Husserl the *object* is an ideality constituted in a presumed manner by consciousness, the result of the syntheses of the various aspects of the thing the consciousness presumes to refer to the same reality, to the same unity of possible experience, something identical to itself beyond all its variations. *Abschattungen* (outlines, aspects, perspectives) is the Husserlian term that indicates the way in which the spatial thing manifests itself in perception. Thảo assimilates in this way the Husserlian theory of *Abschattungen* to the empiriocriticismists theory of the complexes of sensations sharply criticised by Lenin.

Of course, Husserl had criticised empiriocriticism in his *Logical Investigations* (see Hua XVIII). To him, indeed, Mach’s phenomenalism was a kind of psychologism and subjectivism in so far as the validity of concepts would depend upon the biopsychic structure of the knowing subject. Husserl did not agree with phenomenalism whereby the mind-independent thing is reducible to sensations

and other mental events. And according to Husserl, the noema does not construct the reality but rather it tends to make the reality appear. The noema pretends to be the reality but it is the medium between the subject of knowledge and the mind-independent thing. Thus, the subject does not know the reality directly but rather by means of the noema.

Husserl regarded the psychologism as a kind of relativism. To the psychologism, in fact, the truth is only in connection with a certain psychic structure. Thus, the existence of things would be reduced by the psychologism to a mental event and reality would be nothing but the connection between mental images (cf. Hua XIV: 151). According to Husserl, phenomenism leads to solipsism and scepticism. As we have seen, Husserl accepted the Humean scepticism, but at the same time he tried to solve the main conundrum of the Humean scepticism by way of the description of the lived experience.

In any case, to Thảo, the Husserlian view did not allow a comprehensive analysis of lived experience. And, thus, Husserl's idealism cannot be embedded in a materialist theory of real consciousness. Against that, Thảo's materialistic account argued for an epistemology in which "the real objectivity is given to humans thanks to sensation that is its image." In this vein, he had to change his method and dismissed phenomenological methodology:

to pose the problem not as a lived, phenomenological analysis of consciousness, pursued on the positions of dialectical materialism, but rather an application of dialectical materialism to the analysis of lived consciousness, and to solve it through its very content, namely through the orderly reproduction of the actual, material process, where the movement of subjectivity is constituted. (Thảo [1974: 38] 2009: 299)

Thus, Thảo's aim is now to describe the real intentionality of consciousness as it appears since we consider the three relations of belonging, presence, and conformity. He had to explain how conscious lived experience could intentionally refer to the real world. At the same time, he had also to explain the way in which the belief in the existence of mind-independent things could arise.

4. Thảo's Theory of Semiotic Intentionality

Thảo developed his materialist theory of intentionality by distancing himself from the Husserlian phenomenology. At the same time, Thảo disagreed with Lenin in some regards, as we will see in the paragraph 7. For the time being, we must remind the reader that, according to Lenin, dialectical materialism regards thinking as the result of material life. And material life is nothing other than the relations between the ego and both, the physical and social environment. Thảo, too, suggested that thinking must be regarded as something that depends upon the interactions with the others as well as with the physical environment (mind-independent things). Specifically, the most fundamental relationship between humans and physical environment is mediated by social relations. And social relations involve a form of language, i.e., the language of real life.

As we have seen in Chapter 3, against Saussurean semiology and its assumption of the psychical nature of signs, Thảo claimed that the semiotics of the language of the real life must deal with the material embodied origins of psychical dimension. The criticism towards Saussurean semiology leads Thảo to rehabilitate motivated signs and language-reality relations. According to Thảo, Saussure and Husserl dismissed the real context in which both signs and cognition arise. In fact, the pre-conscious, collective, and semiotic structure of social practices involves the development of individual cognitive skills. The same is true so as to explain the origin of psychic intentionality.

The language of real life has been seen as a practical tool which conveys some fundamental significations and a community employed to interact with the physical environment. Assuming that, Thảo linked the analysis of intentionality with his description of language. To explain how lived experience referring to mind-independent things arises, Thảo introduced in ILC the notion of “gestural indication” (pointing). In essence, Thảo claimed that indicative gesture satisfies a certain number of objective requirements designed to materialistically explain the emergence of psychic dimension. As a matter of fact, pointing is a real movement which entails material relations between humans and external world against the background of social practices. Unlike Husserl, Thảo insisted that the directness of

intentional acts is not a process that exists inside our mind but rather something that must be conceived as a body movement displayed during collective activities.

As we have seen, the psychic signifier is the result of the internalisation of a material signifier. In the same way, the psychic signified is the result of the internalisation of a material signified produced by the signifier of motivated fundamental signs (see below Chapter 6 for more elaborate treatment). Since the Saussurean signifier-signified psychic relation corresponds to the Husserlian noetic-noematic cognitive relation, Thảo argued that the material signifier of the pointing corresponds to the embodied intentional semiotic act which refers to the real mind-independent object. Similarly, the signified produced by pointing correspond to the sensation of the intended object perceived as a mind-independent thing. Simply put, pointing changes human perception of the object because it establishes the intended object as mind-independent reality. Thus, Thảo ([1975: 26-27] 2009: 316) wrote:

We thus see that the ideal signifier, as a lived gestural-verbal act ideally reproducing the material, gestural-verbal signifier, defines what Husserl wanted to designate as noesis, namely the ideal activity of the subject of consciousness, but we see also that he mutilated and deformed it, in particular by removing the originary lived act of indication of the object, the lived act that reproduces on the ideal plane of consciousness the actual movement of indication. Correlatively the ideal signified, as the ideal image reflecting the tendentious image signified on the material, sensory-motor level, defines what Husserl wanted to designate noema, the “intentional object,” but which he equally mutilated and deformed by eliminating the fundamental moment that ideally reproduces the relation of the exteriority of the object vis-à-vis the subject, the ideal image of the exteriority of the actual object, a moment by which the intentional object is distinguished from, and at the same time is related to, that actual object of which it is the ideal lived image.

Thảo anchored both consciousness and intentionality in collective semiotic activities and especially in the semiotic act of gestural indication. So what Thảo argued for is a theory of semiotic embodied intentionality. And so conceived, pointing explains how the belief in the existence of the real mind-independent world arises. Not only did pointing involve the original intentional relation subject-object, it also entails the belief in the external world as such. Thảo ([1975: 25] 2009: 313) wrote:

This gesture is thus the material constitutive movement of the *actual real intentionality* of consciousness taken in its most fundamental form, that by which consciousness is consciousness *of the object in its objective reality*, as existing beyond the subject and independently of it.

According to Bimbenet (2011: 96), this is the main task of every explanation of process of hominisation:

We know ourselves as a particular biological species, or as a historically and culturally situated humanity; but we continue to live the world not as ‘a’ subjective-relative world, but as ‘the’ world. In the ‘natural attitude’, as Husserl says so well, we are naturally and viscerally realistic. We meet the world as what is, in the strongest sense that can be imagined, it always exists before and without us. (id., p. 92)

Thảo’s semiotic intentionality solved the main conundrum of the Husserlian phenomenology since it shows how the belief in the existence of the external mind-independent world arises without dismissing the bodily relation with that world. In support of his position, not only did Thảo describe the intentional relation as phenomenally already done, he also explains how that intentionality arises and why it can be justified. The mind-independent thing is no longer an ideal target of lived experience but rather a real material thing the subject interacts with. Against the Husserlian phenomenology, Thảo’s semiotic intentionality intends a real mind-independent object and does not stop at the *eidōs* of the thing, at the psychic intentional noetic-noematic relation.

We cannot neglect the fact that intentional relation with mind-independent reality takes place against social relations. And the social exchange of gestural indications must be regarded as the origin of self-consciousness (see Chapter 5 for more details). So Thảo argued against the Husserlian idealist assumption concerning self-consciousness as inner-relation between individuals and their own self. Thảo must solve this conundrum and demonstrate how self-consciousness arises from social relations: “There remains for now the relation of the subject to itself, this constant return of self to self, in which consists the intimate structure of lived experience as such” ([Thảo 1974: 27] 2009: 317).

Thảo’s analysis started from social relations in order to investigate the origins of self-consciousness. Thus, the relation with the others is not a result of a solipsist comparison of self with others as Husserl stated in his *Fifth Meditation*. In contrast

with that, and according to Marx and Engels (cf. MEW 23: 67), Thảo ([1975: 27] 2009: 318) highlighted that “*the mirror is in others [le miroir est dans les autres].*” But Thảo added that language allows the emergence of self-consciousness in so far as individuals address signs to themselves by the mediation of the others:

It seems, in fact, that in this first, still embryonic form of the collective at work at the end of human evolution, the original gesture of indication, with its accompanying exclamation, is necessarily exchanged in reciprocal recognition, wherein each subject sees himself in others as if in a *mirror* and hears himself in others as if an *echo*. That reciprocal feature of a sign remains here at the material, sensory-motor level, since we have not yet crossed the threshold of the animal level. However, with the contradictions that appear in the development of collective work, certain situations are produced where the movement of the sign sent by an individual subject is *immediately identified with those of others*, so that he immediately returns to himself, which means that he is addressed to himself from those others with whom he had just identified himself. (Thảo [1975: 28] 2009: 319)

Cooperative relations with fellows are, then, the conditions for having self-consciousness. And the internalization of social working relations is nothing but the internalization of language as a social fact (Thảo was evidently sympathetic to Marx’s *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*; cf. MEW XLII: 390).

To conclude, semiotic intentionality transcends the narrow limit of the Husserlian intentionality. It puts in relation the knowing subject with the real world. Remarkably semiotic intentionality seems to solve the main conundrum of PDM. Thảo can now describe the mediation between practical life and linguistic consciousness once the fully-developed language emerges. And he showed the way in which fully-formed language could be context-related and it effectively refers to the reality-in-itself. Signs refer no more to mental content. Thảo could thus conciliate the linguistic ego and the real subject of practical life.

5. Language and Reality

As Thảo put it, the language of real life modifies the epistemic attitude of individuals towards mind-independent things. Indeed, fundamental signs – and, above all, pointing – establish a new epistemic relation between knowing subject and external reality. As we have seen, Thảo (1974) accused Saussure to be an

idealist because he reduced our cognition to differential relations among signs. In the same way, in his ILC, Thảo ([1973] 1984: 33) wrote, Roman Jakobson's (1986–1982) semiotics felt in the same error (cf. Jakobson 1963: 41). If any sign translates itself into another sign, then, Thảo added, “the whole meaning of signs merely consists in their referring to one another, without ever referring directly to things” ([1973] 1984: 33). Thus, the speaker is epistemically separated from physical reality. And, in the same way, linguistic signs are decoupled from the body of the speaker.

Against that, to Thảo, mind-independent objects are essential to analyse the system of intrinsic signs. The question facing the relation between language and mind-independent objects involves a wide range of topics such as semantic reference, representational content, justification of knowledge, and so on. For instance, Thảo wrote that the simple indication of a given object establishes the reference within a communicative act between two partners takes place. The simple indication could be the gesture of the pointing as well as vocal indexical, of course.

To Thảo, the indicative gesture must be regarded as the first step of linguistic signification. In this regard, Thảo invoked an example made by Jakobson:

Suppose I want to explain to a unilingual Indian what Chesterfield is and I point to a package of cigarettes. What can the Indian conclude? ... He will gather what Chesterfield is and what it is not only if he masters a series of other linguistic signs, which will serve as interpretant of the sign under discussion [Jakobson, 1963: 41-42, from Thảo [1973] 1984: 33]

To Thảo, it was a serious error to consider the other signs as interpretants of the pointing. Indeed, Thảo ([1973] 1984: 34) wrote, “the indicative gesture simply means that it is a question of this very object [...] such a meaning is understood by the gesture itself, it has no need to be interpreted.” He admitted that the pointing cannot say anything about the properties of the object²². But this did not mean that

22 So Thảo followed Hegel's theory of *sense certainly*: “Moreover, sense-certainty appears to be the *truest* knowledge; for it has not as yet omitted anything from the object, but has the object before it in its perfect entirety. But, in the event, this *certainty* proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest truth. All that it says about what it knows is just that it is; and its truth contains nothing but the sheer being of the thing” (Hegel [1807] 1977: 58).

other signs can serve as a substitute of the pointing²³. They simply add ancillary information to pointing. In other words, the pointing participates in creating the frame of reference and establishes the referent. Then other signs explain the properties of that object.

In support of his position, Thảo suggested that pointing does not require any system of arbitrary signs to be understood. The indicative gesture performs a denotative function while other motivated and arbitrary signs add supplementary connotative information:

Now if, for example, one adds by a mimetic sign this it is something *to be smoked*, one will have shown a certain particular property of that object, and will not have explained the meaning of the gesture of pointing with the finger. [...] (id., p. 34)

Thus, the indicative gesture means outside the relationship with other signs and directly refers to *the thing itself*. This one is perceived by way of the indicative gesture and, consequently, appears in its material existence. For this reason, the thing could be understood to be the shared frame of reference that allows every linguistic act.

Semiotic intentionality of indicative gestures is also the source of the experience of the mind-independent world as the target of common efforts, discourses, sciences, etc. As Bimbenet (2011: 197-199) stated:

The gesture of indication places us immediately in an intersubjective space where the points of view interact with one another. [...] He [the child who points] “declares” the thing to the address of people around him. In so doing, he constitutes it as the invariant term of a multiplicity of possible determinations. The thing once named or designated can reveal itself in its infinity of aspects. [...] The public declaration of a thing enriches it with no new content, but institutes it as an invariant term under a multiplicity of possible looks. It opens the space of multiple perspectives.

For this reason, Thảo had stated that fundamental signs – among which we should mention the pointing – must be reckoned to be the semiotic base of

23 Hegel, too, wrote that language cannot substitute the pointing: “They *mean* ‘this’ bit of paper on which I am writing – or rather have written – ‘this’; but what they mean is not what they say. If they actually wanted to say ‘this’, then it is impossible, because the sensuous This that is meant *cannot be reached* by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e. to that which is inherently universal” (Hegel [1807] 1977: 66).

conventional systems of arbitrary signs.

Interestingly, in a similar way, Husserl already and explicitly mentioned the role of perception to determine the meaning of demonstrative expressions such as *this* (cf. Hua IV: Sixth Investigation, § 5). And after him, although he took the fully-developed language into account, Karl Bühler (1879-1963) argued that demonstrative expressions required gesture and perceptions which specify their meaning, their reference (cf. Bühler 1934: 90).

It is not surprising that the same attempt to find the origins of consciousness and language by adapting the Husserlian theory of intentionality to semiotics could be observed in the writings of Hendrik Pos (1898–1955):

Since it does not appear specifically as speech, language must be understood as the continuation of the organs of sight and action par excellence, eyes and hands. (Pos [1933] 2013: 117)

The outstretched hand that does not reach its goal is converted into a hand that realizes an act of language. While in itself it remains an organ that does not attain its goal, it is understood and ultimately understands itself as a hand that indicates. Before language, there is, therefore, the gesture and, as the very first origin of language, the gesture of the outstretched hand. (id., p. 119)

What emerges from these quotations is the fact that some scholars who were concerned with certain phenomenological issues tackled the question of the reference and that of gestural indication as well.

6. Naïve Realism

According to Thảo “the meaning of the indicative gesture in no way refers to any other sign. It uniquely and directly refers to the thing itself in its external existence as independent of the subject” ([1973] 1984: 34). Since Thảo believed that arbitrary fully-formed languages are based on pointing which involves the belief that the world exists independently of the subject, then, systems of arbitrary signs depend upon the psychological attitude of naïve realism. Thus, the belief that the world exists independently of the subject must be regarded as the gnoseological justification of meaningfulness of arbitrary signs.

Naïve realism is the common-sense theory of perception: there are objects out

there in the world, and those objects have the properties that they appear to us to have (see Genone 2016). In the same way, Thảo ([1973] 1984: 35) wrote that the pointing is the “mediation which assures the correspondence between knowledge and things.” Assuming that sensations link thinking and reality and the criterion of knowledge is the practical interaction with the physical environment, then pointing seems to provide a solid basis for having the correspondence between concepts and reality.

To Thảo, the semantic content of indicative gestures is the necessary foundation for conceptual knowledge: “It is the meaning of this sign which is the basis of the concept of *matter*, as an essential concept of the theory of knowledge” (ibid.)²⁴. Conceptual knowledge needs the relation to the objective sensible reality and this relation is involved in indicative gestures. Only later, within fully-formed languages, systems of arbitrary signs allow conceptual inferences, generalizations, abstractions, and so forth²⁵.

The awareness of the object as mind-independent thing marks the most relevant difference between humans and animals. To Thảo, animals perceive the object but do not perceive the object as mind-independent. Of course, they have a disposal gestures, but they must be understood to be forms of grasping. Thảo admitted that primates could recognize indicative gestures as such: “when the finger is pointed in order to indicate an object to an ape, his look follows the extension of the experimenter’s hand gesture to the indicated object” ([1973] 1984: 19). But “gestural activity of apes denotes feeling and action” (id., p. 20) rather than “meaning of the object.” Thus, apes cannot employ indicative gestures as means to state or announce the thing to someone else. They understand pointing and merely employ it as imperative means to achieve an individual goal. According to more recent studies (Vauclair & Bertrand 2002: 309, 323-324; Vauclair 1992: 125, 134, 175;

24 In this way, Thảo agreed with Hegel’s *Phenomenology*: “The knowledge or knowing is at the start or immediately our object cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a knowledge of the immediate or of what simply is” (Hegel [1807] 1977: 58). Federici (1970) notes: “[For Thảo] Matter can only be defined as ‘what is independent of consciousness’ (independent and not merely ‘external’). [...] Sense indicates objects as objective reality, independent of the subject, and this independent reality is already implied in the sense itself.”

25 To Hegel, too, the fully-fledged language must be regarded as the dimension of the universal and general notions (see Hegel [1807] 1977: 66).

Lestel 2001: 143), the pointing among chimps must be regarded as injunctive, either because it responds to a request from the experimenter, or because it expresses an interested request, and not the desire to share information (cf. also Bimbenet 2011: 291).

For Thảo ([1973] 1984: 5) “the indicative gesture marks the most elementary relation of consciousness to the object as external object.” The world is no more my world; it becomes the transcendent world which exists outside me, independently of my will, and existing for the others. On the contrary, the animal perceives the object as part of the own behaviour: “the object is not detached from his own sensory-motor organization.” The perception of the object entails the corresponding psychic image among animals, of course, but such an image “can be defined only in terms of the potential action.” For the ape, the object is nothing other than the last physical extension of the own body. The pressure of needs causes a perception of the object as something that is actually “*touched*” and manipulated rather than something that is perceived and then indicated.

In other words, among animals, the relation to the object implies the direct behavioural continuity with the external things, so that the perception of the object does not take place at distance. For the same reason, the means of expression among apes (gestures, cries, etc.) serve as signals and refer to the emotional biological aspect of a given situation. Regarding this dynamic, Thảo wrote:

And it is precisely because the psychic image of the object presents itself contiguously with the potential movements already more or less set in operation in the body of the animal that he is incapable of indicating the distant object, even though the distance of the object is minute. In other words, he does not have the concept of distance as such, so that his perception, though it is of the external object does not include awareness of the externality of the object. (ibid.)

Otherwise, among humans, the indicative gesture exactly reveals the ability to refer to external things as such. External things are thus something that exists although it is not the object of potential actions.

To Thảo, it does not mean that gestures at a distance do not derive from gestures employed by our primate-like ancestors, of course. But since apes perceive

the situation by way of contiguity, humans show the consciousness of the distance and exteriority of the object.

7. Thảo's Theory of Semiotic Cognition

Before concluding, it seems important to show the differences between Thảo's and Lenin's theories of knowledge. As we have seen above, to Lenin the error underlying empiriocriticism was that of reducing the objective world to our sensations and representations. In contrast with empiriocriticism, Lenin thought of the process of knowledge in terms of direct realism: the object is directly perceived and perceiving it does not depend on something internal the mind. Not only does the external mind-independent reality exist, it is also knowable through human sensations. To him, indeed, "the mind does not exist independently of the body [...] mind is secondary, a function of the brain, a reflection of the external world" (Lenin 1972: 95; about the brain cf. Engels' *Anti-Dühring* in MEW XX: 33).

In this way, Lenin merged his ontological monism – i.e., matter is the only substance which makes up the universe – with his theory of sensation as reflection of mind-independent things²⁶. The ontological homogeneity between the mind and things is the condition for having epistemic correspondence between representations and external reality. To Lenin, there is an epistemic condition that justifies our beliefs. The praxis – i.e., the interactions between humans and

²⁶ Lenin's theory of knowledge appealed to some Russian psychological trends of the epoch (see McLeish 1975). To Sechenov (1863) conscious and unconscious actions are bodily reflexes whose origins are the sensory simulation. Then this one entails the corresponding muscular movements and psychic acts. Sechenov acknowledged that the behaviour could be described as the necessary link between organism and environment. He introduced the notion of "reflex arc": the physiological mechanism that transforms environmental energy into activity. The behaviour was regarded as an automatic and involuntary body's response mediated by the nervous system with the formation of a reflex arc that generates a response as a result of a stimulus coming from the environment or from the body itself. Sechenov's physiology became the starting point for Pavlov's psychology and then Pavlov further developed Sechenov's account concerning reflexes. Lenin regarded Pavlov's theory of reflection as psychological example to support his own theory of knowledge. According to Lenin, all matter possesses the property of reflection. Consequently, mind is a function of the brain that reflects the external state of affairs. Language is nothing but an instrument of communication and a reflex of external reality (see Asratyan 1982, Losev 1984, Bodarenko 2008).

environment – must be regarded as the testing ground of our representations of external reality:

Thus, the materialist theory, the theory of the reflection of objects by our mind, is here presented with absolute clarity: things exist outside us. Our perceptions and ideas are their images. Verification of these images, differentiation between true and false images, is given by practice. (Lenin 1972: 119)

In this way, according to Lenin, sciences unconsciously assume a realist and materialist theory of knowledge. This is nothing but naïve realism.

In ILC, Thảo quoted several times Lenin (1972). Indeed, they agreed on various assumptions. For instance, Thảo regarded sensation as the image of mind-independent things. And, in this instance, he supported the idea that the universe is composed of matter alone. His monistic materialism led him to consider the mind as a result of the neural-physiological mechanisms of the brain (see below Chapter 6 for more elaborate treatment). So, the naïve realism must be seen as the most fundamental form of knowledge. Like Lenin, Thảo regarded the interaction between the body and a given environment as the starting point for having knowledge.

Thảo's view, however, differed from Lenin's one regarding the role of signs. To Lenin, signs are nothing other than instruments to communicate the already acquired knowledge of the world (Losev 1984). Indeed, sensations alone could be reckoned to be the beginning of peculiar human knowledge. Not only did Thảo date back the emergence of the most fundamental forms of human knowledge to the period of prehomínids, he also introduced the language of real life as essential part of the process of knowledge. In this vein, Thảo would agree with Lenin's theory of knowledge as he, too, suggested that social practice represents the real dimension in which human knowledge of mind-independent things could be justified. But Thảo stated that the social practice takes the shape of the language of real life.

To Thảo, the object of sensations is not the material thing in itself but rather the mind-independent thing as it is presented by the pointing within a social context. Indeed, he wrote that “the indicative gesture simply means that it is question of this very object, the ‘*this here*’ as objective reality given to sense intuition and *nothing more*” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 34).

Though he attempted to take the issue of language far more seriously than Lenin, Thảo's theory of semiotic knowledge was conceived along the lines of Lenin's materialism and realism, of course. So Thảo stated:

“Matter”, says Lenin, “is the objective reality, which is given to us in sensation.” Naturally, the word “given” must be understood here in an active sense. “The senses” specifies Lenin “show reality”. They show it to us precisely because of the indicative gesture which defines the very act of sense intuition as *sense certainty*. Objective reality is “given” to us in sensation in the sense that it is *indicated* to us by sensation. (id., p. 34)

Interestingly, fundamental signs support sensation of mind-independent objects. That is to say, fundamental signs do not replace sensations but rather they direct the attention to a given mind-independent material thing. While in Lenin's insight knowledge starts as passively and mechanically product of physiological mechanisms, Thảo highlighted how both semiotic intentionality and social practice modify the way sensations grasp objective reality.

8. Beyond the Phenomenological Approach?

Thảo presents his own approach as diametrically opposed to Husserl's one. Indeed, Husserl suspended the naïve realism and the general thesis of the natural attitude: the world exists. The *reduction* (or *epoché*) exactly suspends the belief on the existence of mind-independent things (Hua XXIV: 122). This scepticism leads Husserl to state that there can be no doubt that the phenomenon appears to the subject. In this way, the act of consciousness constitutes the field of research of phenomenology because it is beyond doubt while the existence of mind-independent things is not apodictic. By contrast, to Thảo, the existence of the world is the starting point to investigate the origins of consciousness.

While Husserl's phenomenological project started from the field of phenomena to describe the processes that lead us to believe in the existence of mind-independent things (Hua I), Thảo took for granted that the mind-independent things exist in themselves as matter in motion. From a peculiar notion of matter, then, Thảo illustrated how consciousness arose and how the belief in mind-independent reality dialectically develops. Thus, Thảo and Husserl wanted to

describe how something can appear to consciousness, what kind of subjectivity is at issue, what kind of subjective acts allows the emergence of a certain field of objects, etc. But they assumed two different perspectives.

Thảo tried to solve the question by way of genetic investigations into the origins of consciousness and assumed as a starting point the existence of matter in motion and as his endpoint the subjective knowledge of that reality. And Thảo integrated this description into a wider research on the nature of humankind. In support of his position, he illustrated how practical collective life and semiotic skills are the preconditions for having access to the reality as matter in motion. Thảo's approach aimed to transcend the epistemological dualism between the subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge and assumed the ontological identity of them.

But, in this manner, Thảo dismissed the difficulties emerging from the scepticism concerning the mind-independent reality. In so far as Thảo took for granted the mind-independent reality and defined it as matter in motion by dialectical materialism, he was not interested to demonstrate the existence of the mind-independent reality. He was rather more interested in the description of the way the consciousness of mind-independent reality arose. Thus, Thảo's approach seems to be weaker than Husserl's one exactly because Thảo did not demonstrate the ultimate basis of his ontology. What he illustrated is rather the epistemological defence as well as the genetic development of his own ontology – which was based on the belief in the mind-independent reality conceived as matter in motion.

Chapter Five

Consciousness: what is it, who has it, and how does it arise?

Ainsi le psychique, dans son sens humain,
ne peut pas se comprendre directement à partir du biologique.
Il implique la médiation des déterminations sociales,
fondées sur la dialectique historique des forces productives
et des rapports de production, et développées dans le langage.
(T. D. Thảo)

1. Preliminary Remarks. - 2. Language as Social Matter. - 3.1. The Relation of Reciprocity. - 3.2. Consciousness as Self-Consciousness. - 3.3. Consciousness as Consciousness of the Object. - 4.1. The Soviet Debate on Consciousness. - 4.2. The Western Debate on Consciousness. - 4.3. Conclusions.

1. Preliminary Remarks

The question facing the origin of speech involves the question of the most elementary form of contents which subjective inner lived experience focuses on. Does language reorganize the pre-linguistic experience? To what extent does language have an influence over thought? What kind of conscious contents does language convey? As we have announced in the previous chapter, the subjective lived experience is called by Thảo *consciousness*. It is not easy to define what consciousness is. According to Thảo, subjective lived experience has two distinguishing characteristics: i) it is conscious, namely subjective lived experience must be regarded as the individual's inner experience and had to be described from the first-person perspective – that had already been suggested by Descartes in his *Meditations*; ii) it is intentional, namely subjective lived experience refers to a given content (mental states and processes, things, properties and states of affairs, concepts, and so on) – as it had already been affirmed by Brentano (see above Chapter 1). Since lived experience is conscious, the subject is also aware of the own

conscious mental activity. At the same time, lived experience is nothing but the consciousness of the contents it tends to – that is the consciousness of the object. Thus, simultaneously, the conscious lived experience is consciousness of the object and consciousness of self. We can anticipate that, to Thảo, the language of real life allows the emergence of conscious lived experience. To point the fact, language mediates the internalisation of the contents of our experience. It translates the experience of the world into stable contents of consciousness. On the one side, we can be aware of our inner experience because it is objectified in language. On the other side, consciousness could refer to something else by way of language. Not for nothing is intentionality the main characteristic of fundamental signs like the gestural indication. Finally, we must remark that for Thảo the dimension of conscious lived experience seems to coincide with that of thinking.

What immediately stands out when one analyses Thảo's theory of consciousness is the fact that he had to accommodate the material origin of thinking with human-specific cognition. That is an issue that was extensively handled in the Marxist literature (cf. MEW II: 136; id., XX: 32, 354). Thảo ([1974: 38] 2009: 299-301) introduced the conundrum in the following way:

Toward the end of the fifties, a riveting and impassioned general discussion on the nature of consciousness was beginning in the Soviet Union²⁷. [...] the classics of Marxism-Leninism had not yet specifically pursued a concrete science of consciousness. In order to establish a research methodology in this area, it was necessary, it seems, to clarify the concept of consciousness vis-à-vis the most general categories of dialectical materialism, namely matter and motion. The world is but matter in motion or movement in matter, and the task of knowledge is to study matter in its many forms of movement. [...] The science of consciousness should thus, it seems, define its object as a certain form of the movement of matter [...] However, such a definition would, in fact, equate consciousness with mere physical movement [...]. It remains, nonetheless, that consciousness displays an incontestably ideal character [...].

At the heart of the debate about the nature of consciousness lie questions concerning the ontological primacy of matter. They are: Why are humans aware of the contents of their lived experience? If we assume that material object is not able

27 Thảo (1974: 38) invoked: “*L’origine de la conscience* de Spirskine, *La nature de l’image* de Tioukhtine, *Le problème de la conscience dans la philosophie et la science de la nature* de Chorokova, *Comment naquit l’humanité* de Séménov.” Because of our lack of knowledge of Russian, we cannot account for that debate unfortunately.

to intentionally refer to something else, why is our lived experience intentional? How can physical brain processes be about things or ideas? How can intentionality arise from matter? And how can mind-dependent thoughts refer to mind-independent things? Since we assume a materialistic approach, what kind of interactions are maintained by the brain with the mind? What kind of materialistic theoretical frame provides the best explanation of peculiarities of human-specific cognition?

Before coming to the core of Thảo theory of consciousness and to illustrate how he answered to previous questions, some remarks concerning materialistic dialectic framework are needed. We should place Thảo's theory in the context of Marxism-Leninism and pay special attention to ontological and epistemological relations between mind and matter.

Thảo offered a wide analysis of the emergence of consciousness from matter and suggested a philosophical and ontological theory that justified his assumptions. Thảo ([1973] 1984: 26) argued for "the dependency of consciousness, as a secondary factor in relation to matter, which is the primary element." Thus, in contrast to dualism, Thảo refused to admit the existence of two kinds of substances. Mind and brain, consciousness and body share the same ontological substrate. Indeed, he argued for "the fundamental unity of the two opposed terms, a unity which is expressed in material monism." From an ontological point of view, there is no difference between mind/consciousness and the brain. Consciousness is nothing but an emergent ability of given bodies, or, a function of the brain.

Nonetheless, consciousness seems to be something that differs from matter. Even today, scholars wonder if consciousness could be explained from a materialistic point of view (see Koch 2005). The main concern is the question how the brain could produce lived experience. From an epistemological perspective, Thảo ([1973] 1984: 26) wrote, "the opposition between matter and consciousness has an absolute meaning." It seems that there is a contradiction between the two theories of consciousness, the epistemological and the ontological one. Consciousness is rooted in matter but it seems to transcend matter. Even if both consciousness and matter can be reduced to same substance "matter", from an ontological standpoint, the knowing subject is epistemologically aware to

transcend the material world. In a similar way, the third-person perspective usually employed to describe material phenomena such as the brain functioning appears to be ineffective to describe the lived experience. Thảo invoked Lenin's theory of consciousness in order better to explain this conundrum. Lenin, indeed, wrote that

Of course, even the antithesis of matter and mind has absolute significance only within the bounds of a very limited field – in this case exclusively within the bounds of the fundamental epistemological problem of what is to be regarded as primary and what as secondary. Beyond these bounds the relative character of this antithesis is indubitable. (Lenin 1972: 167-168)

The materialist elimination of the “dualism of mind and body” (scil., materialist monism) consists in the assertion that the mind does not exist independently of the body, that mind is secondary, a function of the brain, a reflection of the external world. (id., p. 95)

We will return to this point further. For the time being, we should note that for Thảo, consciousness is the product of both, biological evolution and development of social practice. To Thảo consciousness is not a separate substance independent of matter but rather the embodied capability of lived experience “to keep a certain distance” from what it refers to. And the semiotic intentional act of pointing had been regarded by Thảo as the most fundamental form of consciousness because this kind of gestures establishes the most elementary distance between the knowing subject and mind-independent things²⁸.

As Thảo put it, not only does matter must be understood to be a physical element (body and mind-independent things), it must be also seen as the social environment. Thus, consciousness is something material not just because it is a function of the brain, but rather because it emerges from the material behaviour of humans. The social life-process of production and reproduction of means of existence constitutes, then, the precondition of consciousness. But we must add that social life-process is interwoven with language behaviour. Thus, in the

28 Thảo insisted that “it goes without saying that this description [of the most elementary form of consciousness of the mind-independent thing] is only fully valid under the original conditions of *hominization*, or the gestation period of genus *Homo*. In the second part of anthropogenesis, namely *sapientation* or the formation of *Homo sapiens*, the motion is internalised, to be followed by indefinitely complicated forms” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 202)

following paragraph, we will focus on the way the language of real life involved in collective cooperative activities is the condition for having the emergence of some human-specific cognitive functions and to what extent it mediates the interaction between consciousness and reality.

2. Language as Social Matter

Thảo ([1973] 1984: 16) defined what consciousness is by invoking some lines from Marx's *German Ideology*: "language is practical consciousness [die Sprache ist das praktische [...] wirkliche Bewußtsein]" (MEW III: 30; Marx & Engels 1998). Some words concerning the Marxian approach to consciousness and language are now needed. To Marx, language is a multi-dimensional device which interacts with the physical environment so as to solve material problems. The multidimensionality depends upon the fact that language must be simultaneously regarded as i) social, ii) embodied, iii) and practical. Language is the first mode of being of thinking. This one must be seen as the practical ability involved in problem-solving. And both language and thinking have their common origin in social practices. Thus, since thinking and language are intertwined, the nature of consciousness must be studied in relation to both the life of the body and social relations.

The social nature of both, language and consciousness, had been highlighted by Marx, who, as a consequence, stated that "language is as old as consciousness" and consciousness is "from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all" (MEW III: 30; Marx & Engels 1998). Thảo wanted to explain how the language of real life transforms consciousness in a social fact. Thảo wrote that language of real life is "integral part" of the act of consciousness (Thảo [1973] 1984: 16). And he defined the *act of consciousness* as "*language*, or unity of the signifying act, as material signs, with what it signifies [avec sa signification]" (id., p. [34] 16). What impact can language have on consciousness? And to what extent can language enable us to solve the puzzle of consciousness?

Now we should spend a few words about Engels' theory of matter because it largely influenced Thảo's treatment of language behaviour. According to Engels, "motion in the most general sense" must be conceived "as the mode of existence,

the inherent attribute, of matter” (MEW XX: 354; trans. from Engels 1987: 362). In the utterance “the motion of matter”, “matter” means the subject (the so-called genitive subjective): the motion of matter is matter in motion. Matter is the only ontological substrate of all that exists. It takes the shape of several different ways of motion. To Engels, the motion of matter could take the shape of basic mechanical motion, the motion of celestial bodies, chemical decomposition and combination, the motion of molecules, heat and light, electricity and magnetism, life, consciousness, thinking, etc. (cf. MEW XX: 325, 575-576).

In mentioning Engels, Thảo tried to solve what he considered the most relevant problem of consciousness. He did not neglect that “consciousness, in so far as it actually exists must have something material in itself.” But Thảo also stated that “naturally, we must not conclude from this that consciousness would itself be material” (id., p. 26). This does not mean that consciousness is an immaterial substance. Even if consciousness requires a certain body to appear, this does not mean that consciousness is something material in the same way as the body. To point the fact, consciousness is nothing other than the awareness to have transcended the material reality. As this discussion implies, Thảo did not regard consciousness as a function of the brain merely. To him, the body alone cannot explain the origins of consciousness, even if it is a necessary condition for having consciousness. How can we explain the material and ideal nature of consciousness at the same time?

As has been seen, the language of real life is a social activity preceding the emergence of consciousness as individual’s psychic phenomenon. And the language of real life is taken as a material behaviour that has something material in itself. The materiality of the language of real life is nothing but the concrete embodied and social production of gestural-verbal signs. Those signs are what Thảo called “matter of linguistic sign” (id., p. 26). As a result, the material substrate of consciousness is nothing other than the material movement of the language of real life.

To Thảo, first, consciousness is the result of the motion of the matter that composed the brain: “*knowledge is the brain itself in its motion of thinking*” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 29). But the brain is not enough. The peculiar motion of the brain requires

the support of signs, i.e., “the *idealization* characteristic of the motion of inner language.” Tháo stated that “consciousness must, therefore, be more exactly defined as the *idealized form of the motion of inner language*” (ibid.). Consciousness is the result of the internalisation of the language of real life. Interestingly, Tháo regarded the material nature of the language of real life as “*social matter*”. Here it is important to bear in mind that “language first of all objectively consists of material behaviour as the language of real life, a direct expression of material activity and of the material relations among workers” (ibid.).

On the one side, the language of real life is material because it is composed of concrete production of signs. On the other side, it is a social product involved in collective cooperative activities. So Tháo wrote: “social matter, in its linguistic layer, is defined as the ensemble of signifying acts, gestures and utterances, in *the structure of reciprocity*.” The social exchange of signs is the condition of both the individual internalisation of language and the emergence of consciousness. To illustrate this point, it could be useful to invoke the following explanation provided by Tháo:

Consciousness must, therefore, be more exactly defined as the *idealized form of the motion of inner language*. And since it exists only in that language, the only “form of the motion of matter” in question here is, strictly speaking, language itself. Language first of all objectively consists of material behaviour as the language of real life, a direct expression of material activity and of the material relations among workers, and *raises itself to consciousness* in inner language where the subject addresses himself starting with the image of the others in which he recognizes himself in the identity of his own lived experience. (id., p. 29)

So Tháo regarded the language of real life as the infrastructure of consciousness. Interestingly, through inner language, “on the one hand” consciousness “*stands out from the material movement which produces it*” (id., p. 27). This material movement simultaneously concerns bodily dispositions of a certain organism and the ensemble of social relations. On the other hand, consciousness “cannot be *separated* from that material movement from which it stands out.” In fact, consciousness exists in so far as it employs linguistic signs – which arose from concrete material social relations – and constantly requires the support of outlined and sketched-out body movements.

Thảo did not dismiss that “the *material component always remains present, in one way or another, in the ideal form*” (id., p. 15). The inner language arose as sketched-out and outlined gestural communicative movements that a given individual addresses to him/herself. In support of his position, Thảo observed that

When I look at an object, I naturally don't have to point it out to myself in order to obtain the “sense certainty” of its objective reality. But the material act of indication is revealed in the motion of the glance. The human eyes have an expression that we do not find in the animal. The animal *orients* his eyes toward the object, the human gaze *indicates* the object, to himself as well as to others.

As for the gesture of the hand, one rarely finds it externalised. It nevertheless remains present in the form of an internal outline. (id., p. 15)

[...]

The movement of the glance and the gesture of the hand, outlined or completed, are associated with the exclamation addressed internally to oneself: we feel it outlined, so to speak, in the movements of the throat and tongue, and, moreover, we also happen to externalise it as “Ah!” or “That!”

[...]

And as we have already noted, the outlined movement or internal movement is just as real, as material, as the externalised movement. This can be demonstrated by monitoring the bioelectric currents at the muscular level. Moreover, when we think, we do indeed feel the action of the vocal organs and the hand. The subject is *conscious* of what he thinks, thanks to the internal perception, starting from the kinaesthesia, and visual and auditory associations of the outlined motion of his gestures and of his voice. When we say that language expresses thought or consciousness, this simply means that formulated language expresses generally explicitly and in an externalised way the meaning expressed in an outlined and abbreviated manner in internal language. (id., p. 16)

Lastly, we must note that, once again, as in PDM, Thảo seems to suggest that consciousness arises as a result of the inhibition of a given behaviour. Consciousness is the internalisation at the level of the nervous system of an inhibited intentional behaviour. More specifically, consciousness takes the shape of the inner language, i.e., the inner outlined motion of gestures and voice. But there is a crucial distinction to be made when we compare Thảo's theory of consciousness in PDM and in ILC. In the second case, as a matter of fact, consciousness arises through the language of real life as semiotic interaction with the surrounding physical and social environment. In ILC, Thảo did not neglect the role of relations of reciprocity and real interactions with objects. And the notion of the language of real life allowed him to explain the mediation from practical life and inner lived experience. In this way, inner language as the inner form of the

language of real life is not the result of the repression of the real behaviour but rather it is its inner reproduction at the level of muscular activity. In other words, there are no more functional differences between inner outlines and external behaviour.

3.1. The Relation of Reciprocity

As we have already noted in the previous paragraph, for Thảo the relation of reciprocity with other individuals is the condition for having the emergence of both, self-consciousness and consciousness of the object. In Thảo's view, the aim of providing a satisfactory explanation of consciousness needs a previous description of dynamics taking place in social relations. The fellows exchanged indications at a distance to each other during purposive cooperative activities. Then "each is thus, alternatively, or even simultaneously, the giver and the receiver of the indication, both the one who guides and is guided" (Thảo [1973] 1984: 8). The same process is involved in ancient social relations as well as in current ones. To Thảo that situation is the condition for having *the relation of reciprocity*. The fellows see reciprocally other fellows as givers and receivers of the indication and, consequently, "each sees in the other a being similar to himself, making the same gesture." In this vein, each fellow sees the other *as another self*. But before having something like *the self*, it is necessary that individuals assume the point of view of the community which they take part in.

According to Thảo, given the existence of human-specific social relations, the image of the others leaves a trace in the brain of individuals: "the enduring image of the social environment." From a cognitive perspective, that image could be regarded as other's people gaze. Each person begins to judge him/herself from the point of view of the others. Another way of saying this is that the relation of reciprocity involved the ability to see the own behaviour from the point of view of the community.

To support this hypothesis, Thảo invoked an example from Marx's *Capital* (MEW XXIII: 67, footnote 18): "The man first sees himself in the other man as in a mirror. Peter only relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, as

being of like kind.” Some remarks concerning this translation are needed. This is our English translation of Thảo’s own French translation of the Marx’s German text (cf. Thảo 1973: 20). Remarkably, the French translation of the *Éditions sociales* differed from German version as well as from Thảo’s translation. The German original version reads:

Da er weder mit einem Spiegel auf die Welt kommt noch als Fichtescher Philosoph: Ich bin ich, *bespiegelt sich der Mensch zuerst in einem andren Menschen*. Erst durch die Beziehung auf den Menschen Paul als seinesgleichen bezieht sich der Mensch Peter auf sich selbst als Mensch. Damit gilt ihm aber auch der Paul mit Haut und Haaren, in seiner paulinischen Leiblichkeit, als Erscheinungsform des Genus Mensch. (MEW XXIII: 67, footnote 18; italics ours)

The French translation invoked by Thảo, in fact, translated Marx’s German text in the following way:

Comme il ne vient point au monde avec un miroir, ni en philosophe à la Fichte dont le Moi n’a besoin de rien pour s’affirmer, *il se mire et se reconnaît d’abord seulement dans un autre homme*. Aussi cet autre, avec peau et poil, lui semble-t-il la forme phénoménale du genre homme. (Marx 1969: 67, footnote 2; italics ours)

The English translators of Thảo ([1973] 1984) pointed out that “unfortunately this very sentence of Marx was omitted in the French edition” (Daniel J. Herman and Robert L. Armstrong in Thảo [1973] 1984: 202). This is not entirely true: the French translation omitted the passage concerning Paul and Pierre but translated the passage “[...] *bespiegelt sich der Mensch zuerst in einem andren Menschen*.” One can also appreciate the choice to translate “sich *bespiegeln*” with “se mirer”. Indeed, the root “mir-” could recall to mind the word “mir-oir”. And Marx’s German text played with the correspondence between “der Spiegel” and “sich *bespiegeln*”. Otherwise, it is debatable the addition of “se reconnaît” because the verb *se reconnaître* did not appear in the German version. However, we could admit that it was somehow implicit.

Thảo’s translation highlighted the metaphor of the mirror more than the German one. Specifically, Thảo (1973: 20) translated:

L’homme [...] *se voit lui-même tout d’abord dans l’autre homme comme dans un miroir*. Ce n’est que grâce à son rapport avec l’homme Paul comme avec un être semblable à

lui-même, que l'homme Pierre entre en rapport avec lui-même comme avec un homme [italics ours].

Thảo's emphasis on the metaphor of the mirror is significant. He constantly employed the expression "comme dans un miroir" (as in a mirror) to explain the relation of reciprocity all over his ILC. By this, it would be quite wrong to omit that "as in a mirror".

The English translation of Thảo ([1973] 1984: 8) does not respect Thảo's version of Marx's passage: "a man [...] first *sees and recognizes himself in another man*. Peter only relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, in whom recognizes his likeness [italics ours]." Evidently, the English translation of Thảo ([1973] 1984) is actually a translation of the French version of the *Éditions sociales*. This choice does not permit to highlight how Thảo sometimes preferred his own translations and sometimes he opted for French translations of the *Éditions sociales*. In other words, the English translation of Thảo ([1973] 1984) does not do justice to Thảo's choice to highlight, in different moments of his reasoning, the *reciprocity* or the notion of *mirror*. For instance, he opted for the translation of the *Éditions sociales* in the following passage:

"A man", says Marx, "first sees and recognizes himself in another man" ["L'homme" dit Marx, "se mire et se reconnaît d'abord seulement dans un autre homme"]. (Thảo [1973: 27] 1984: 12)

For this reason, we have preferred to translate Thảo's own French translation rather than quoting the English translation of Thảo ([1973] 1984). In the same way, we cannot invoke the English version of Marx's *Capital* we usually employ because it, too, radically differs from Thảo's translation of the German text. In detail, the English version translated Marx's passage in the following way:

Since he [the man] comes into the world neither with a looking glass in his hand, nor as a Fichtian philosopher, to whom "I am I" is sufficient, *man first sees and recognises himself in other men*. Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind. And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his Pauline personality, becomes to Peter the type of the genus homo. (Marx 1887: 55, footnote 19; italics ours)

But coming back to the Thảo's theory of the relation of reciprocity, we may note that he supplemented Marx's insight with a further detail. Not only did our ancestors recognize themselves in the others as in a mirror in so far as they saw each other when they reciprocally exchanged indicative gestures during goal-oriented cooperative activities, they also heard each other. "The guidance movement does not consist in simply tracing a direction, it has essentially the function of a *call*" (Thảo [1973] 1984: 9). To him, guidance gestures were accompanied by vocalizations. Thus, "the workers call themselves to the work-object by means of gesture and voice, and each one sees himself in the others as in a mirror and hears himself in the others *as in an echo*" (ibid.).

The exchange of gestures and vocalizations entails the fact that relation of reciprocity precedes self-awareness. In this regard, Thảo made the following example: "when we sing in unison, our own voice seems to come as much from the others as from ourselves" (id., p. 10). Although the subject is active and intentionally addresses signs to the others, the subject perceives his/her own actions as made by the group as a whole. To Thảo collective cooperative activities are so pervasive that the subject is aware to be part of the group before being aware to be an individual.

In this way, Thảo refused the idea of self-consciousness as a private relation of the self with the self. As we have seen in the previous chapter, he criticised Husserl's theory, according to which the relationship with the other egos is nothing but the result of a solipsistic comparison of the own self with the others (this theory was described in Husserl's *Fifth Meditation*)²⁹. Instead, to Thảo, the experience of the others is the source of self-consciousness as awareness of the fact that I am similar to the other egos that I see and hear. The consciousness of the others precedes self-consciousness. And nobody can dismiss the primacy of practical life as a condition for having self-consciousness.

Before concluding, it needs to be highlighted how Thảo was aware that the image of the others that individuals internalise cannot be reduced to an abstract

²⁹ But it is necessary to remember that Husserl had insisted that the experience of the world is radically intersubjective (see Hua I: 123; IX: 431; XIV: 289, 390; XV: 5; XVII: 243; VI: 469). For this reason, he had also analysed the nature of transcendental intersubjectivity (see Hua I: 35, 182; VIII: 449; IX: 295, 474; XV: 110).

image of the others in general: “he recognizes himself in the image of the others in a form that is *identified, modified, and oppositional or antagonistic* according to whether it concerns his own group or different groups, friends or enemies” (id., p. 27). In this vein, Thảo argued for sophisticated forms that relations of reciprocity assume over time. He also illustrated that relation of reciprocity extensively depends upon the role that each person plays within a given social group (family, labour, state, etc.).

But, since we turn to phylogeny, the established collective point of view which is internalised by everybody is still unconscious at the beginning: “at the stage at which we have arrived, of course, perception consists only of sensor-motor images which are not conscious” (id., p. 8). The question facing Thảo at this juncture is how the transition from sensory-motor psychism to the original form human consciousness took place among our ancestors.

3.2. Consciousness as Self-Consciousness

The language of real life entails self-awareness. The gestures employed by the group during collective cooperative activities (the objective form) become gestures at a disposal of the subject that begins to address them to him/herself (the subjective form). Simply put, the internalisation of the language of real life is explained by Thảo as the transition of the objective form of indication to the subjective one. This transition is thus the appropriation of indicative gestures.

Thảo ([1973] 1984: 7) called “*objective form of indication*” the signalling behaviour that each one addresses to the others during collective purposive activities. It is “the signalling behaviour that makes possible a concentration of collective efforts on the same object.” To Thảo, the indication was enriched by the *subjective form* over time. While the objective form of indication concerns the exchange of gestures during collective activities, the subjective form regards the private employ of indication: “once the structure of the gesture is established, the subjects applies it to himself. In other words, *he points out the object to himself*” (ibid.). Thảo described the main features of the subjective form of indication in the following way:

The indicative gesture to oneself naturally derives from the gesture we use in pointing things out to others. [...] The indicative gesture to others, which we have defined in its original form as a guidance act at a distance, implies, in fact, at least two subjects, one guiding and the other guided, separated by a certain distance. In the case of the indicative gesture to oneself, we have only one subject, both guiding and guided, so how under these conditions can guidance be accomplished “*at a distance*”? Evidently, the movement is possible only if the subject *considers the distance*, so to speak, *in relation to himself*. Moreover, it is what we more or less feel within ourselves if we make this gesture or some other signifying gesture to ourselves. The phenomenon is quite evident in the case of the “internal dialogue” when I address myself in the second person: I obviously place myself in the position of another, *who is precisely myself*, and it is from that point of view that I address myself *to myself as another*. (id., p. 7-8)

The subjective form of indicative gesture depends upon previous relations of reciprocity. As a result, self-consciousness seems to be the result of the internalisation of social relations. The subject reproduces on oneself the semiotic exchange with the others. Then each person places him/herself in the position of the others and keeps a certain distance from him/herself.

We cannot deny that “this calling to himself which takes up the call of the others is immediately realized on the vocal level, for the exclamations which answer one another blend like a choir” (id, p. 10). In fact, “the form of reciprocity is even more marked in the exclamatory component than in the gestural one” (id., p. 9). At the animal stage, indeed, everyone can observe the relevance of the “reciprocity of cries”. Slowly, “at the prehomimid stage, the cry becomes an exclamation” (ibid.). Thus, the process of self-signalising is firstly realized on the vocal level and then is extended to the gestural one.

Finally, we must note that Thảo suggested that the collective use of signs slowly took the shape of the subjective form of indication because of needs arising during collective activities. For instance, a fellow finds him/herself isolated from the rest of the group. The habit of collective activities leads the subject to perform gestures and vocalizations even if the others are far away. Given the role of the subject in situations of this kind, the subject “starting *with the others with whom he identifies, points out the object to himself*” (id., p. 11). In this way, the subject begins to distance him/herself from the content of own lived experience and sees him/herself from the point of view of the others. In other words, self-awareness appears as a

sporadic employ of the gestures that are addressed to the self.

Assuming that the language of real life is primarily a social fact and it precedes self-awareness, at the beginning, consciousness is “simply collective” (id., p. 14). Simply put, “it does not in any way contain the form of the ‘I’ [moi].” Indeed, Thảo wrote:

At the birth of the prehomimid, the gesture of reciprocal indication in the collective work of adaptation implies a complete assimilation among subjects who indicate to one another the object of their common efforts: consciousness thus appears as “mere herd-consciousness” or “sheep-like consciousness”. Lived experience is still “anonymous”. (14-15)

Not only does the relation of reciprocity seem to be the condition for having self-consciousness, the perception of the object as the target of cooperative collective goal-oriented activities needs also to be regarded as the support for the development of self-consciousness. To Thảo, as a matter of fact, “consciousness appears identically as consciousness of the object and consciousness of self” (ibid.). To anticipate what we will illustrate in the following paragraph, in so far as our pre-human ancestors began to address indicative gestures to oneself rather than merely employing them to coordinate collective efforts, they showed the ability to transcend immediate needs and to distance themselves from their own behaviour. In other words, the subjective form of indication led our pre-human ancestors to both the abstract reasoning and the self-awareness.

3.3. Consciousness as Consciousness of the Object

To Thảo ([1973] 1984: 8), the “*objective form* of indication” was “the signalling behaviour that makes possible a concentration of collective efforts on the same object.” Then, the subjective form of indicative gestures must be regarded as “the first *intentional* relation of subject to object, as the *original consciousness* of the object” (id., p. 7). Thus, the internalisation of indicative gestures conditions the emergence of consciousness of the object as the ideal content of lived experience.

One must also remember that “the indicative gesture, as distance guidance, is a *call for work on the indicated object*” (id., p. 9). And, since it is a call, “it is naturally

completed by the normal form of a call, the vocal form.” Remarkably, Thảo insisted that “the form of reciprocity is even more marked in the exclamatory component than in the gestural one” (id., p. 9). At the animal stage, as we have already said in the previous paragraph, anyone can observe the relevance of the “reciprocity of cries”. Slowly, “at the prehomimid stage, the cry becomes an exclamation.” As is clear from this passage, exclamation could be regarded as “the original form of verbal language.” The first word ever pronounced has been something like: *this here!* But we must remark that vocalizations could become exclamations among our ancestors because they were accompanied by gestures: “when the cry accompanies the indicative gesture, it takes, thereby, the meaning of the object” (ibid.).

In so far as the work-object is the target of both, collective cooperative activities and gestural-verbal signs, it is perceived in a peculiar way. We have already illustrated that the subject consciously regards the object as an independent entity. The animals, otherwise, perceive the object only as part of their own body. To Thảo, this peculiar way of perceiving things is called “perceptive image” (id., p. 11). Not only did human ancestors perceive things as the other mammals, they were also conscious of the object as the independent thing: the consciousness of the object is “the *image of the object* posited as external” to consciousness. As such, we want to ask: how can consciousness of the object as external and independent thing arise from the perceptive image?

The tendential meaning of gestural indications already contains the description of the thing as the mind-independent entity. But this tendential meaning is still unconscious before the individuals internalise such a semiotic practice. As we have seen, thanks to the subjective form of indication individuals apply the indicative-vocal gesture to themselves; the subject “*points out the object to himself*” and “*calls himself*” (id., p. 10). As has been seen, too, “the indicative gesture to oneself naturally derives from the gesture we use in pointing things out to others.” Only when individuals address the gestural-verbal sign to themselves, they become conscious of the object as an independent thing:

in the indicative gesture to oneself, such as it has just arisen, the subject gives himself an image of the object in its not only most elementary but also most fundamental determination, that is, its objective externality, a determination where

the object appears as the “this here!” (ibid.)

Thus, the object is not perceived as work-object of urgent collective activities anymore. It is rather observed as a peculiar and singular thing, it becomes the singular object now perceived.

Interestingly, Thảo stated that consciousness as consciousness of the object is the image of the object. Then he insisted that “of course, when we speak of consciousness as an image of the object, we mean it in the active sense, as a productive act of image” (ibid.). Conscious contents are not the copy of external world merely. As a matter of fact, they require the activity of gesturing as its condition of possibility. The language of real life is the activity that produces the image of the object as the external object at the preconscious level of tendential meaning. After that, consciousness emerges as internalisation of the tendential meaning produced by the language of real life. Consciousness, in other words, reproduces in the interiority of the lived experience the productive act of signifying already performed by the language of real life. Against a mechanistic interpretation of Lenin’s theory of reflection (see below Chapter 6 for more details), Thảo seems to argue for a dialectical version of interactions between the knowing subject and the real material world.

It shall be our concern to substantiate this thesis in the next chapter. For the time being, we shall leave that point open. Now we should attempt only to map out the main lines of the debate on consciousness in the USSR in the mid-20th century as well as in the Western Countries. Of course, the scope of the present chapter compels us to limit ourselves to a cursory examination of this issue. It is a problem of great complexity, and even superficial treatment of it would have necessitated enlarging the present chapter considerably. Nonetheless, precisely in order to understand Thảo’s conception of consciousness, it is essential to add more context and mapping out the main trends of debates on the so-called mind-body problem.

4.1. The Soviet Debate on Consciousness

We have already mentioned Thảo’s record of the “great and general [...] debate

on the nature of consciousness” taking place in the USSR in the 1950s. The present paragraph exactly deals with the attempt to describe Thảo’s theory against the background of that debate. Unfortunately, we cannot translate from Russian and, consequently, we have to seek the support of Graham (1987) in order better to complete our analysis.

As a preliminary, we should simply observe that Russian psychologists had to conciliate the thesis that consciousness is nothing other than a particular motion of matter with the thesis that consciousness has an ideal character. These two assumptions largely depended upon Soviet dialectical materialist approach to the philosophy of science. Here it is important to bear in mind that an enormous attention to dialectical materialism has been a constant theme in Soviet psychology. As mentioned several times previously, dialectical materialism is a challenge for the study of consciousness. Assuming that there is nothing in the objective world other than matter in motion, it follows the risk of reductionism and physicalism. Looked at from the angle of our concern, there is the risk to reduce the description of the higher mental activity to physiological processes.

It is instructive to note that dialectical materialism, however, was carefully distinguished from the earlier materialism of the 18th century. To point the fact, the principle of the transition of quantity into quality supports the view that the laws of development of matter exist on different levels (see above Ch. 1). In short, every definite stage of the motion of matter involves a new organisation of matter which, in turn, shows new qualities and properties that distinguish it from previous ones.

It is remarkable that the so-called Soviet *struggle for consciousness* had already begun in the 1920s (cf. Graham 1987: 166). In Russia, the early 20th century was marked by rapid development of Pavlov’s method. It would be useful to specify that before Pavlov, in his *Reflexes of the Brain* (1863) Sechenov had already argued that all acts of conscious or unconscious life are reflexes. In this connection, we should like to make a special point of the fact that Pavlov’s method was based “on the assumption that psychic phenomena can be understood on the basis of evidence gathered externally to the subject” (cf. Graham 19897: 158). The focus on behaviour and third-person point of view implied a profound disagreement with the

introspective approach of many investigations of mental activity at the turn of the century, like that of Gustav Fechner (1801–1887), Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), and Edward Titchener (1867–1927). At the end of the 1920s, the defenders of psychology as a discipline which had to be independent of a purely physiological description of mental activity had still defended introspective approach. But, in the 1920s, Wladimir M. Bexterev's (1857–1927) "reflexiology" gain in popularity (see below Ch. 8 for more elaborate treatment). Bexterev's research in neurobiology focused on brain anatomy and conditional reflexes. More remarkably, his studies explored the role of conditional reflexes in higher nervous activity. Generally, according to Graham (1987: 175), we could say that the negative attitude of the reflexiology toward psychology could be largely explained by the objective need to criticise the vestiges of subjectivism in psychology.

Nevertheless, in the early 1930s, Bexterev's approach gradually lost its popularity and the place of psychology in the Soviet Union became "more secure" (cf. Graham 1987: 167). The 1930s is the decade of the first works of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896–1934), Alexander Luria (1902–1977), Nikolaevich Leont'ev (1903–1979), and Sergei Leonidovich Rubištejn (1889–1960). They were a group of psychologists who suggested a kind of nurturism. According to them "human thought is primarily influenced by the social environment" (cf. id., p. 60) rather than being merely influenced by physiology. For our present purposes, we do not need to consider the theories of those scientists in great detail. Nevertheless, before we address the debate on consciousness taking place in the USSR at the end of the 1950s, we must begin by sketching a particular landscape of relationships that have existed between the psychologists of the 1930s and those of the 1950s and 1960s.

Vygotsky's writings were in disfavour from the 1930s to the end of the 1950s. During Stalinian era, Vygotsky's theory of thinking and speech was contradicted by Stalin himself who wrote in his *Marxism and Linguistics* that bare thoughts free of language material do not exist. To Vygotsky, instead, the child who has not yet internalised speech as social fact shows a kind of pre-linguistic thought which is very similar to the embryonic thought of some species of animals (cf. Graham 1987: 171). What we should emphasise here, however, is the fact that Vygotsky

highlighted the socio-historical influences conveyed by language which surpassed the physiological mechanisms of the brain. Vygotsky gained international popularity in 1962 when his *Thought and Language* (or *Thinking and Speech*, 1934) had been published in English, although that edition was heavily abbreviated. In the USSR, the rebirth in Vygotsky's writings occurred only after Stalin's death (cf. Graham 1987: 173). Like Vygotsky before them, Luria and Leont'ev set out that the origins of higher forms of conscious behaviour were to be found in the individual's social relations with the external world (cf. id., p. 186). They tried to incorporate Marxism into psychological theory in an anti-reductionist way. Consciousness is a higher form of cognition which cannot be reduced to brain mechanism. Rather it must be reckoned to be the product of the relationship between the organism and the social environment.

In a similar way, in his *Foundations of General Psychology* (1940; cf. Graham 1987: 176), Rubiņstein refused to reduce the psychic dimension to the physical one. Remarkably he published three authoritative books on the nature of consciousness at the end of the 1950s. But, in the 1950s, there was also a strong tendency toward the liquidation of psychology entirely, replacing it with Pavlovian psychology (cf. id., p. 175). In this regard, Rubiņstein set out that there is a category of conscious phenomena that are ideal and are different from material ones. Nevertheless, those ideal phenomena must be regarded as ideal only in so far as we assume an epistemological standpoint. As a matter of fact, from the ontological standpoint, there is no difference between the psychic dimension and the physical one because both are two forms of the same reality. If we want to know what the world is made of, we have to answer: matter. But if we wonder how we can learn about the consciousness, we cannot answer that the mechanisms of the brain allow us offering a comprehensive account of human conscious activity.

In May 1962, the All-Union Conference on Philosophic Questions of Higher Nervous Activity and Psychology took place in Moscow (Graham 1987: 191). There were the supporters of Rubiņstein's approach who set out that reflexes could be understood whether as physiological mechanisms or as psychic phenomena. Some scholars, such as Fedor Fomich Kal'sin (1904–1975), argued for the reduction of psychic to physical. For others, thought was seen as an extremely complex

movement of matter, but, nonetheless, a movement of matter (N.V. Medvedev, B.M. Kedrov, and A.N. Riakin). Other authors more radically thought that psychic activity itself is material and thus consciousness must be seen as the effect of nervous processes (V.M. Arkhipov, I.G. Eroškin). Other scholars denied that reflex activity could be the same as psychic activity. On the one side, there were scientists, such as Nikolai Bernštein (1896–1966) and others, who argued that physiologists had to transcend the too reductive notion of reflex activity and looking for other physiological mechanisms which would explain phenomena which were usually the subject matter of psychology. On the other side, there were scholars such as V.V. Orlov who affirmed that psychic activity as the ideal activity of the brain is the subject matter of psychology.

One other extremely pertinent consideration needs to be added here. The already mentioned Soviet philosopher and psychologist Alexander Spirkin (1918–2004) taught philosophy and psychological disciplines in the universities of Moscow from 1946 and earned his doctorate in philosophy in 1959. In the same years of Thảo, he tackled the issue of the essence and origin of consciousness. As a matter of fact, his dissertation was devoted to the origin of consciousness. He seems to have had a certain influence on Thảo's conception of the origins of language. And for this reason, it could be useful to spend few words about his approach. For the time being, however, we do not dwell on the extent Thảo and Spirkin adopted the same set of assumptions – which the main assumptions of dialectical materialism were – although they suggested two different solutions of the question of the origins of human language (see below Chapters 7 and 8).

Unfortunately, we cannot translate from Russian and, consequently, we cannot take the following Spirkin's writings into account even if they could be very interesting for present purposes: *язык* (Language) collected in *Мышление и язык* (Thought and Language, 1958), *Происхождение сознания* (The origin of consciousness, 1960), *Сознание и самосознание* (Consciousness and Self-consciousness, 1972). For this reason, some Spirkin's translated writings (1959, 1966, 1984, 1990) are regarded here as the sources for explaining his philosophical account even if some of them have been published during the 1980s. For all we know, Spirkin (1966) seems to be the Spanish translation of his *язык* (Language,

1958) which Thảo ([1973] 1984) quoted several times.

For Spirkin (1984: 99) consciousness is “a function of the brain” and “*the highest function of the brain characteristic only of men*” (id., p. 100). As this discussion implies, Spirkin argued for “the dependence of the level of consciousness on the degree of organization of the brain” (id., p. 101). Nonetheless, “it is not these processes [occurring in the brain] that constitute the essence of consciousness.” Indeed, “there is no, and neither can there be, consciousness outside society, outside knowledge accumulated in the course of mankind’s history and outside the specifically human modes of activity worked out by mankind” (id., p. 100). According to Spirkin, consciousness is “*a generalized and purposeful reflection of reality, anticipatory mental construction of actions and foreseeing their results, and rational regulation and self-control*” (id., p. 100). In this sense, consciousness could be reckoned to be “a reflection of the external world.” And “the content of the psyche itself [...] is a reflection of reality in the form of subjective images” (id., p. 101) in so far as “the reflection of a thing in the brain is thus an active reflection connected with the processing of transformation of external impressions” (id., p. 103). Spirkin insisted that “consciousness is a subjective image of the objective world,” “a synthetic description of an object obtained in the course of object-transforming activity.” Language takes part “in mental activity as its sensuous basis” (id., p. 117). However, to Spirkin, “thought is largely determined by its links with reality, while language can only partially modify the form and style of thought” (id., p. 118). On the one side, “consciousness and language form a unity [... but they are not the same]” (id., p. 117). On the other, consciousness “reflects reality, while language designates it and expresses it in thought.” In short, to Spirkin, consciousness is a functional property that emerges from both the activity of the brain and interactions with surrounding physical and social environment.

To summarise the essence of the Soviet debate on consciousness, we can say that, after the success of Pavlovian methods, some philosophers and psychologists had to suggest a way to put in place an objective study of consciousness from the point of view of materialism, along with the criticism of subjectivism and introspection. Some of them had also to justify consciousness as an autonomous subject matter against Pavlovian reflexiology and other forms of physiological

approach to mental activities. The struggle between physiologists and psychologists took its most radical form in the fight between a sociologically oriented psychology (nurturism) and the individualistic methods of neurophysiology. Against the background of a debate concerning the potentialities of physiology, some dogmatic concerns regarding the main theses of Marxism-Leninism and the right way to understand what materialism is were at work. For this reason, we have to point the fact that some scholars had to substantiate the dialectical law of transition from quantity to quality. From what has been established, it follows that consciousness must be regarded as qualitatively different from its physical support, although consciousness emerges only from the body. In the final analysis, the main efforts of some Soviet philosophers and psychologists were to support an anti-reductionist theory of consciousness which did not dismiss a certain mental activity of the body. They had to describe the new properties which emerge at the new level of complexity of higher mental activity. Meanwhile, they cannot admit that mental activity takes place without corresponding brain activity. What emerges from all that has been said is a wide concept of “matter in motion”. Some scholars regarded the social milieu surrounding the individual being as a particular form of motion of matter. It would be the key to explaining the emergence of consciousness from a materialistic standpoint. Correspondingly, a lot of importance is given to language as social mediation between individuals. This is a quick picture of the Soviet debate on consciousness. Against the background of a such a context, Thảo suggested his own theory of consciousness. Accordingly, the brain activity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for explaining the nature of human consciousness. Instead, consciousness is the result of the internalization of the language of real life which mediates between higher mental activities and practical, social and corporeal activities.

4.2. The Western Debate on Consciousness

After having tackled the Soviet struggle for consciousness, let us now move to the contemporary Western debate on mind/body relationship. Little wonder that

both Soviet scholars and American ones shared similar concerns. The fact is not surprising because those similarities are perfectly understandable once we recall the basic features characterising the puzzles surrounding consciousness as well as the mind-body problem. For instance, we can go so far as to say that following questions resume one of the main philosophical concerns at the mid-20th century: Is it possible a scientific theory of consciousness? Is it possible an objective psychology of consciousness? What kind of characteristics does a theory of consciousness have to exhibit if our aim is to suggest a naturalist approach to the study of consciousness? Should we reduce consciousness to physiological or neurological mechanisms? What kind of organization of matter really gives rise to the plurality of phenomena that we call consciousness? Needless to say, along with more urgent topics, we should note that, first of all, most of those recent concerns did not essentially differ from age-old questions which have been asked by philosophers since the Ancient Greece (see Heinämaa, Lähteenmäki, Remes 2007).

Velmans (2009: 3-4) lists some of what he considered the hardest philosophical questions underlying the issue of consciousness: Is the universe composed of one thing (monism)? Or are there two (dualism)? Does the world have an observer-independent existence (realism)? Or does its existence depend in some way on the operations of our own minds (idealism)? Is knowledge of the world “public” and “objective”, and knowledge of our own experience “private” and “subjective”? If so, how is it possible to establish the study of consciousness as a science? What is consciousness and where is it? How can we understand the causal relationships between consciousness and matter and, in particular, causal relationships between consciousness and the brain? What is the function of consciousness? How, for example, does it relate to information processing? What forms of matter are associated with consciousness – in particular, what are the neural substrates of consciousness in the human brain? What are the appropriate ways to examine consciousness, to discover its nature? Which features can we examine with a first-person approach, which features require a third-person approach, and how does the former and the latter relate each other?

We shall now devote a few words to a brief analysis of the main philosophical trends in the study of consciousness in the English-speaking world. Of course, there

is no date of birth of the debate, but we can consider *The analysis of mind* (1921) by Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) as a key work to understanding some assumptions of the debate on consciousness in the English-speaking world in the mid-20th century. To Russell philosophy of mind should analyse and clarify psychological concepts we usually employ. By the way, he suggested a kind of neutral monism which was too close to empiriocriticism. For Russell bodies and minds are not different substances but rather *neutral stuff*, i.e. different collections of sensations which can refer to both, inner experience or brain mechanisms. This approach justified a kind of dualistic methods in the study of consciousness. In his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) shared Russell’s concerns to clarify our concepts and expressed some dissatisfaction at traditional ways of understanding consciousness. In the same period, the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976) sharply criticised Cartesian dualism and the idea of ontological separateness of the soul, the so-called *ghost in the machine*. In his *The Concept of Mind* (1949), he set out that psychological terminology refers neither to inner states or events nor to cerebral mechanisms. Rather it describes observable behavioural dispositions. More radically, the German philosopher Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970), whose theory was seriously informed by Wittgenstein’s early writings, argued that the language of psychology had to be reduced to that of physics in so far it should describe observable behaviour and cerebral states.

Some philosophers were somewhat sceptical about the ontological independence of soul/mind from the behaviour or the body. In the first half of the century, similarly, some psychologists dismissed investigations into inner states of consciousness and rejected introspection as a scientific psychological method. American psychologists such as John B. Watson and Burrhus Frederic Skinner, who had been largely influenced by the Pavlovian notion of *reflex*, merely described observable behaviour. In the 1950s, however, this trend, the so-called behaviourism was largely criticised. The fact that behaviourism did not focus on the analysis of mental activities basically contributed to eclipse behaviourism in favour of cognitivism during the 1950s.

As we have already seen, the Soviet debate on consciousness, which took place

in the same period, arose as a consequence of certain dissatisfaction about Pavlovian behaviourist trends in Soviet psychology. We can so highlight that a point of convergence between American and Soviet scholars related to the same dissatisfaction about physicalism and reductionism. But we should also note the fact that solutions suggested by Soviet scholars largely differed from those set out by American ones. Just to mention one example, Vygotskian psychological approach played a significant role in allowing the progress of sociological study of consciousness in the USSR. An approach like that was totally absent in the United States.

To move forward, we should now mention some works that determined the emergence of the cognitive trends in American study of consciousness: George A. Miller's (1920–2012) 1956 *Psychological Review* article *The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two*, Noam Chomsky's (born in 1928) 1959 *Review of Verbal Behavior*, by B.F. Skinner and his critique of behaviourism, and Ulric Neisser's (1928–2012) 1967 book *Cognitive Psychology*. According to cognitivism, the concepts of information, computation, and feedback allow us to describe thinking as an information processing. The analogy brain-hardware / mind-software was introduced to describe the functional organization of mental activities. Like computers, as a consequence, the mind should be regarded as largely independent of its particular physical support. Cognitivism also reduced the role played by experience, which was one of the key concepts of behaviourism. The supporter of that new trend suggested that a finite number of combinatorial programs in the mind could generate infinite kinds of behaviour.

At this point, it could be useful to tackle some assumptions of Putnam's conception of mental activity even if we shall limit ourselves to a general analysis of his philosophical approach to the study of mind. In his *Minds and Machines* (1960), Hilary Putnam (1926–2016) introduced the label *functionalism* to describe his approach to human cognition. Mental states could be described in functional terms on the model of the functional states of a computer. In his 1963 *Brains and Behavior*, Putnam set out that mental states do not refer to a set of behavioural disposition as Carnap, Ryle, and Russell had already argued. For Putnam mental states are inner states of the organism which show the following unilinear sequence: a given

sensitive input determines a given motor output. And the term “function” serves to define an inner state rather than its material support. At this stage, Putnam still defended a materialist standpoint even if he acknowledged the need to apply a different method to the study of mental activity. In *Robots: Machines or Artificially Created Life?* (1964), Putnam radicalized his anti-materialism and added that mental states are something essentially different from the brain states in which they are implemented. The same mental state can be implemented by different brain states (this is the so-called Argument for the Multiple-Realizability Thesis). In his *Philosophy and Our Mental Life* (1973) he actually set out that there is no explanation for our behaviour grounded on physical laws. In short, Putnam suggested that the mind is not a substance but rather an activity whose definition is based on the functions it performs. After all, Putnam’s approach seems to arise from the same concerns we have seen at work among those Soviet psychologists who tried to justify the psychic activity as a subject matter independent of physiological descriptions of brain mechanisms.

Nonetheless, at the same moment, materialism and physicalism were largely appreciated by philosophers. In 1956, The British philosopher Ullin Place (1924–2000) set out the well-known *mind-brain identity theory*: consciousness is a process of the brain. Mind and brain seem to be two different things to our experience. However, they are the same. Mental activities could be reduced to lower-level physical events. Place’s gain certain popularity in the US when the Australian philosopher Jack J.C. Smart (1920–2012) gave some speeches devoted to it. A few years later, the Australian philosopher David M. Armstrong (1926–2014) defended the *central-state theory* in his *A Materialist Theory of Mind* (1968). According to him, Ryle’s behavioural dispositions have to be understood to be physical states. The central nervous system could show the processes which explain the role we usually attribute to mental states. In the 1960s, the American philosopher David Lewis (1941–2001) set out his *causal theory of mind*: each state of mind is definable through the relationship of cause and effect with external stimuli, behavioural responses, and other mental states. Assuming that mental states interact with other causal physical chains, they must be seen as states of the central nervous system.

A different approach was that of the Austrian philosopher Herbert Feigl (1902–

1988) who suggested that mind and brain mean different things, though they refer to the same physical phenomenon. According to *On Mental Entities* (1953) of the American philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine (1908– 2000), psychologists have to study the brain without assuming the existence of mental entities. He refused every ontological dualism. These philosophers may be grouped together under the labels of *eliminativism*. Nonetheless, in the same period, some works had been published to criticise materialism, mind-brain identity theory, and the possibility of physicalist descriptions of the inner psychological world. In this connection we should mention Saul Kripke's (born in 1940) *Identity and Necessity* (1971) and Thomas Nagel's (born in 1937) *What is it like to be a bat?* (1974).

We are now able to determine the meaning of the debate on consciousness in the English-speaking world over the course of the period in question. In the 1950s, behaviourism did not seem to offer adequate theoretical support for an understanding of subjective conscious experience. Many believed that psychology and the study of consciousness cannot be reduced to physiology, neurophysiology, or the study of observable behaviour. To point the fact, it is by no means clear how to solve what Chalmers (1996) called *the hard problem* of consciousness, namely how to explain a state of consciousness in terms of its neurological basis. The objective account of natural sciences seems not be able to explain how subjectivity arises. Thus, many philosophers tried to justify the study of phenomenal consciousness, that is, of the subjective first-person experience, in other ways. This need arose from the Cartesian assumption of privileged access to our states of consciousness. This assumption can, however, lead to what U. Place regarded as *the phenomenological fallacy*: one cannot believe that the phenomenal distinction between mental states and brain processes proves the existence of some immaterial reality. Conversely, some scholars highlighted an *explanatory gap*: it is difficult to find a satisfactory explanation of how consciousness is linked to the physical world (Levine 1983). We cannot explain how consciousness may produce causal effects on both the body and behaviour.

5. Concluding Remarks

In the previous paragraphs, we have explored to what extent the philosophical debate on consciousness between the 1950s and 1960s was more or less marked by the same problems in the USSR as well in the US. Look at from the angle of our concerns, we shall take note of the fact that, in the 1950s, dissatisfaction was growing with regard to Pavlovian reflexiology and classical behaviourism. It became even more clear that conscious subjective experience cannot be explained by mere physiological approaches. One other extremely pertinent consideration needs to be added here. Psychology aims to be independent of physiology by defending the autonomy of its subject matter, i.e., consciousness. Meanwhile, both scientific findings and ideological constraints obliged some scholars not to contradict certain materialistic assumptions. Symptomatically, considerable efforts have been made in that respect. Compromises between materialism and non-reductionist approach to consciousness took several different shapes. In any case, as we have also made clear, we can go so far as to say that, for our purposes, the question can be summarised by the following conundrum. We should either dismiss reductionism and thus lose the causal role of mind (epiphenomenalism) or we should defend the causal efficacy of mind by way of reductionism and thus weaken the ontological autonomy of consciousness. We have so far only pointed out the general outlines of the debate on consciousness at the mid-1950s. But the general framework we have mapped out allows us better to understand Thảo's proposal.

Thảo tried to justify the objective study of consciousness without reducing consciousness to physical states. In this vein, he felt the same need of other contemporary psychologists and philosophers. He refused the eliminativism as well as the materialist reductionism. To him, consciousness exists and can be described in terms of language behaviour. He did not exclude that neurological and physiological factors are the preconditions for having consciousness. Note for instance the role of sketched-out movements. In this vein, Consciousness is radically embodied. For Thảo consciousness cannot be separated from corporeal movements which support language behaviour. But body movements can only

partially explain the functioning of consciousness. By contrast, the internalisation of a particular kind of behaviour, the linguistic relation of reciprocity, seems to be the better way to describe the emergence of the most elementary form of consciousness.

Before tackling the last point, we must note that Thảo wanted to remain faithful to the Brentanian and Husserlian anti-reductionist conception of consciousness and subjectivity. But, according to Thảo, phenomenology does not allow us to have privileged and pre-empirical access to our internal states. According to Thảo, the phenomenologist interprets the data of inner sense in the light of a particular image of humans, which, in turn, depends on a particular historical-cultural tradition, that of Descartes. Thảo, therefore, did not refute the existence of that set of phenomena that are grouped and described by phenomenology. He denies the scientific appropriateness of phenomenological way of grouping them and describing them. Thảo's aim was to explain the material origin of intentionality and self-consciousness. So Thảo's materialism did not deny that consciousness exists. But that does not mean that for Thảo consciousness is a non-material entity. Thảo restricted the term "consciousness" to situations where phenomenal content is present (where one is conscious of something). At the same time, although consciousness is a higher-order property of brains, the search for neural conditions does not provide a comprehensive approach to explain consciousness. To Thảo, as a matter of fact, the practical interactions with surrounding environment allows us to assume the behaviour rather than the body-machine as the starting point for explaining the emergence of consciousness. Saying that consciousness is a state of the brain is not enough. For Thảo we cannot dismiss the fact that human brain is the result of natural evolution and social history.

Thảo's conception of consciousness did not aim to describe how consciousness can determine the behaviour. Rather, its goal is to show how language behaviour determines the emergence of consciousness. In this way, consciousness seems to be a mere epiphenomenon of language behaviour. To point the fact, he did not describe how consciousness interacts with behaviour. Thảo seems to support a kind of *epiphenomenalism*, that is, mental events are caused by physical events in the body but have no effects upon any physical events. In this vein, Thảo's efforts

to isolate mental properties and to highlight the epistemological irreducibility of mental states to bodily states led him to suggest a theory that shared some assumptions with dualism. Specifically, it seems that Thảo argued for *property dualism*: consciousness is a non-physical property of physical phenomena. Remarkably, anti-materialists like Nagel and Kripke argued for assumptions of this kind. In short, we can admit that Thảo's treatment of consciousness is limited to the phenomenological description of the emergence of consciousness as well as of the subjective experience related to language behaviour, rather than being based upon the attempt to show how consciousness can determine the behaviour.

To summarise Thảo's conception of consciousness, we can mention the following remarks:

In order to expose the situation as a whole, we can say that in the experience actually spontaneously lived by consciousness; we are dealing with three plans. In the foreground, there is the real object, the external world itself, given in its sensible image as existing outside of consciousness and independently of it, which means that it existed before it and would exist just as well without it. In the second plane, there is the experience with its two moments: the lived act of the subject as an ideal signifying act, and its intended meaning, namely the sensitive image projected onto the object as a signified image so that the object is given in this image. Finally, quite at the rear, in the third plane, the inner image of the social environment appears more or less confusedly and in a blurred form, in which the subject sees himself and constantly recognizes himself, in which precisely consists the form ideally monadic of his experience, as lived *in oneself*. (Thảo 1975: 29)

Thảo claimed that intentionality is a property of language before being a property of conscious contents. In a similar way, reflective consciousness is nothing other than the effect of inner language, as we will better show in the next chapter. In any case, consciousness must be analysed in linguistic behavioural terms. This can cause problems, of course. For example, it is unclear whether Thảo distinguished perceptions and perceptive judgments. It seems that the way we intentionally refer to the outside world as well as to our internal states depends on the description that language offers us in the form of a perceptive judgment about the existence of the intended object. Thảo seems to identify these perceptive judgments with perceptions. Our perceptions depend on the same linguistic activity that allows the emergence of perceptive judgments. But one could argue that perceptions depend upon natural preconditions and biological evolution,

while perceptual judgments are primarily the result of the way language produces beliefs about our experience.

Assuming that consciousness is the effect of language, language makes some of the activities of the body accessible to consciousness. Thảo does not tell us anything about what is outside of the consciousness and if there are any unconscious mental states. Moreover, he added that conscious experience of intended real or ideal objects is always accompanied by awareness (or self-consciousness). We can say that awareness is the sum of phenomenal contents plus reflection about the subject's own perceptual experience. From this point of view, consciousness seems to have a merely epistemic role. Consciousness is a form of reflection that the mind exerts upon itself, is a function of self-monitoring. On that basis, according to Thảo, consciousness can be identified by the fact of having mental contents along with awareness. In other words, the two characteristics of consciousness are the intentionality of mental contents and reflexivity.

Consciousness is, first, an effect of the language of real life. Social practical life, interactions with the surrounding environment, biological predispositions, and language behaviour are main elements that determine the emergence of consciousness. Consciousness is nothing but the effect of language behaviour being addressed to the one's own self. For the same reason, there is no inner private experience in a strict sense. Because of social nature of language, consciousness, too, is a social product and as such every inner conscious experience is mostly social. For this reason, Thảo's theory refused any kind of individualism in studying consciousness and inner experience.

Thảo was a supporter of the traditional Marxist nurturist view which emphasized the role of social and environmental influences over consciousness. It is clear, from the very start, that Thảo's conception of consciousness can be successfully compared with the Vygotskian approach to the same topic. As we have already mentioned earlier, as a matter of fact, Vygotsky, Luria, and Leont'ev stressed on the socio-historical origins of consciousness. We are not able to judge whether or not Thảo was familiar with the Vygotskian approach to consciousness and language. Surely, Thảo squarely focused on the socio-historical influences conveyed by language which surpass the physiological mechanisms of the brain.

The sociogenesis of consciousness seems to be the solution to the puzzle of consciousness. In detail, the dialogical nature of language behaviour allows us understanding consciousness as a particular form of dialogue. Consciousness is nothing other than a form of language behaviour. In connection with this, consciousness is not deprived of its bodily support and can interact with the surrounding environment. Language behaviour is indeed a new qualitative level in the material world which cannot be ontologically separated from matter, even if it shows some specific features.

Thus, Thảo argued for the social nature of our cognition. The matter constitutes the support of consciousness is not only the matter of the brain but also the matter of social relations. Specifically, human social behaviour takes the shape of the language of real life. It is the social matter and support for having the emergence of consciousness from the activity of our brains. As a consequence, consciousness is nothing more than inner language. Conscious experience is reduced to the form of phonemic imagery or inner speech. Certainly, one could question the fact that inner speech exemplifies the whole of conscious experience. But one should previously understand how the contents of consciousness arise. For this reason, we must better explain how language can be regarded as the mediation between practical life and inner lived experience. In the next chapter, we will exactly deal with this topic.

Chapter Six

From the Language of Real Life to Inner Language

« Le langage de la vie réelle », tel qu'il se présente ici, est évidemment l'expression immédiate du mouvement de « l'activité matérielle » et de « relations matérielles des hommes ».
Ce trois moments : l'activité matérielle, relations matérielles et langage de la vie réelle, constituent le « comportement matériel » des hommes, dont la conscience ou la pensée est originairement « l'émanation directe ».
(T.D. Thảo)

1. Thảo's and Vološinov-Baxtin's Theories of Consciousness. 2. Language as Material Behaviour. - 3. Consciousness as Reflection. - 4. "Two layers of meaning". - 5. Consciousness and the Language of Real Life. - 6.1. The Fundamental Signs. - 6.2. The Tendential Image. - 6.3. The Tendential Meaning. - 6.4. The Development of Idealized Meaning. - 6.5. The Corporeal Components of the Inner Language. - 7. Thảo's Theory of the Inner Language.

1. Thảo's and Vološinov-Baxtin's Theories of Consciousness

Before turning to a detailed analysis of the emergence of inner lived experience of conscious contents through the language of real life, we should like to make a special point of the fact that Thảo was not the only philosopher who sympathised with Marxism and tackled the issue of consciousness from the point of view of language behaviour. It is not possible in a limited space to comment on the history of the issue in the Marxist tradition. We have already mentioned the Vygotskyian trend in psychology. And we will return to Vygotsky at the end of the present chapter. For the time being, our comments will focus on another scholar, who dealt with the question of consciousness and language and suggested a theory similar to Thảo's one. The following digression will perform the function of introducing the detailed analysis of Thảo's conception of inner language.

We will compare Thảo's approach to consciousness with that set out in a book published in the USSR at the end of the 1920s: *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* by Vološinov-Baxtin (first published in Russian in 1929; Engl. Transl. 1973). Looked at from the angle of our concern, we know for sure that Thảo's theory of language did not cover the large number of topics Vološinov/Baxtin dealt with. And it is true that Thảo's conception of consciousness merely reveals only a few hints of a general theory of ideology. Conversely, the main goal of *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* is to illustrate the main outlines of a theory of ideology (i.e., human socio-cultural activity in a very broad sense rather than a system of ideas). We should briefly mention, however, the characterization of ideology described by Vološinov/Baxtin (1973: 12): "Its real place in existence [of the ideological as such] is in the special material of signs created by man." Given that "without signs, there is no ideology" (id., p. 9), then a wide theory of signs is vital to understand ideology. Abstracting from the fact that Thảo's conception of consciousness should be read against the background of a glottogenetic tale, we cannot underestimate that, surprisingly, the theory of signs suggested by Vološinov/Baxtin is similar to that of Thảo in many respects.

That is really interesting. It is very unlikely that Thảo read *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*. As is well known, as a matter of fact, written in the late 1920s in the USSR, the book went back to being popular in the 1970s. Even the name of the author of the book is still discussed. Is the literary critic Mixail Baxin (1895–1975) the author of the book or should we prefer to regard his student Valentin Vološinov (1895–1936) as the author? Let scholars debate on that point (see Brandist 2002; Sériot 2010; Bronckart & Bota 2011; Tylkowski-Ageeva 2012). We will merely focus on some of the Vološinov/Baxtin's theses. We believe that it is not only necessary to read some lines of *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* to appreciate the similarities between Vološinov-Baxtin and Thảo, but that we should also take advantage of that comparison in order better to understand Thảo's conception of consciousness. We will analyse those similarities in great detail. If we consider reasonable that Thảo did not read Vološinov/Baxtin until the 1970s at least, we must reason that the shared assumptions of their theories depend upon a common theoretical framework. This is perfectly understandable once we recall

the basic feature characterizing the theses on language set out in the *German Ideology*.

We shall limit ourselves here to a general analysis of the main philosophical-linguistic positions set out in the *German Ideology*. We have already had occasion to note that for Marx language is as old as consciousness. Given the material nature of language, the mind is from the outset afflicted with the matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. To Marx language is the immediate reality of consciousness. And, as Lecerle (2006: 94) noticed, for Marx “language plays a similar role to the imagination in Kant, which, as is well known, serves as an intermediary, by means of its schemata, between intuition and understanding: language serves as an intermediary between real life and the ideas that derive from it.” Consciousness and language arise from the need of intercourse with other individuals. As a consequence, the language of real life is seen as the practical, real consciousness. In turn, consciousness is affected by the socio-practical origin of language. Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product.

Let us move on to Vološinov-Baxtin’s theory. For Vološinov/Baxtin – as for Marx’s *German Ideology* and Thảo (1973) – “consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs” (Vološinov/Baxtin 1973: 11). To Thảo, who offered a detailed analysis of psycho-motor mechanisms underlying inner language, consciousness is the result of the material motion of language. “Outside objectification, outside embodiment in some particular material (the material of gesture, inner word, outcry), consciousness is a fiction” (id., p. 87). In short, for Vološinov/Baxtin “the reality of the inner psyche is the same reality that of the sign” (id., p. 26). Accordingly, “outside the material of signs there is no psyche” (id., p. 26).

Our authors have exactly the same concern. They had to demonstrate the material nature of consciousness without reducing it to brain mechanisms. Assuming that “outside the material of signs there is no psyche, there are physiological processes, processes in the nervous system, but no subjective psyche” (id., p. 26), as a consequence, consciousness cannot be reduced to “physiological processes occurring within the organism” (ibid.). But it does not mean that consciousness is something immaterial. Consciousness is the result of

the internalisation of language. As such it “could have developed only by having at its disposal material that was pliable expressible by bodily means” (id., p. 14). To point the fact, “language is produced by the individual’s organism own means.” It does not depend upon “extracorporeal material” (ibid.).

Vološinov-Baxtin’s insight – but the same is true for Marx as well as for Thảo – is likely to lead to epiphenomenalism and then to the so-called *dualism of properties*. Since we assume that consciousness cannot be reduced to neurophysiological processes, matter and consciousness should be regarded as two different realities. It is sure that the materiality of language and its sensory-motor nature allowed our authors to admit the material nature of consciousness. But it is not clear how individual’s organism own means may produce subjective lived experience. Thảo’s theory of gestural indication exactly fulfilled that purpose. Preconscious semiotic intentionality and meanings already objectively exist before any kind of inner experience. Together with material movements of language, tendential meanings are internalised by consciousness. In other words, the referential intrinsic power of gestural indication was seen by Thảo as the key to explaining the most elementary content of consciousness, namely the consciousness of the object.

Crucially, to Marx, Vološinov-Baxtin, and Thảo, did language not only be regarded as a material entity, it must also be reckoned to be a socio-practical phenomenon. According to Vološinov/Baxtin, as a matter of fact, “signs can arise only on interindividual territory” (id., p. 12). As a result, “consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of social intercourse” (id., p. 13). As in the case of Thảo, we must previously assume the existence of “production relation” and “sociopolitical order” to explain the way “those social relations determine the full range of verbal contacts between people” (id., p. 19). To point the fact, “the sign is a creation between individuals, a creation within a social milieu” (id., 22). Indeed, “it is essential that the two individuals be organized socially, that they compose a group (a social unit); only then can the medium of signs take shape between them” (id., p. 12). Or, to put it another way, “all these forms of speech interchange operate in extremely close connection with the conditions of the social situation” (id., p. 20). Social relations need assuming as preconditions for explaining the functioning of language.

Remarkably, our authors highlighted the cognitive role played by language. As Vološinov-Baxtin reasoned: “expression is what first gives experience its form and specificity of direction” (id., p. 85). Conscious contents take the shape language gives them. Language is “*the semiotic material of inner life of consciousness* (inner speech)” (id., p. 14). We cannot underestimate what Sériot (2010) wrote about the link between Vološinov/Baxtin and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). For Humboldt, language activity is central insofar as it connects the understanding and the sensibility. As we have already noticed, language plays a similar role to the Kantian imagination, i.e. intermediary between intuition and understanding. In this regard, but only in the limit of this point, we can affirm that both Vološinov/Baxtin and Thảo participated in the same Neo-Humboldtian tradition (see Formigari 2011). A further clarification is needed. Not only did Thảo’s conception of semiotic intentionality explain the role played by language to mediate between sensibility and understanding, it also shows to what extent language really interacts with mind-independent things. In this way, this thesis avoids any kind of idealism.

All our authors shared the assumption that, given the “social life of the verbal signs” (ibid.) and the fact that “our inner world accommodating itself to the potentialities of our expression,” then “consciousness is a social-ideological fact” (id., p. 12). As the language of real life depends upon social practices, in a similar way, to Vološinov-Baxtin “*the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction*” (id., p. 21).

In connection with this, Vološinov-Baxtin added that “*the unity of the social milieu and the unity of the immediate social event of communication* are conditions absolutely essential for bringing our physical-psycho-physiological complex into relation with language, with speech” (Vološinov/Baxtin 1973: 47). It means that “*anything and everything occurring within the organism can become the material of experience, since everything can acquire semiotic significance, can become expressive*” (id., p. 29). On that basis, the internalisation of language involves the internalisation of social and linguistic relations. As a result, “the individual, as possessor of the contents of his own consciousness, as author of his own thoughts, as the personality

responsible for his thoughts and feelings – such an individual is a purely sociological phenomenon” (id., p. 34).

To sum up, consciousness arises through the internalisation of concrete verbal communication and social intercourse. As such, consciousness depends upon the forms, conditions, and type of verbal communication. To Vološinov-Baxtin, language is located between organised individuals. Like Thảo, Vološinov/Baxtin admitted that “verbal interaction is the basic reality of language” (id., p. 94). As we have already seen, that is what Thảo called relation of reciprocity. Thus “in the absence of a real addressee” – as in the case of inner speech – “addressee is presupposed in the person, so to speak, of a normal representative of the social group to which the speaker belongs” (id., p. 85). In a similar way, to Thảo, consciousness arose when the individual addresses signs to him/herself in absence of the others as if they were present. In other words, inner speech “has its stabilized social audience” (id., p. 86). It means that the flow of inner language must be seen as a dialogue-like phenomenon. The same is true for Thảo. To make this point clearer:

The word is oriented toward an addressee, toward who that addressee might be: a fellow-member or not of the same social group, of higher or lower standing (the addressee’s hierarchical status), someone connected with the speaker by close social ties (father, brother, husband, and so on) or not. There can be no such thing as an abstract addressee, a man unto himself, so to speak. With such a person, we would indeed have no language in common, literally and figuratively. (id., p. 85)

Language cannot be divorced from the social intercourse stemming from the economic basis. Forms of speech, thus, “exhibit an extraordinary sensibility to all fluctuations in the social atmosphere” (id., p. 20). As a consequence, language mediates the internalisation of social atmosphere. In turn, we can become more or less conscious of that social atmosphere. But, in the same way, we can also be influenced by those social conditions. Thus, the study of language allows us better to understand both the emergence and dynamics of ideology: “The word is the most sensitive index of social change” (id., p. 19). In the next paragraphs, we will analyse Thảo’s approach to ideology. But we can already anticipate that he accepted the same framework of Vološinov-Baxtin, even if he did not develop this

point accurately.

To recapitulate, we can list some common assumption shared by our authors (Marx, Vološinov-Baxtin, Thảo):

- a. Language is a human practice involved in social interactions;
- b. Conscious contents depend upon the internalisation of language;
- c. Language is not the translation of ideas that pre-exist in consciousness;
- d. Language is the internalisation of public dialogue;
- e. The subjectivity is the result of intersubjectivity;
- f. Social origins of language mark the forms of thinking;
- g. Consciousness cannot be reduced to physio-neurological mechanisms.

To avoid misunderstandings, the *German Ideology* might be considered as the common source of both Vološinov-Baxtin's and Thảo's theory of consciousness and language. But an assumption like that is relatively uninteresting. In the final analysis, the framework we have mapped out does not exclude that some ideas largely circulate in the Eastern Marxism. Quite the contrary, as we have already seen in the case of Spirkin, we could affirm that it existed a philosophical-linguistic tradition that more or less unconsciously followed the same lines of Vološinov/Baxtin's theory.

If one asks the reasons why Thảo's theory seems to be very close to Vološinov-Baxtin's one, one point must be kept in mind. The main point of convergence between theories related to fact that they shared the same critical target. Vološinov/Baxtin's criticism toward abstract objectivism of Saussure's linguistics may recall Thảo analysis of CLG (see above Chapter 3; cf. Vološinov/Baxtin 1973: 57). They refused to reduce language to an abstract, stable, closed system of linguistic forms which have nothing in common with social conditions of its production. That could explain some similarities between Vološinov/Baxtin and Thảo.

Interestingly the same criticism could be directed at Stalin's conception of language. In fact, we cannot neglect the fact that in the period between Vološinov-Baxtin and Thảo, Stalin suggested a theory of language that became the official

doctrine in the USSR. Briefly, we can highlight that Stalin ([1950] 1953) set out that language is not a superstructure but a means of communication serving all the people. It means that a language “escapes its social and political determinations to become a neutral object” (Lecerlce 2006: 81). It will be fascinating to affirm that Thảo’s approach to language should be reckoned to be an alternative to Stalin’s one. We should remember that, in the 1980s, Thảo devoted some writings to criticise Stalin’s philosophical insight. But there is no evidence that Thảo read Stalin’s articles on language – even if it is quite difficult that he did not know their existence. In 1950, for instance, Thảo’s friend Jean-Toussaint Desanti published three papers concerning Stalin’s articles in the French review *La Nouvelle Critique* (see Desanti 1950a, b, c). At the time, Thảo was still in Paris. But we cannot underestimate the role played by the Saussurean semiological model in French structuralist trends during the 1960s. If we want to understand Thảo’s critical target, structuralism seems to be a more palatable hypothesis (see above Chapter 3).

Before concluding, let us take note of the fact that Vološinov-Baxtin’s aim was to suggest a sociolinguistic approach to ideologies, a foundation of a Marxist conception of ideology, an essay on the application of the sociological method in linguistics. Instead, Thảo tried to demonstrate how language, and then consciousness, arises from social practices during phylogeny. It is true that both, Vološinov/Baxtin and Thảo, proposed an objective psychology based on sociological, not physiological or biological principles. And both of them introduced a general theory of social origins of signs so as to individuate the social factors in the formation of consciousness. But the Vološinov/Baxtin’s efforts was to suggest a psycho-socio-semiotics of verbal behaviour in individual interaction (cf. Sériot 2010: 66), or a philosophy of language as a philosophy of the ideological sign. By contrast, Thảo’s concern was to show how a Marxist approach to language can solve some conundrums concerning the nature and origins of consciousness. And he assumed the point of view of phylogeny to demonstrate the validity of his materialistic-dialectic method. Precisely in order to understand how consciousness depends on social practices, Thảo had to show how the first forms of the language of real life are internalised by consciousness. As a result, he would show how

fundamental signs could be seen as preconditions for having consciousness and intentionality. As we have already noted, consciousness and intentionality are the two main characteristics of inner lived experience and then they are the two greatest obstacles that defenders of materialism had to face with. How can matter intentionally refer to something else? How can conscious contents refer to the external mind-independent world? How can matter become conscious of the own activity? How can subjective lived experience arise?

2. Language as Material Behaviour

In the previous chapter, we have described Thảo's conception of the origins of consciousness as consciousness of the self and consciousness of the object. We have seen that the language of real life is the relation of reciprocity between fellows and interaction with surrounding physical environment. It involves the emergence of consciousness. On that basis, Thảo agreed with Marx who wrote that "consciousness is at first, of course, merely consciousness concerning the *immediate sensuous environment* and consciousness of the limited connection *with other persons and things outside* the individual who is growing self-conscious" (MEW III: 31; Eng. trans. from Marx & Engels 1998; italics ours). Thảo explicitly defined what he meant with the term "consciousness" since he invoked what Marx had written: "Consciousness [Das Bewußtsein] can never be anything else than conscious existence [das bewußte Sein], and the existence of men [das Sein der Menschen] is their actual life-process [wirklicher Lebensprozeß]" (MEW III: 26; trans. from Marx & Engels 1998; cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 15).

What immediately stands out when one takes Thảo's theory of language origins into account is the fact that "language is thus not simply the *expression* of thought or of consciousness" ([1973] 1984: 16). According to him, then, language "*is consciousness itself in its immediate reality*.'" As has been seen, language must be regarded, first of all, as language of real life. The language of real life, Thảo stated, is one of the three moments of the *material behaviour of humans* (cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 17). They are i) the language of real life, ii) the material activity (interactions with the physical environment), and iii) the material relations (interactions with

the social environment). But caution must be paid to the fact that Thảo argued for the previous existence of the signs of the language of real life before the formation of consciousness. It seems that, unlike Marx and Engels, to Thảo – even if he did not explicitly admit that – the language of real life is older than consciousness.

Thảo argued for “the existence of a language belonging to reality itself, prior to consciousness, from which consciousness draws its meaning” (id., p. 17). He admitted that “*the language of real life is thus prior to consciousness*” in so far as “its meaning consists in the immediate expression of the very moment of material relations and it is this objective, not *conscious*, meaning that subjects first communicate to one another in their ‘material behaviour’” (ibid.). We must now better understand what Thảo meant with a language that is prior to consciousness and how it can be the source of contents of consciousness.

3. Consciousness as Reflection

In the following paragraph, we must say a few words concerning Marxist-Leninist framework, since it is the background against which Thảo’s conception of consciousness has been set out. The theory of knowledge of Marxism-Leninism affirmed that knowledge consists of approximately faithful reflection of independent and external world in consciousness (see Hogan 1967). But we must remark that, in the context of this debate, consciousness did not merely mean the ability to distance ourselves from contents of our experience but rather it was also synonymous with thought, ideal dimension, forms of thought, the dialectic of concepts, etc.

In the Afterword to the Second German Edition of *Capital* (1873) Marx wrote: “the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought [Bei mir ist umgekehrt das Ideelle nichts anders als das im Menschenkopf umgesetzte und übersetzte Materielle]” (1887: 14; cf. MEW XXIII: 27). And Engels wrote “we again took a materialistic view of the thoughts in our heads, regarding them as images [Abbilder] of real things instead of regarding real things as images of this or that stage of the absolute concept. [...] Thereby the dialectic of concepts itself became merely the conscious reflex of the

dialectical motion of the real world” (Engels 1946: Part IV; cf. MEW XXI: 293). What they would explain is the fact that i) objective world precedes and influences our knowledge, ii) contrary to idealism, objective world is not the result of operations of our thought, iii) our social consciousness reflects, or correspond to, social being – in other words, our consciousness is rooted in a historical and social context. Consciousness is not merely the mirror-reflection of objective being but is rather the inner reflection of real and practical interactions with surrounding social and physical environment.

As we have already seen in Chapter 4, Lenin’s theory of knowledge extensively developed the idea that mind reflects the external world by way of sensations. Lenin’s objective sensationalism stated that sensation reveals the objective truth to humans. Attention must be paid to correct interpretation of the theory of reflection. As Lenin (1972: 300) noticed that “it is beyond doubt that an image cannot wholly resemble the model.” The image of the mind-independent thing must be actually regarded as the subjective image of the objective world. But we should add that, a starting point of knowledge, a relation of causality between things and sensations necessarily exists and implies a certain correspondence between the two terms.

It could be useful now to return to Spirkin’s theory once again (see above Chapter 5). To Spirkin (1984: 100), consciousness is “a reflection of the external world.” But consciousness is not the copy of the external world merely. It is rather “*a generalized and purposeful reflection of reality, anticipatory mental construction of actions and foreseeing their results, and rational regulation and self-control.*” Thus, consciousness offers a goal-oriented reproduction of the mind-independent object. For this reason, “the content of the psyche itself [...] is a reflection of reality in the form of subjective images” (id., p. 101) in so far as “the reflection of a thing in the brain is thus an active reflection connected with the processing of transformation of external impressions” (id., p. 103)³⁰.

³⁰ In this way, Spirkin subscribed Pavlovian theory of reflection: in the interaction between organisms or things it takes place reciprocal restructuring of the inner state of the interacting system which involved an informational reproduction of the properties of the object (which leaves a memory of itself in the other and must be regarded as abstraction of vital information about the environment) (see Spirkin 1984: 110).

Spirkin insisted that “consciousness is a subjective image of the objective world.” It means that consciousness belongs to someone and it does not achieve a complete adequacy to mind-independent things. Interestingly, with “subjective image” Spirkin meant “a synthetic description of an object obtained in the course of object-transforming activity.” Similarly, to Thảo, Spirkin suggested that “consciousness could only emerge as a function of a highly organized brain which evolved through labour and speech” (id., p. 112). On that basis, consciousness has a “pre-history” as well as a “social history” (id., p. 110). It is the product of natural evolution and “the sum total of the practical and cognitive activity of countless generations throughout the centuries.”

Thảo described more than Spirkin the way mind reflects objective reality by way of language. According to Spirkin, indeed, language is nothing but the result of psychological mechanism of conditioned reflex. In this respect, Spirkin wrote: “sounds pronounced in a given situation and accompanied by gestures were associated in the brain with the appropriate objects and actions, and then with the ideal phenomena of consciousness” (id., p. 115). Against that, Thảo suggested that the language of real life is not the association of sounds and representations exactly because fundamental signs are already meaningful. And, at the same time, they are the condition for having the awareness of mind-independent objects as external and independent. No concepts or forms of thought exist before the language of real life.

To Spirkin language “serves as a means of communication and as an instrument of thought” (ibid.), while for Thảo the language of real life is not a mere instrument of thought but the essential condition for having thought. To Thảo, the language of real life is the most elementary form of thought. More precisely, how will see in next paragraphs, consciousness is the inner reflection of the language of real life as practical interactions with mind-independent things and exchange among social groups. The specific reason for this is Thảo’s need to admit that conscious thinking is nothing other than inner language: “the *ideality* of consciousness is not some kind of ideality ‘in itself’, but is constituted in the actual motion of *idealization* which is immediately implied in inner language” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 25). Consequently, consciousness could be reckoned to be the “ideal image of the

external world” (id., p. 26). It is the internalization and idealisation of the language of real life which entails the most fundamental sensuous relation between thinking and reality.

4. “Two layers of meaning”

Did not only Thảo admit that the language of real life is embedded in social relations, he also suggested that the meaning of the language of real life “consists in the immediate expression of the very movement of material relations” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 17). Indeed, the language of real life is a social tool to solve material problems. The language of real life is “*the direct efflux of their [of humans] material behaviour*” (ibid.; Thảo invoked MEW III: 26: “Das Vorstellen, Denken, der geistige Verkehr der Menschen erscheinen hier noch als direkter Ausfluss ihres materiellen Verhaltens.”). Interestingly, the language of real life could record changes that have arisen in social working relations before consciousness being aware of those changes. Consciousness is indeed the internalisation of significations which arise in the language of real life. In other words, “in the dialectical flow of history, however, new meanings are always constituted which are at first unknown to consciousness in the language of real life, and only become the object of cognizance after a period of time” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 17).

Thus, Thảo distinguished between “two layers of meaning” (*deux couches de significations*): i) there are conscious meanings and ii) not yet conscious meanings. The first ones are the meanings of which consciousness is already aware while the second ones are the new meanings that the language of real life has already produced and recorded even if they have not yet become the conscious target of reflection. The language of real life always gets ahead of inner language and consciousness. Each person already employs new meanings but “he says it involuntarily, for this meaning is imposed objectively by the force of circumstances outside consciousness, in *the language of real life*” (id., p. 19). After that, consciousness may become aware of new meanings – which emerged in the language of real life as a response to social and physical problems.

As a consequence, Thảo called *tendential meaning* the non-conscious meaning as

it is embedded in the language of real life and *idealized meaning* the conscious meaning. To him, these two kinds of meaning exist in every speech act nowadays too. And one turns into the other one: the non-conscious meaning of the language of real life “is directly produced by the material motion of the signs themselves, in so far as it is necessarily shaped by the motion of things” (id., p. 24) and the “whole of the already acquired content of consciousness [...] has itself been established historically on previous forms of the language of real life.” That is to say, the historical development of language as a social tool must be regarded as the source of transition from non-conscious meanings of the language of real life to conscious meanings.

Thảo made the following example: in Franklin’s analysis of labour – which had been analysed by Marx in his *Capital* – there is a contradiction between an abstract notion of labour and a concrete notion of labour. It is so because that opposition exists in reality and “this real opposition has been reflected, unknown to the author, in the *tendential meaning* of his discourse which, while presented as a perfectly conscious theoretical exposition nevertheless includes the non-conscious moment of the *language of real life*” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 24-25). Specifically, Marx wrote:

The celebrated Franklin, one of the first economists, after Wm. Petty, who saw through the nature of value, says: “Trade in general being nothing else but the exchange of labour for labour, the value of all things is...most justly measured by labour.” (The works of B. Franklin, & c., edited by Sparks, Boston, 1836, Vol. II., p. 267.) Franklin is unconscious that by estimating the value of everything in labour, he makes abstraction from any difference in the sorts of labour exchanged, and thus reduces them all to equal human labour. But although ignorant of this, yet he says it. He speaks first of “the one labour”, then of “the other labour”, and finally of “labour”, without further qualification, as the substance of the value of everything. (MEW I: 65 [(17a) Note zur 2. Ausgabe])

Some details must be now clarified. In Chapter 7, we will illustrate Thảo’s conception of language as a social and practical tool which conveys some fundamental significations from the point of view of phylogeny. In the same chapter, it will be of interest to spend some words concerning an example of the assimilation of the social experience by the subject through the language of real life. In this regard, we will focus on how Thảo analysed the dialectical development

of both, personal pronouns and names of family members, in the third part of his ILC (cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 145-198). Nevertheless, for the sake of completeness and clarity, we will state those points beforehand in the next paragraph. After that, our comments here will focus on the way how Thảo described the way tendential meaning turns into idealized one in the case of indicative gesture.

5. Consciousness and the Language of Real Life

Some questions emerge from all that has been said. How far has labour contributed to the formation of language? Does language convey the mark of its social origins? How do social origins of language affect consciousness? How far is consciousness affected by language and its social origins? No better answer can be given than the following. To Thảo labour is the most decisive factor in the evolution of language. Practical needs are the pre-conditions the emergence of certain forms of language. In turn, those forms involve the development of some cognitive skills.

For instance, the communication systems of apes and anthropoids, such as *cries* and *simple indications* exactly correspond to the emotive *natural instrument* as objects which satisfy immediate needs. To put it another way, the form of life of apes and anthropoids is largely based on immediate need situations as well as their communication systems are. By contrast, the language of prehomínids suggests the ability to refer to absent objects by way of a set of indicative gestures and vocalizations. In this regard, the evolution of the hand had considerably changed the living conditions of our ancestors. The first Australanthropus lived in groups and worked in coordination to survive and adapt themselves to new environmental conditions. The Australanthropus *prepared and conserved instruments* and got means of subsistence from *collective hunting* (see Chapters 7 and 8 for more details). In a similar way, the language of the Australanthropus was a little but stable set of signs shared by the community and performed during collective activities. For Thảo, this set of signs was composed of straight-line gestures and circular-arc motions of the arm. “The circular-arc motion [...] first appeared in phylogenesis” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 5), which is proven by the fact that children perform this sign “in some

emotional situations” before employing straight-line gestures. For our purposes, we have to stress on the fact that circular-arc motion of the arm is an act of *guidance at distance*. It entails the awareness of the externality of the thing. But most importantly it arose during collective hunting and thus must be regarded as a solution for practical needs.

Evolution of language skills was interwoven with the development of practical activities. In turn, language and practical activities outperformed the cognitive skills of our ancestor. In connection with this, Tháo admitted that, though indicative gestures could be seen the necessary foundation for conceptual knowledge, they should not be considered as the first form of *effective knowledge*. Pointing simply shows things in themselves as stable matter. But, according to Tháo, “matter only exists in motion” (id., p. 35). Thus “the indicative sign must be developed by *following the motion of the object*.” For this reason, Tháo described the transition of indicative signs from the simple indication to the straight-line gesture during the phylogeny of genus homo (id., p. 48-79)³¹. Guidance gestures were first referred to objects that were perceptible in the environment. Since the systematic use of guidance gestures had been established, those signs began to indicate absent objects of biological needs and entailed the cognitive representation of them. Artefacts of Olduwan industry (2.6–1.7 ka; see Chapter 7 for more elaborate treatment) suggest that our ancestor used to address each other *straight-line gestures* which served to indicate the current work-object as well as everything interesting that could function as a possible work object.

As we have already had occasion to say in the previous chapter, the use of gestures was the condition for having complex interpersonal relations (“relation of reciprocity”). The social origin of the communication system of our ancestor involved the emergence of a shared point of view that Tháo called *collective cognizance*. This one preceded individual’s self-consciousness. In this regard, Tháo

³¹ Interestingly, Tháo described the transition from the pointing to the straight-line gestures in a way very similar to Hegel’s description of the transition from *sense certainly* and *perception*: “The Now is pointed to; *this* Now. ‘Now’; it has already ceased to be in the act of pointing to it. The Now that *is*, is another Now than the one pointed to, and we see that the Now is just this: to be no more just when it is. [...] The *Here pointed out*, to which I hold fast, is similarly a *this* Here which, in fact, is *not* this Here, but a Before and Behind, a Right and Left.” (Hegel [1807] 1977: 63-64).

observed that

The cognizance [prise de conscience: grasp of consciousness] of the indicative gesture began sporadically in the lagging prehomimid hunter who repeated to himself the call of the others and recognized himself in them. Cognizance now develops into a collective cognizance where all the individuals of the group recognize each other in the others, since they at the same time address each to himself the sign which they return to one another, so that all merge in one and the same gesture where each sees himself in the others as in himself. The sign, consequently, which thus appears to each individual as experienced in himself in so far as he is part of the action of the group and is identified with it, is somehow sustained by the social relation itself. In other words, the sign has been internalized by the group, in such a way that it becomes for the group available experience that subsequently can be used at will; in other words, it can be applied not only to particularly interesting objects, but also to any more or less interesting object in general. (id., p. 12-13)

To summarise what has been just said, Thảo wrote that

Language first of all objectively consists of material behaviour as the language of real life, a direct expression of material activity and of the material relations among workers, and raises itself to consciousness in inner language where the subject addresses himself starting with the image of the others in which he recognizes himself in the identity of his own lived experience. (id., p. 29)

In short, language arises as a social and practical tool which conveys some fundamental signification during collective activities. On that basis, it precedes and allows the emergence of lived meaning. Inner language must then be seen as the mediation between social language behaviour and inner life of consciousness. We can thus understand why Thảo criticised Husserl's as well as Saussure's idealism, he exactly refused the idea of the primacy of psychic dimension in the evolution and development of language. To him, instead, inner language and psychic linguistic dimension are the secondary product of the material life of signs. And the material life of signs is a peculiar form of problem-solving involved in the practical life of human societies.

Along with internalisation of language behaviour, inner language also conveys the contradictions of a given society in the form of ideology. In these cases, consciousness suffers from social established habits and gives them the shape of ideological representations of the world. Along with the development of cognitive skills among our ancestors, the language of real life could also convey a distort

perspective on social reality. Such a distorted perspective consequently involves a distorted perception of the self. This could be the premise of a theory of the origin of ideology. Unfortunately, Thảo did not develop this point and did not describe how ideology arises in greater detail (Thảo 1975 is an exception). Nonetheless, he made an example of the assimilation of the social experience by the individual through the language of real life. That is the case of the period immediately preceding the emergence of personal pronouns.

Before the end of the Lower Palaeolithic, the bipedal posture increased the mortality of women (the so-called “Tragedy of Women”). The anatomical modification of the pelvis entailed complications during childbirth. It follows a generational asymmetry between men and women in archaic societies. The few women at disposal were a prerogative of the oldest men. Ancient societies were so divided into three social groups: elderly men, women and young men. In so far as Thảo believed that language was part of the social environment, he suggested that the tragedy of the women affected the vocabulary, too. Words like *father*, *mother* and *son* emerged in this period. Remarkably, those words did not designate the natural parents, but all the men of the group (*father*), all the women of the group (*mother*), and all young people of the group (*son*).

Then, Thảo described the social order of the first period of the Mousterian (600–40 ka; ka: kilo annum, thousand calendar years ago) and called it “proto-gerontocracy”. The ban to have sex with women before the age of thirty became a permanent institution. At the End of the Middle Palaeolithic and at the beginning of the Upper Pleistocene (126–11.7 ka), Thảo explained, *H. Neanderthalensis* disciplined the respect of the ban by means of sanctions such as eviration and introcision. The younger member of the group and all the wives had been subject to the control of the elders. And if they did not respect the sexual primacy of the elders, they incurred sanctions.

At the beginning of the Middle Palaeolithic (300–45 ka), the gradual emergence of the household industry was the reason for an economic development which led to the increase of human longevity. In the same period, speech began to be a means to express individuals’ own individuality. We can thus suggest that the use of pronouns emerged for the first time. It was the consequence of the household

industry in which the roles were strictly defined. Tháo made the example of first personal graves which were built in that period and which showed the awareness of personal identity. During the Mousterian, proto-gerontocracy and biological tragedy of women involved some linguistic consequences. Specifically, those social phenomena changed the meaning of the words *father*, *mother*, and *son*. In the previous stage, *mother* designated all women of the community exactly because the interdiction to have sex with women before the age of thirty concerned all men of the community. In contrast with that, later, the interdiction began to concern the younger alone. *Mother* did no more mean every woman, but every desirable woman because they were the wives of the elders and were still young.

At the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic (40–10 ka), *H. faber sapiens* converted the social meaning of the circumcision: initially it was a sanction, then, it became the rite of passage marking entrance or acceptance into the group and formal admission to adulthood in a community. Instead, the Mesolithic (11–8 ka) was typified by the end of the biological tragedy of women and the stabilization of commercial exchanges. Both of these circumstances allowed the success of endogamy and the consequent interdiction of incest. The division of tasks among family members involved a more strictly subdivision of assignments and roles. This point contributed to Tháo's ongoing argument in favour of the introduction of personal pronouns. To him, pronouns – especially I and You – prevent the misrepresented identification with the *father* or the *mother* and inhibit the wish to own the parent of opposite sex. In effect, pronouns establish interpersonal relation peculiar of human societies. They must also be reckoned to be the original form of personal identity.

The language of real life mediates the internalisation of social order. In fact, the language of real life is the immediate expression of the socio-economic order of a given society and, as such, it records social practice and accordingly gives shape to the forms of consciousness. Let us now move on to Tháo's detailed description of the internalisation of social practice by way of the language of real life.

6.1. The Fundamental Signs

Thảo insisted that language arises outside of consciousness. In this way, he solved the following traditional conundrum: if language presupposes consciousness as its source and consciousness needs language to develop, the question of language origins is impossible to solve because “consciousness presupposes language and language, consciousness” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 19). Against that, Thảo suggested that the meaning of fundamental signs does not depend upon a voluntary act of consciousness.

As we have seen, Thảo stated that arbitrary signs cannot be considered as a constitutive moment of consciousness because they presuppose consciousness as the source of their meaning. By contrast, the investigation into the origins of language and consciousness must assume a moment in which neither the fully-fledged language nor the fully-developed human cognition already emerged. For this reason, Thảo introduced the notion of “fundamental signs”.

Remarkably Thảo confirmed that fundamental signs are produced by the movement of the body itself and do not depend upon syntagmatic or paradigmatic relations to other signs. In the CLG, Saussure ([1916] 2011: 123) had instead written that “relations and differences between linguistic terms fall into two distinct groups, each of which generates a certain class of values.” To him, in fact, “in discourse, on the one hand, words acquire relations based on the linear nature of language because they are chained together.” This is the syntagmatic relation. But “outside discourse” Saussure continued “words [...] that have something in common are associated in the memory, resulting in groups marked by diverse relations.” These are the associative relations or, in Jakobson’s terms, paradigmatic relations.

Thus, to Saussure, “in the syntagm a term acquires its value only because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes or follows it, or to both” while “the associative relation unites terms *in absentia* in a potential mnemonic series” (ibid.). In other words, the signified of a term depends upon the relation of the sign with the other signs of a discourse or with the mnemonic series of signs. Instead, to Thảo ([1973] 1984: 51), for instance, indicative gesture “can take its meaning only

directly from the gesture: for, since it is always used by itself, it does not imply any relation to the other words either on the syntagmatic plane, or on the paradigmatic plane.” The indicative gesture can consequently be seen as the starting point of the development of consciousness. In effect, “the meaning of the indicative gesture” is “absolutely original” and “appeared objectively in the language of real life before all consciousness in general.” Indeed, indicative gestures “produces its own meaning entirely by itself” (id., p. 19).

Now it could be useful to highlight that Thảo argued that meaning of indicative gestures is just an example of general and more sophisticated dynamics involved in the language of real life. Indeed, the meaning of the indicative gesture was called by Thảo *tendential meaning* and “can serve to characterize generally the language of real life in so far as it directly reflects the motion of material activity and the material relations of men independently of their consciousness” (id., p. 24). Specifically, the tendential meaning of fundamental signs is not wholly arbitrary: “The linguistic sign, naturally, can only be considered as a constitutive moment of consciousness if it somehow implies its own meaning” (id., p. 23). In the next paragraphs, we will analyse how such a tendential meaning emerges and how it becomes a constitutive moment of consciousness.

6.2. The Tendential Image

One of the most elementary forms of indicative gesture is the pointing. To Thảo the development of pointing obviously depends upon natural evolution. The ape can actually perceive the object as external and can also employ indicative gestures. Among apes and humans, the image evoked by the gesture is “a *tendential extension* of the hand gesture” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 19). Thảo called the image evoked by indicative gestures “tendential image [*image tendancielle*] since it consists of the tendential extension of the actual motion” (id., p. 20). Among apes, the perceived image of the object “can be defined only in terms of the potential action of his own body” (id., p. 5). It is not a mental image but rather a perceptive image that emerged from the behaviour as the goal which the behaviour is directed to. This image is thus evoked by the behaviour as the anticipated action that it has not

accomplished yet. Gestural indications among apes are indeed the result of the extension of practical attitudes towards the target of biological needs.

Interestingly, Thảo focused on the fact that the tendential image “does not contain the least particle of matter” (id., p. 20). It is the “tendential extension of the actual motion.” Simply put, the material motion of the hand produces a surplus that cannot be regarded as material in the same way as the motion of the hand. In detail, the motion produces that surplus in so far as the motion of the hand could involve a sensory-motor reaction in the performer as well as in the observer. Indeed, Thảo affirmed that “the notion of a tendential image can serve to characterize the sensory-motor psychism in general.” With *sensory-motor psychism*, Thảo probably thought of Piaget’s conception of child development.

To Piaget (1936) the sensory-motor schema is the more or less quick organization of sensory data to produce some movements. In the case of Thảo’s theory of tendential meaning, one may suggest that the motion of the hand is a perceptive datum that involves in the mind of both, the performer and the observer, a motor schema. Now, it is not required that the motor schema must become an effective movement. What it is important to highlight is, however, the fact that the viewing of the gesture involves a cognitive reaction that consists in an imaginary accomplishment of the gesture. This imaginative reaction entails the tendential image (or motor schema) of the tendential direction of the gesture.

In so far as the motor schema depends upon the performance and perception of the gesture, the tendential image is indissociable from the gesture. Another way of saying this is that the tendential image is nothing but the *motor* of the structure sensory-*motor* schema and the gesture the *sensory* of that structure. And since the tendential image is nothing other than a motor schema it has a cognitive reality rather than material in a strict sense.

As this discussion implies, the tendential image seems to be reduced to the ideomotor action. In his handbook, the French philosopher Cuvillier (1937: 129) wrote: “the vision of the movement alone entails the implementation of that movement.” It is the physiological process whereby the representation or image of an action brings an automatic unconscious reflexive muscular reaction. This one could be of minuscule degree, outlined, sketched-out, etc. The term had been introduced by

the English physiologist William B. Carpenter (1813–1895) in 1852. This theory was successfully in the scientific literature until the 1950s (for instance see the psychological handbook of Cuvillier 1937: 129-130, where the author discussed that theory as it had been set out by Théodule Ribot, Michel E. Chevreul, and Charles Feré).

6.3. The Tendential Meaning

We should now take Thảo's analysis of the difference between human and animal perception of the tendential image into account. Certainly, the essential role played by the tendential image is so pronounced that Thảo ([1973] 1984: 20) affirmed that it “characterize the sensory-motor psychism in general.” As we have seen in Chapter 4, Thảo argued that “when an animal sees an object, he sketches or outlines in his body an ensemble of movements which orient his behaviour toward this object according to the tendencies already established by hereditary or acquired associations” (ibid.). With this statement, he suggested that the ability to project the corporeal movement upon things is shared by humans and animals. In effect, “when the finger is pointed in order to indicate an object to an ape, his look follows the extension of the experimenter's hand gesture to the indicated object” (id., p. 19).

Nonetheless, the tendential image produced by indicative gesture among humans could convey something like a meaning in a strict sense. So, there is not anything like tendential meaning among animals. The tendential meaning, in fact, cannot be reduced to the image of potential actions but it must rather be regarded as the meaning of the object as mind-independent reality. In this vein, indicative gestures also represent the most elementary forms of human language in so far as they mark the transition from animal to human communication.

Indeed, “the tendential image of the sensory-motor psychism at the animal level does not, generally, have any meaning value, for the outlined movement which projects it, does not function as a sign.” In effect, even if some primates show gestural indication somehow (for instance the pointing), this gestural activity “denotes feeling and action, and not ‘meaning’ strictly speaking” (ibid.). So what is

the difference between humans and other primates?

Other primates display signals as epiphenomena of practical attitudes towards the external object, while humans employ indicative gestures as signs, i.e., as means to communicate the meaning of the object to someone else. And the meaning of the object is nothing but the relation of exteriority to mind-independent things. The object is not indicated and perceived as the external target of potential actions, but it is rather indicated as the mind-independent thing:

[...] the image of movement toward the object, projected by the gesture of the subject upon the other, thereby defines the *distance to be covered* or in other words the *relation of externality* between the other subject and the object. And as the gesture is reciprocal, the image returns to the first subject himself. This time, we are dealing with the meaning of *object*, even with its fundamental meaning, its externality to the subject. (id., p. 20-21)

According to Thảo, the tendential image could become meaningful only if it is performed against the background of social relations of reciprocity. In this way, the tendential image produced by the gesture becomes a tendential meaning which means the relation of exteriority between the other ego and the object. Simply put, human language is simultaneously directed toward the reference as well as toward the others. The relation between the knowing subject and the thing cannot be reduced to the animal-like relation between two terms: the subject and the object. It is necessary to add the role of the others so that the real relation to the real external world is embedded in social relations. Pointing, in other words, indicates the thing as the external target of common attention. As such, the thing becomes the object of several different perspectives at once, that is, the shared ground of human discourses (cf. Bimbenet 2011: 308-310; cf. also recent studies concerning the development of language in the child: Schaffer 1984: 79; Camaioni 1993: 84; Tomasello 1995: 106; Eilan et al. 2005: 5; Morgenstern et al. 2008).

We should also remark that the gesture would be meaningless if the object was absent. The tendential meaning is projected by the gesture on the object within a given visual field. The indicative gesture is then eminently context-related in so far as it depends upon perception. But we cannot dismiss that the gesture, at the same

time, intervenes in the perceptual field by adding some symbolic elements that radically change the awareness and gnosiological relation to the sensory data. The problem facing Thảo at this juncture is how tendential meaning could be detached from the context they are produced.

6.4. The Development of Idealized Meaning

Thảo's description of the transition from tendential meaning to idealized meaning in the case of indicative gesture is one of the more suggestive topics of the RLC. Nonetheless, it is not without difficulties.

We should previously point out that Thảo's description of the development of idealized meaning is divided into three parts. First, he showed how the use of indicative gesture conditions the transition from sporadic gesturing to the systematic use of gestures. Second, Thảo explained how gestural indication becomes a means at everyone's disposal. Third, he analysed how gesturing becomes increasingly detached from social practice and is internalised by individuals. At the end of this multidimensional process, the tendential meaning is internalised and becomes idealized meaning. So Thảo describes how the use of signs is transformed in its performance: from the social use to the individual use, and from the external behaviour into the inner outline.

In short, Thảo regarded the emergence of idealized meaning as a slow process of desocialization, dematerialization, and decontextualization. Nonetheless, here it is important to bear in mind that the idealized meaning is nothing but the internalisation of pre-conscious significations of the language of real life. On that basis, its origin still remains social, material and context-related.

Lastly, we have to remember what has been said in Chapter 4. Thảo explained material origins of Husserlian noetic-noematic relation in the following way: the internalisation of tendential meaning and semiotic intentional relation to mind-independent thing becomes the noetic act in so far as the real thing becomes the intentional noema.

For a start, the use of gestural indication against the background of social relations allows the perception of the external object in its objective externality. As

we have seen above, “particular situations arise in which the movement of the sign sent by an individual subject *is immediately identified with that of the others*” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 28). In other words, the subject “addresses the sign to himself from the others with whom he has just identified himself” (ibid.). Thus, the subject “does indeed have the proprioceptive perception of the outlined movement of his hand stretching toward the object” (id., p. 22) and then “[tendential] meaning will become ideal by detaching itself from the material reality of the signifying act” (id., p. 21). As such, “the subject’s act of signifying the real, the material, takes the form of an *ideal indication or intentional sighting in the informality of lived experience*” (id., p. 22). As is clear from this passage, the origin of Husserlian intentional noetic-noematic relation as well as the consciousness of the object in its externality has been explained thanks to the theory of material and social dynamics conveyed by the language of real life.

And, thus, Thảo stated:

It is only through the transition to consciousness, where [tendential] meaning will become *ideal* by detaching itself from the material reality of the signifying act, that the relation of externality will be disengaged as such. The object will then be perceived not only as external but also in its *objective* externality, as existing independently of the subject. (id. p. 21)

The pointing must be regarded “as indication to oneself and as the predominant form of reciprocal indications” (id., p. 21). Thảo called “*objective form of indication*” (id., p. 7) the signalling behaviour that each one addresses to the others during purposive collective cooperative activities. By contrast, the subjective form of indication is nothing other than the situation in which the subject addresses the gesture to him/herself. In this case, the subject is the actor and the receiver of the gesture at once. On that basis, the subject “*considers the distance, so to speak, in relation to himself*” (ibid).

The inner language develops sophisticated cognitive skills in so far as the signifying act is increasingly independent of immediate practical need. In this regard, Thảo stated that

It is only through the transition to consciousness, [...] And it is precisely in this way

that the content of this meaning, that is, the movement toward the object, where the distance to be overcome is defined as the *relation of externality* between the subject and the object, is ‘ideally presented’ *in itself* independently of the actual motion of the subject’s hand which projected the image of this relation. (id., p. 21-23)

Since the relation of externality is ideally presented, the meaning of the indicative gesture ceases to be a sensory-motor content (tendential image) and becomes a proprioceptive content (mental, psychic). Specifically, “the subject’s act of signifying the real, the material, takes the form of an *ideal indication* or *intentional sighting* [visée intentionnelle] in the *informality of lived experience* [intérieurité du vécu]” (id., p. 22). In this vein, the intentionality becomes a psychic act of indication in the “informality” of lived experience.

Even if traces of bodily-movements are at work in the inner language (see the next paragraph for more details), Thảo insisted that the subject “does indeed have the proprioceptive perception of the outlined movement of his hand stretching toward the object, but this perception is immediately absorbed in this immanent environment.” The *immanent environment* Thảo talked about is the inner experience of outlined gestural indication. In the consciousness of the subject, the inner language involves a sort of inner exchange of signs which is nothing but the most elementary form of inner dialogue. It is the “*internal recognition* which defines the form of *lived experience*” (id., p. 21).

The indicative gesture is no more perceived as meaningful *in-itself* but rather as the result of the will of the subject who want to communicate something. The signified slowly becomes independent of the signifier because the meaning is now at a disposal of the subject. So Thảo wrote that “the *ideality of the meaning* consists in its appearance of being simply carried by the experienced movement of itself, in other words, [...] ‘independently’ of the material gesture which, henceforth, seems to figure only as ‘*disappearing moment*’ ” (id., p. 22). With “disappearing moment” Thảo meant the gestural-verbal support of signification that is only outlined or sketched-out in the inner language. In the next paragraph, consequently, we should take Thảo’s description of bodily supports of inner language into account in great detail.

6.5. The Corporeal Components of the Inner Language

Before dealing with Thảo's description of bodily supports of inner language, it could be useful to remember that he took that issue into account in order to limit the pure psychic nature of the idealized meaning. This point must be regarded against the background of Thảo's criticism of the Saussurean idea of psychic nature of signs (see above Chapter 3).

We must previously note that, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, it seems that idealized meaning is partially independent of the movements which produce uttered speech. As a consequence, "every meaning, however, once it has become conscious can, in principle, be tied to any verbal sign whatsoever" (Thảo [1973] 1984: 24). Thus, the idealized meaning could be combined with other signs. Thảo made the example of the French word *arbre* whose signified could be combined with the German signifier *Baum*, the English *tree*, the Latin *arbor*, etc. (the example is from Saussure [1916] 2011: 65-6632). "The relation of the signifying [*le signifiant*, the signifier] to the signified appears to be a matter of purely arbitrary convention" (Thảo [1973] 1984: 24).

To Thảo, the arbitrary conventions imply the occasional bond between signifier and signified. This could be the condition for having perfect word-to-word translations, of course. But it means also that all languages share the same meanings and all languages are nothing other than nomenclatures. Nevertheless, Thảo partially corrected his statement few lines below. To him, "arbitrary convention" could concern only verbal linguistic signs in a strict sense. Secondly, a careful analysis may show that the relation between signifier and signified is tighter than an "arbitrary convention." To explain the last point, Thảo introduced the description of embodied nature of inner speech.

Firstly, Thảo highlighted that arbitrariness concerns only verbal linguistic signs in a strict sense. Once again, Thảo identified systems of arbitrary signs with conventional languages (see above Chapter 3). In this case, the conventional nature

32 The example has been extensively discussed: vd. De Mauro in Saussure [1967] 2011: 413-416. It seems that Thảo regarded the meaning of the fully-fledged language as a translinguistic universal concept. Consequently, languages would be nothing but nomenclatures.

of the bond between signifier and signified is more pronounced than in other cases. There are other signs that continue to depend upon some gestural, bodily elements:

In reality, however, this is just a specific characteristic of the verbal sign which we know does not at all exhaust the material reality of the signifying act. This act always includes gestures, which by themselves produce their own tendential meaning. The gesture “makes the image,” and in the course of history, it becomes more and more representative by taking the operative form of schema, drawing, etc.

Secondly, Thảo suggested that, in the inner speech, the movement usually involved in the utterance of verbal signs is merely outlined. To Thảo, the materiality of the signifier is still at work even if it is only evoked. And this assumption seems to correct Thảo’s previous remark concerning the material substrate of signification that in the inner language would be nothing but a “disappearing moment”. In effect, he wrote that “the *ideality* of consciousness is [...] constituted in the actual motion of *idealization* which immediately implied in inner language” and “such an idealization cannot, of course suppress its material foundation” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 25).

To Thảo there is no essential difference between the evoked outline and the effective outlined. To support this assumption, he invoked the following experiment:

We know that it is possible, by picking up and amplifying the bioelectric currents in the forearm, to obtain movements in an artificial hand which result from the subject’s mental activity, his own hand remaining motionless. Scientists are presently thinking of drawing these currents directly from the motor zone of the brain rather than from the effector organs.

On that basis, the evoked outline is limited to nervous system while the effective outline involves a slight muscular movement which may also not be externalised. As we have seen, what Thảo described in this passage is the so-called phenomenon of *ideo-motor action* (action idéo-motrice).

To a first approximation, outlined gestures involved in silent pronounced speech are the movements of the tongue accompanying inner speech. In this case, nonetheless, the outlined movement of the tongue that accompanies the silent

pronunciation of a word in the flow of inner language is not enough to determine its meaning: “Clearly, when we pronounce a word in inner speech, the outlined gesture which accompanies it is not sufficient to determine its meaning as it appears to consciousness” (id., p. 24-25). As in uttered speech, the pronunciation of words is necessarily accompanied by a wide range of movements of phonic organs and other gestures. The movement of the tongue ties with the pronunciation of a given word alone cannot convey any kind of meaning in uttered speech. The same is true for the inner language.

The inner speech does not isolate the movement of the tongue from the other movements of the phonic organs as well as other bodily gestures that usually accompanied the utterance. To Thảo, the verbal silent sign “is itself already associated with an ensemble of gestural movements” (id., p. 25). The inner speech evokes all these movements even if they are not actually performed. Thảo wrote:

[...] as the gestural component in the material motion of the signifying act of inner speech we have not only an actually outlined gesture, but what is more, by virtue of an *evoked outline*, the entire operative system, which allows the definition of the meaning of the verbal sign.

As a result, Thảo stated that a verbal sign alone is meaningless without the support of the entire operative system of gestural movements. Every utterance is meaningful in so far as there is a subconscious system of gestural movements that are involved in process of determination of meaning. This subconscious system is only evoked or outlined. And the signified cannot be reckoned to be totally independent of the material signifier even if this one is only evoked or outlined. This assumption explains Thảo’s previous criticism toward the idea of disembodied nature of idealized meaning. Nonetheless, we cannot dismiss the fact that both, internalisation of tendential meaning and development of idealized meaning, entail the consciousness of the ideality of the meaning as an abstract concept independent of the support of the body.

In so far as the inner language entails effective or evoked outlines, it must be characterized in terms of the idealized form of effective speech. And given that the consciousness is nothing other than “the language that the subject addresses to himself” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 16), then the consciousness itself is the idealized form

of speech. But attention must be paid. Consciousness “cannot be *separated* from the material movement from which it stands out” (id., p. 27). This material movement must be seen, as the same, as the body movement that produces the act of speech. So Thảo concluded that consciousness “stands out from the material signifying act as a figure ‘stands out’ from its background, without being separated from it” (ibid.).

7. Thảo’s Theory of the Inner Language

Thảo’s conception of inner language seems to be one of the main keys to describe his theory of language. It could be useful cursory to illustrate this topic against the background of both, the history of the notion of “inner language” and the epistemological consequences of Thảo’s approach. First, we have to understand the core of the issue of inner language beyond the several different ways to approach it: thought as dialogue, the silent speech, the link between self-talk and self-consciousness, the internalisation/externalisation of language, etc.

The notion of internal language has been largely debated in the history of philosophy (see the bibliography in Puech 2001), at least since Plato’s definition of thought as “the talk which the soul has with itself about any subjects which it considers” (*Theaetetus* 189e, English translation by Harold N. Fowler). After him, Stoicism introduced the opposition *logos endiathetos* and *logos prophorikos* to describe the peculiarities of internal and external language. Generally, philosophy seems to regard inner language either as the inner form of the external language (from Augustin’s *sermo interior* – which differs from the *verbum cordis* until Jakobson 1963) or as the mental language-like structure of thought (from the medieval tradition of the *gramatica speculativa* until Fodor 1975). From this point of view, it takes place the alternative between two approaches to the issue: 1) thinking presupposes a process of internalisation of external linguistic practices; 2) linguistic public practices are the externalisation of inner linguistic structures of thought.

In 1881, the French philosopher Victor Egger (1848–1909) inaugurated the treatment of inner language in the field of the new scientific psychology of the

19th century (see Egger 1881, Carroy 2001, Bergounioux 2001, and Puech 2001). He was in contact with the American psychologist William James and the French philosopher Henri Bergson, with whom he largely debated the notion of “stream of consciousness” (Roni 2016). Egger insisted that the internal language is not subordinated to external language. And to him, the issue of inner language should not concern the traditional issues of the relation between language and world, but rather the linguistic experience of the speaker. By the way, the term “endophasia” (from the Greek *endo*, in, and *phasia*, word) was invented in 1892 by the French psychologist Georges Saint-Paul (1870–1937; see Saint-Paul 1892).

In the light of this debate, it seems that the major difficulty – and, at the same time, the main fascinating aspect – of the study of inner language lies in the contradictory or paradoxical nature of the phenomenon itself. The inner language takes place in the confusion between production and reception of speech acts, between the speaker and the receiver, where the silent speech evokes a voice which has not been emitted, and where the social dimension of speech interacts with the individual one.

Thảo was interested in the genetic origin of thought. His interest is mostly philosophical in so far as he described the origin of the concepts, the relation between thought and mind-independent reality, the abstract and shared nature of reasoning. And then the inner language must be regarded as the material support of consciousness and thought. As has been remarked above, to Thảo, inner language is nothing but the inner stream of thought and is the result of the internalisation of the external and preconscious language of real life.

To Thảo, the issue of inner language is based on the assumption that the social collective activities and the body of the speaker are the preconditions for having inner language. As this discussion implies, the inner language is the result of the internalisation of the external linguistic practices (the language of real life). It is not *external language without sounds* but rather it is as embodied as the external language. To Thảo, inner language depends upon a system of outlined, sketched-out, and evoked vocalizations and gestures that are the same of external language. In inner language, the communicative function of external language still remains – even if this function is mostly fictive in the stream of inner language.

Consciousness is the point of an iceberg of several psycho-physical phenomena: subconscious associations of sketched-out and evoked ideo-motor images, the image of the other member of the surrounding environment, and the perceptive image of the referential object.

The topic of the inner speech was largely debated among psychologists. For instance, Piaget (1923) wrote that at the developmental level, language as it appears at two years is *egocentric*. This egocentric language then passes through a semi-stationary state between 3 and 6 years, to regress after 7 years. The egocentric language refers to a language that does not follow the two criteria of communication: i) first of all, communication aims to act on the other; ii) communication presupposes that each of the two interlocutors distinguishes his own point of view from that of the other. To Vygotsky ([1934] 1962), instead, the egocentric language would, therefore, be a social tool that the child uses on himself. To him, the egocentric language is the verbal form that precedes the inner language. Children speak to themselves out loud only because they have already been able to speak to others. In this way, the egocentric language and then the inner language are the results of the internalisation and refunctionalisation of the external language.

Paradoxically, one could affirm that Thảo's description of the linguistic skills of the child largely depends upon Piaget's psychology. Like Piaget, Thảo did not illustrate the development of language in the child as a kind of internalisation of communicative social practices (see below Chapter 9 for more elaborate treatment). But Thảo's description of the evolution of language seems to be more similar to Vygotsky's approach. But one cannot dismiss the fact that, unlike Vygotsky (see Friedrich 2001), Thảo did not consider language and thought as two psychological phenomena which have two different origins.

Before concluding it could be interesting to mention the fact that, recently, the Canadian psychologist Alain Morin develops the idea that without internal language human beings cannot be conscious. In detail, inner language processes information about the mental experience of the self. Interestingly, Morin's hypothesis is that internal language prolongs social exchanges based on languages that make the individual aware of existing within a community. So Morin seems to

suggest a theory very similar to Thảo's one since he states:

[...] inner speech makes us aware of what we are experiencing [...] our internal dialogue is also what makes us aware of our own existence [...] Inner speech can internalize this mechanism of taking others' perspective. This means that we can engage in self-talk in which we state to real or imaginary persons our motives for behaving in a given fashion or for having some personal characteristics. When, in response to the expected reactions of others, we explain our actions or describe ourselves in self-talk, we take other people's perspective into consideration and thus gain an objective view of ourselves. (Morin 2003: 1-6)

In a more detailed way, Thảo described the inner language as a polyphonic dialogue with self and others. But the question arises whether conscious experience could be effectively reduced to inner speech and verbal imagery. Now, we have to leave that question open.

For Thảo consciousness does not intervene to determine the signification, at least from a genetic standpoint. Consciousness is rather the result of the motion of inner language and specifically of the internalisation of the language of the real life. In other words, the body of the speaker is the active player and consciousness is simply the recognition of the signification produced by the flow of inner language. Then, the ideal form of thought becomes conscious even if they continue to depend upon the subconscious system of associations of evoked and sketched-out vocalizations and gestures. But we cannot forget that slowly inner language becomes more and more pervasive and influences the external language: "When we say that language expresses thought or consciousness, this simply means that formulated language expresses generally explicitly and in an externalised way the meaning expressed in an outlined and abbreviated manner in internal language" (Thảo [1973] 1984: 16).

Chapter Seven

The Origin of our Species and the Evolution of Tool-Making

[...] the brain of *H. habilis* had made major advances, beyond the more ape-like australopithecine brain. With *H. habilis*, cerebral evolution had progressed beyond the stage of “animal hominids” (*Australopithecus* spp.) to that of “human hominids” (*Homo* spp.). In functional capacity, in particular, its possession of a structural marker of the neurological basis of spoken language, *H. habilis* had attained a new evolutionary level of organization. (P.V. Tobias)

1. Preliminary Remarks. - 2. The Origins of Language and Consciousness. - 3.1. Thảo's Theory and Palaeoanthropology Findings. - 3.2. The Missing Link. - 3.3. The Australopithecus. - 3.4. The Olduvai Gorge and the Discovery of *Homo habilis*. - 4.1. Tool-making in the Pleistocene: the Kafuan. - 4.2. Tool-making in the Pleistocene: the Chellean. - 4.3. Tool-making in the Pleistocene: the Acheulean. - 5. Concluding Remarks.

1. Preliminary Remarks

After having described Thảo's approach to the study of consciousness, the time has come to analyse his own suggestion linking language, consciousness, and labour in greater detail. The fact cannot be ignored that Thảo proposed a picture of the emergence of consciousness through language and labour which took place in the prehistorical past. At this point, therefore, we would like to shift attention to Thảo's conception of language origins. Thảo did not hesitate to assert that a scientific theory of language origins cannot be isolated from investigations into material activities of our ancestors. Thảo seems to be convinced that social life and material activities evolved at the same time as language. To put it another way, Thảo's effort was “to think with the help of the concept of *praxis*, the contemporaneous emergence of relations of production and language in the

context of action in common, be it the fabrication of tools, hunting, agricultural work, or the sexual division of labour” (Lecerclé 2006: 146).

As we have already seen in Chapter 6, language and labour are two aspects of the same material behaviour. Thảo gave significant attention to the fact that labour is the infrastructure on the basis of which the whole of society is reconstructed. The focus on labour implied that material activities should be seen as the background against which language emerged. In certain respects, language is mainly an instrument of productive activities. Given that labour is immediately social, the objectivity of labour in common involves the objective of symbolic behaviour. But Thảo did not think of language merely as an instrument of communication. Rather it is also the condition of lived experience, as we have largely said in previous chapters. And assuming that the immediate reality of consciousness is language, it follows that consciousness has material, collective, and social origins. As a result, a description of the evolution of practical collective activities among our ancestors might allow us suggesting hypotheses on both language origins and conscious experience.

In this connection, we should like to make point of the fact that we have no direct evidence of the development of linguistic skills among our ancestors. Chapter 9 will be largely devoted to analysing this point. For the time being, suffice it to anticipate that, convinced that labour must be regarded as the background against which human symbolic behaviour arises, Thảo attempted to work a position in which paleoanthropological findings are interpreted as supports for describing the development of both symbolic skills and sophisticated forms of conscious experience. More exactly, Thảo combined the results of biological or physical anthropology, which is the study of biological and behavioural aspects of human beings, their related non-human primates and their extinct hominin ancestors, and findings of palaeoarchaeology, such as petrified skeletal remains, bone fragments, footprints and associated evidence, stone tools, artefacts, and settlement localities. To put it another way, Thảo’s approach did not differ from that of current paleoanthropology. Similarly, Thảo had to compare findings which come from two different “archives” (Hombert & Lenclud 2014: 254-257). That is, the evolution of biological features of human beings whose reconstruction depends

upon paleontological archives cannot be confused with the evolution of cultural humans whose reconstruction depends upon archaeological evidence. In effect, biological innovations do not always correspond to cultural innovations. Put this way, the distinction between the two archives should be clear. Unfortunately, matters are not quite that simple and, in next paragraphs, we will analyse the way Tháo provided an explanation of language origins which was based on the comparison between fossils and artefacts.

In order to understand Tháo's theory of language origins, it is then necessary to see some of the assumptions on which it was based and proceed to its details, including Tháo's classification of our ancestors. In the following paragraphs, we will first describe the general outlines of Tháo's theory. Then we will sketch a particular landscape of relationships that have existed between Tháo and some paleoanthropologists of the first half of the 20th century. Thus, we will examine the scientific background to the ideas espoused by Tháo, along with the analysis of Tháo's insight into the most recent findings in paleoanthropology at that time. In this way, readers are introduced to the main debates of the epoch. Exploring some of the most relevant topics concerning our origins will also enable us to understand the peculiar way Tháo evaluated the recent findings and hypotheses. Doing so will also provide a necessary perspective in order to offer a comprehensive analysis of Tháo's approach to language origins.

2. The Origins of Language and Consciousness

As mentioned several times before, Tháo was convinced that collective activities are the most decisive factor in the evolution of language. In the present paragraph, we will introduce the main outlines of Tháo's theory of the link between labour and language. Some aspects have already been mentioned in previous chapters. Other aspects will be taken into account in the following ones. It could look like we repeat what we have already said or what we will say later for nothing. Nonetheless, there is no question of unnecessary repetition. In fact, the aim of this chapter is to offer readers a brief but systematic perspective on Tháo's theory of language origins which will be useful for appreciating next chapters. We are aware, indeed, that not

all readers know the scientific knowledge which was at a disposal of scholars who worked in the 1960s. And we know for sure that, as next paragraphs will show, Thảo's theory largely depended upon that available knowledge. These facts ask us to place Thảo's theory in the context of the paleoanthropological findings of the 1960s. This choice should pave the way for understanding Thảo's assumptions and will also permit us to provide a satisfactory explanation of his conception of language origins. Before we address this question, however, we must briefly describe the way Thảo emphasised certain aspects of human evolution, along with the development of linguistic skills. In order better to understand the peculiar way Thảo linked paleoanthropological findings to language evolution, our best advice is to take a look at the figure 16.

As Thảo put it, our most ancient ancestors, i.e. the anthropoids, already used *natural instrument* as objects which satisfy immediate needs. Instruments of this kind are the result of the individual *work of adaptation* (ad hoc instrument-using for an immediate purpose). The preparation and use of natural instruments took place in front or beside the biological object and finish when the need disappears. Similarly, the communication systems of apes and anthropoids, such as *cries* and *simple indications*, refer to the emotional aspect of the immediate situation. Thảo called signs of this kind *signs of presentation*. In this regard, the evolution of the hand considerably changed the living conditions of our ancestors. During the recession of tropical forests toward the end of Tertiary Period (2.58 ma; ma: million years ago), Thảo wrote, the first examples of Australanthropus (i.e. Australopithecus) began to live in groups and to work in coordination to survive and adapt themselves to new environmental conditions. The Australanthropus *prepared and conserved instruments* (purposeful instrument-modifying for a future eventuality) and got means of subsistence from *collective hunting*. Those cooperative activities required a certain distance between individuals. As a result, Australanthropus had to perform *guidance gestures*.

By term *hominids*, it is good to remember, Thảo referred to our species and all extinct forms that belonged to the same evolutionary trajectory after the appearance of Homo habilis. By the term "pre-hominid", we refer to species as Australopithecus or Australanthropus experienced before the appearance of Homo

habilis.

Prehominids systematically used signs such as guidance gestures and straight-line gestures. Tháo suggested that “the circular-arc motion [...] first appeared in phylogenesis” (Tháo [1973] 1984: 5). And that form does not disappear but rather “continues to play its role together with the straight-line gesture” (id., p. 5-6). Guidance gestures were first referred to objects that were perceptible in the surrounding environment. Since the systematic use of guidance gestures had been established, those signs began to indicate absent objects of biological needs and entailed the cognitive representation of them. To Tháo guidance gestures were simultaneously composed of motions of the hand and cries. The qualitative leap that marks the emergence of the *sign of representation* from the simple indication depends upon the ability to transcend the limits of present perception. In this regard, he stated that “the going beyond the field of presence of present perception is already itself objectively *given* in the social activity of labour, where the group broadens its field of action by dividing itself into different sub-groups” (id., p. 68).

During the phylogeny, Tháo stated, the *sign of representation* emerged at an advanced stage of the evolution of our pre-human ancestors (*Australanthropus*) in connection with the Kafuan lithic production (2.6 ma). They began to organize collective hunting by dividing the group into two subgroups who followed the same game at different distances. They had already at a disposal the simple indicative sign (the pointing to the thing itself) to attract the attention of the others to the game. But the variation in distances needs that the two subgroups exchanged signs which alluded to the game even in the absence of the game within the perceptive field of one or another subgroup. The simple indication is not enough anymore. The sign of representation was the peculiar way our ancestors assured the coordination of their task given the absence of the game.

Before the emergence of Oldowan industry (2.6–1.7 ka), *elaborated instruments* of Kafuan industry were produced with the systematic help of a second instrument (*ad hoc* instrument-making). The new working situations required a *straight-line gesture* which served to indicate the current work-object as well as everything interesting that could function as a possible work object. Tháo’s first purpose was

to establish the cognitive function of syncretic words – i.e. the intrinsic signs which were simultaneously composed of vocalizations and gestures. *Syncretic words*, he insisted, allowed the most elementary representation of the *confused form* of the object.

Thảo went on to point out that the *functional sentence* appeared at the end of the Kafuan era. Thảo stated that some contradictions arose between new social relations and the older means of communication. Contradictions of this kind take the shape of a misunderstanding, “a *quid pro quo*, in which is reflected the objective contradiction between the new relations appearing in collective work, because of the development of the instrumental forces and the form of language previously acquired” (id., p. 95). As a consequence, under the pressure of practical needs, the old form of language is modified. Crucially, the subject was forced to *repeat* the communication *in another form*. The juxtaposition/association of representative signs involved the emergence of first functional sentences. The formation of the functional sentence took place during the transition from the Kafuan to the Olduvian. *Homo habilis* was the first human ancestor who performed sentence-like vocalizations.

The development of functional sentences involves the emergence of *functional names*. Thảo’s next step was to describe the transition from the functional name to the *typical name* which took place during the Kafuan era (Lower Palaeolithic: 2.6 ma–300 ka). To him, the *typical name* involved a form of representation of the object that he calls “typical image” (id., p. 99): this representation could be regarded as a prototype of a group of objects and, to be clear, it should not be confused with the abstract concept. The typical image served, for instance, as a model for the reproduction of instruments. And Thảo highlighted that the palaeoarchaeological evidence shows a standardization in the elaboration of instruments during the Kafuan (cultural instrument-making).

After *H. habilis*, “the transition from the production of the instrument to the production of the tool involves the constitution of the sentence, which will be realized with the original dialectic of the production forces and the relations of production in the development of *Homo habilis* and his transition to *Homo faber*” (id., p. 141). Thảo largely employed the notion of *Pithecanthropus* to individuate the

first form of the genus *Homo* after the disappearance of *Homo habilis*. He wrote that “finally the tool which appears at the Chellean, marks the *birth*, strictly speaking, of the genus *Homo* in the figure of *Homo faber* (Pithecanthropus).” Chellean industry marks the formation of the sentence in the strict sense. And the evolution of language is almost over.

According to Thảo, the signs of the degradation of the technique of stone-cutting of the early Acheulean industry refer back to social crises provoked by the insufficiency of production itself. Before the end of the Lower Palaeolithic, the bipedal posture increased the mortality of women (the so-called “Tragedy of Women”): the anatomical modification of the pelvis entailed complications during childbirth. One of the main consequences of the tragedy of the women was the generational asymmetry between men and women in archaic societies until Mesolithic (11–8 ka). As a result, tool making was adversely affected by such a social crisis. Instead, “the magnificent flowering of tool technique at the late Acheulean, which marks the transition from the lower Palaeolithic to the middle Palaeolithic, assumes that the social crisis had been resolved” (id., p. 173). As we have already said in Chapter 6, at the beginning of the Middle Palaeolithic (300–45 ka), the gradual emergence of the household industry was the reason for an economic development which led to the increase of human longevity. The social order corresponding to the first period of Mousterian industry (600–40 ka) is called by Thảo *proto-gerontocracy*. Anthropological data show that *H. Neanderthalensis* disciplined the respect of laws and social order at the End of the Middle Palaeolithic and at the beginning of the Upper Pleistocene (126–11.7 ka). In the same period, the use of personal pronouns emerged for the first time and speech began to be a means to express the own individuality (see above Chapter 6). The end of the biological tragedy of women and the stabilization of commercial exchanges marks the period called Mesolithic (11–8 ka). When the Upper Palaeolithic began (40–10 ka) a new phase began, too, which is the history of our species, *Homo faber sapiens*.

3.1. Thảo's Theory and Palaeoanthropology Findings

One can ask the extent to which Thảo's theory depended upon paleoanthropological discoveries taking place in the first half of the 20th century. Of course, it is not possible in a limited space to offer a detailed picture of both discoveries and debates which had characterized the first century of paleoanthropology since its birth in the 19th century. For our purposes, we shall skip certain details because we must previously provide the basis for a quick examination of Thảo's interest in paleoanthropology. Our comments here will focus on some dominant traditions in paleoanthropological studies. It is remarkable, as we will see, that Thảo's theory recovers some elements of the 19th-century anthropology. Readers who are not at ease with currently available knowledge in the field of our origins are invited to take a look at the figure 17. That figure allows them to compare Thảo's theory and current views on the classification of human ancestors, tool-making, and dating.

To complete this analysis, we will also turn to the main paleoanthropological discoveries taking place from 1856 until 1964. Particularly, we should underline the great relevance accorded by to the discovery of some fossils dates to 1.75 ma and belonging to an early Homo in the Olduvai Gorge (Tanzania) in 1964.

Needless to say, the precise extent of Thảo's interest in paleoanthropology still calls for further exploration. It is essential above all to determine the meaning of Thảo's theory against the background of the 20th-century paleoanthropological findings. Locked from the angle of our concerns, the essence of Thảo's theory comes down to how to link those paleoanthropological findings with Engels' theory of the part played by labour in the evolution of our species. And, what is more, we shall speak in greater detail of Thảo's efforts to suppose the emergence of every form of protolanguage on the basis of prehistoric artefacts discovered since the middle 19th century.

We turn now to a closer examination of Thảo's conception of modes of tool production. As a step toward developing such an overview, we will focus on the most relevant findings of the period in question, comparing the corresponding suggested labels. As this discussion implies, we can better understand the artefacts

the obsolescent names Tháo sometimes employed referred to. After that, we will deal mainly with Tháo's attempts to demonstrate his own theory of human evolution on the basis of artefacts. Then we will go on to look at the reason why Tháo had divided the genus *Homo* into two sub-genera, the man in making (*Homo habilis*) and full-fledged man (from *Homo faber primigenius* to *Homo faber sapiens*).

In short, this group of paragraphs is intended only as a preliminary exploration of the place of Tháo's theory against the background of what is known about our origins until the 1960s. One can use this as a preliminary means of identifying the extent to which Tháo's theory of linking of labour with language depended upon the available knowledge of his time. Meanwhile, we will be also able to examine the way Tháo took sides in the debate on human evolution suggesting hypotheses, classifications, and remarks.

3.2. The Missing Link

Tháo largely employed the notion of *Pithecanthropus* to individuate the first form of the genus *Homo* after the disappearance of *Homo habilis*. For instance, we wrote: "Finally the tool which appears at the Chellean, marks the *birth*, strictly speaking, of the genus *Homo* in the figure of *Homo faber* (*Pithecanthropus*). Producing tools presupposes a *typical representation of its total shape*" (Tháo [1973] 1984: 47). Some remarks concerning the notion of *Pithecanthropus* may be useful in order better to understand some assumptions of Tháo's theory.

At the end of the 19th century, some scholars largely influenced by Darwinian theory, among which we could mention the Dutch paleoanthropologist Eugène Dubois (1858–1940), were determined to find the missing link between apes and humans, the so-called *Pithecanthropus*, half-man, half-ape (from the Greek *πίθηκος* and *ἄνθρωπος*). Remarkably Dubois himself found some fossils in the Island of Java which he classified as *Pithecanthropus erectus* (today's scholars regarded those fossils as examples of *Homo erectus*). In 1912 Charles Dawson (1864–1916) announced surprising finds in Sussex near Piltdown (England). He called the fossil *Eoanthropus dawsoni*. The *Pithecanthropus* was actually discovered. However, we know that it

was a paleoanthropological hoax. It was found to have consisted of the altered mandible and some teeth of an orang-utan deliberately combined with the cranium of a fully developed, though small-brained, modern human. The fraud has been uncovered only in 1953! But it is necessary to mention this fact in order better to understand the paradigm of the epoch. At the end of the 19th century, scholars were convinced that the modern humans were the result of the evolution of apes through a half-man and half-ape ancestor. Or, to put it another way, they were convinced to find an ancestor with an ape-like body and a human-like brain.

Like Thảo before us, we know that the bipedal gait has been the precondition for having a bigger brain. In his words: “It is essential to note that the fundamental change does not consist here in the general acquisition of *bipedal gait*, but of *bipedal gait insofar as it liberates the hand*” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 204, footnote 12). This assumption largely depended upon Engels’ theory of evolution:

First, owing to their way of living which meant that the hands had different functions than the feet when climbing, these apes began to lose the habit of using their hands to walk and adopted a more and more erect posture. This was *the decisive step in the transition from ape to man*. (MEW XX: 444; trans. in Engels 1934)

To Engels and Thảo, bipedal gait is the preconditions for having tool-making as stable behaviour. Given that for them, the labour played the leading role in human evolution, as a result, they emphasised the role of bipedal gait. They did not reason that the missing link between anthropoids and humans should have a great brain. They simply affirmed that that intermediary creature should walk with two feet and then produce some types of instrument. The core of their proposal did not concern the role played by cognition, but rather the role played by tool-making in human evolution. What is characteristic of humans is not the brain, but labour.

Interestingly, that Thảo affirmed that at the end of the Tertiary Period took place a recession of tropical forests. As a result, the first examples of Australanthropus (i.e. Australopithecus) began to live in groups and to work in coordination to survive and adapt themselves to new environmental conditions. If we translate Thảo’s words in a more recent formula, we can state during the Pliocene, which is the second and youngest epoch of the Neogene Period (23.03 ma–2.58 ma), the global climate cooled considerably culminating in a series of

continental glaciations in the Quaternary Period that follows. In response to the cooler climate, tropical plants lost their leaves and many forests are replaced by grasslands. Evidence suggests that early prehomínids appeared in Africa near the end of the period. Surprisingly Thảo's hypothesis is still largely accepted by scholars (cf. Manzi 2017: 118). But today we know that earlier species of human ancestors had already appeared.

Thảo did not dismiss the idea that there has been an intermediary form between anthropoids and humans. In his words: "Prehominid development, strictly speaking, which prepared for the appearance of genus *Homo* in the form of *Homo habilis*, must be placed in the *first part of the lower Pleistocene* with perhaps a notch in the end of the Pliocene: this is the *intermediary stage* which leads to the transition from ape to man" (Thảo [1973] 1984: 205, footnote 12). To him, however, Pithecanthropus was not seen as the intermediary stage between ape and man. Thảo regarded *Australopithecus* as the "missing" link between the anthropoids and homínids. In other words, *Australopithecus* is the first form of the prehominid stage (prehominids are extinct humanlike primates, Prehominidae): "Marxist anthropological research has established the existence of a *prehominid* stage, notably represented by the remains of *Australopithecus*" (Thảo [1973] 1984: 4; he mentioned Iakimov 1964). Some remarks are needed. Precisely in order to understand Thảo's theory of intermediate species between anthropoids and homínids, it is essential to take issues relating to the history of the findings corresponding to *Australopithecus* into account.

3.3. The *Australopithecus*

In 1925, the anatomist Raymond Dart (1893–1988) called *Australopithecus africanus* the fossil of a skull he found one year before in South Africa. The fossils show the existence of a creature whose skull was similar to those of apes. But, most remarkably, that creature walked with two feet. Thảo couldn't know that one year after the publication of ILC, the American paleoanthropologist Donald Johanson (born in 1943) found the fossils of well-known *Australopithecus afarensis* Lucy in Ethiopia (3.2 ma). One year after, in 1975, other 200 fragmented fossils have been

found in the same region and in 1976 some footprints belonging to *Australopithecus afarensis* have been discovered in Laetoli (Tanzania) by archaeologist Mary Leakey (1913–1996). The discovery of the 1970s allowed scholars to situate the existence of forerunner of humanity around 4 ma.

In any case, *Australopithecus* bipedal posture and the use of instruments allowed Thảo to suggest a new label for those fossils:

The traditional designation of *Australopithecus* becomes difficult to maintain from the moment that this group is separated from the Pongid family in order to connect it to that of the Hominids. Bunak suggests *Protanthropus* and Leroi-Gourhan, *Australanthropus*. In what follows we will generally use the name of *Australanthropi* since they seem to have developed primarily in the southern and western part of Africa. (Thảo [1973] 1984: 204, footnote 11)

To Thảo, we can suppose that the first form of indicative gestures and thus the first form of consciousness emerged among *Australopithecini*. In effect, they were able to walk with two feet and produced some types of instruments: “It is thus at this level that we must look for the original form of consciousness, such as it arose in the course of the development of tool-using activity, which, rooted in animal evolution, brings about the transition to humanity” (id., p. 4). Or, in other words, “with the transition from the anthropoid ancestor to prehominid (*Australopithecus* or *Australanthropus*) at about the end of the Tertiary or Quaternary, we may consider the form of the sign to have become an acquired form of behaviour” (id., p. 36). As a consequence of the role played by labour in human evolution, the intermediary creature should walk with two feet, produce tools, and show an elementary form of language and consciousness.

Thảo’s assumption of the existence of a missing link between anthropoids and hominids, the so-called prehominid stage, like the previous assumption concerning the erect posture, largely depended upon Engels’ theory. Engels wrote:

The first operations for which our ancestors gradually learned to adapt their hands during the many thousands of years of transition from ape to man could have been only very simple ones. The lowest savages, even those in whom regression to a more animal-like condition with a simultaneous physical degeneration can be assumed, are nevertheless far superior to these transitional beings [Übergangsgeschöpfe]. (MEW XX: 445; trans. in Engels 1934).

In short, Engels' theory largely depended upon some assumptions of the 19th-century anthropology. In turn, Thảo's theory was largely based on those Engels' assumptions, for better or for worse. This is one of the reasons why it is not surprising that Thảo's theory shows some old-fashioned elements which were proper of the previous century. Nevertheless, Thảo did not simply embrace those positions. Viewed from the perspective of contemporary anthropology, central claims of Thảo's theory appeared largely debated in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the 1930s, some scholars such as Ernst Mayr (1904–2005) began to combine Mendelian genetics and Darwinian Theory of natural selection. The result has been the so-called *modern synthetic theory of evolution*. The only point we need to note for now is that the modern synthesis drew an analogy between the broad-scale changes of macroevolution and the small-scale microevolution of local populations of living organisms. In this way, gradual changes we can observe within local populations may be seen also in macroevolution. As a result, the idea that humans evolved gradually gained strength. To minimise confusion, let think about the image of the sequence of anthropoids and hominids which we can easily see in several handbooks or on t-shirts. Over the course of the period in question, scholars largely employed notions such as *hominization* and *sapientization*. Those notions show very well an approach to human evolution that assumes the dogma of the only one species: there is only a species constantly evolving.

It is remarkable that Thảo's theory recovers some elements of the 19th-century anthropology. Nonetheless, it is clear, that Thảo largely accepted the idea of the gradual and unilineal evolution of the human species which has been suggested also in the first half of the 20th century. In the sense, it might be that he had also been largely influenced by the 1950s and 1960s theories of evolution. For example, the idea of hominization may be said to be a specific factor of Thảo's theory. In his words: "The major reason for this is that the liberation of the hand resulting from the adaptation of the foot to erect posture, constitutes the decisive step which opens the way to *hominization*" (Thảo [1973] 1984: 205, footnote 12). The main consequence of such an assumption is the risk of teleology: the belief that purpose and design control our evolution. Meanwhile, teleology involves a certain degree of anthropocentrism, of course.

During the 1950s, another one remarkable trend needs to be highlighted. The hundreds of labels employed to classify fossils hominids have been sharply criticised (see Mayr 1950; Campbell 1965). They had been replaced by a distinction between two genres: *Australopithecus* and *Homo*. Put this way, we can also understand some remarks set out by Thảo at the end of the chapter devoted to syntax:

The genus *Homo* thus comprises two sub-genera: *habilis* and *faber*. Such a division enables us at the same time to get rid of the artificial opposition invented by philosophers between ‘*Homo faber*’ and ‘*Homo sapiens*’. In fact, as sub-genus, *Homo faber* extends from Chellean man, *Homo faber primigenius* (Pithecanthropus) to man of the present type, *Homo faber sapiens*. (Thảo [1973] 1984: 141)

Today we know that human evolution has been a branched manifold process. And today’s scholars have identified 20 species at least. But Thảo was convinced that the sequence of sub-genera and species was less sophisticated. After *Australopithecus*, we can observe the emergence of the genus *Homo*. This genus can be divided into two sub-genera: *Homo habilis* and *Homo faber*. The second one is composed of *Homo faber primigenius*, i.e. an earlier form of our species, and our species. Like the German anatomist and physical anthropologist Franz Weidenreich (1873–1948) before him in the 1940s, Thảo collected under the same category (*Homo faber primigenius*) the *Pithecanthropus* and the *Sinanthropus* (cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 170; Thảo mentioned Weidenreich: cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 37). We have already talked about the *Pithecanthropus erectus* discovered by Dubois in on the island of Java (Indonesia) between 1891 and 1892. Discovered in China between 1923 and 1927, the *Sinanthropus* (*Homo erectus pekinensis*) was probably the author of the contiguous findings of animal remains and evidence of fire and tool usage, as well as the manufacturing of tools. What interests us is that by *Homo faber primigenius* we should then understand *Homo erectus*. Instead, Thảo called our species *Homo faber sapiens*, i.e., what today we call *H. sapiens*. To him, the productive activities determine taxonomy. But let’s step back for a moment and focus on *Homo habilis*.

3.4. The Olduvai Gorge and the Discovery of *Homo habilis*

Thảo's articles of 1960s, which constituted the core of ILC, show very well the fact that Thảo was aware of the most recent findings and particularly had understood the meaning of cultural remains discovered in the Olduvai Gorge (cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 36, 130, 162, 166, 169, 205-6, 209, 211). Since 1931, Louis (1903–1972) and Mary Leakey (1913–1996) were searching for traces of human evolution in the Olduvai or Olduwai Gorge (Tanzania). At the beginning, they found several stone tools associated with the Oldowan lithic industry and eventually also the toolmaker was found. In 1960, Mary recovered some fossils dates to 1.75 million years old and belonging to an early Homo. In 1964, Phillip Tobias, John Napier, Louis Leakey called that group of fossils *Homo habilis* (see Leakey, Tobias & Napier 1964; Thảo mentioned this relevant article: cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 206). Most experts assume the intelligence of *H. habilis* were more sophisticated than *Australopithecus* also because *H. habilis* brain size was on average 50% larger than that of the *Australopithecus*. Nonetheless, how Thảo highlighted, the brain of *H. sapiens* (or *H. faber sapiens* – as he called our species) is incomparably bigger and more sophisticated of that of *H. habilis*. This fact implied that “*Homo habilis* has not yet crossed the famous ‘cerebral Rubicon’” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 37).

According to Thảo, as a result of those studies concerning the “rudimentary stone-cutting technique” discovered in Olduvai Gorge, “with the appearance of *Homo habilis*” emerged “the first form of productive labour” (id., p. 36). He was also aware of the debate concerning the classification of *H. habilis* (cf. id, 36-37): since the 1960s, there has been a scholarly debate regarding its placement in the genus *Homo* rather than the genus *Australopithecus*. For Thảo, to solve the conundrum, we should explore more to what extent tool-making was sophisticated than morphological data. In his words:

Production, however, appears here only in a partial, or, so to speak, embryonic form. As a producer, *Homo habilis* went beyond the *intermediary stage* of ape to man [the stage of the *Australopithecus*]. But as a *producer of instruments, not tools*, he still remains only a “man in the making”. He, therefore, still belongs to the gestation period of which he will be the final stage, and which will end with “fully-fledged man”, producer of tools. At the Olduvian stage, man in the making, like a fetus in its

mothers' womb, developed within the limits of natural existence only; he was not yet a worker. However, he possessed the ability of the first initiator of the productive act, the ability to be a "jack-of-all-trades" of which we can have a pretty fair idea, considering the abundance and variety of his kinds of instruments. The creator of the Olduvian period thus fully deserves his name of *Homo habilis*. (id., p. 46)

To explain, Thảo was proposing "to elevate *Homo habilis* to the rank of a sub-genus" (id., p. 140). Thus, he had no doubt that *H. habilis* can be classified as a *Homo*: "the genus *Homo* thus comprises two sub-genera: *habilis* and *faber*" (ibid.). To him, *H. habilis* stone tools "implied the presence of an ideal image representing the typical shape to be imposed upon the material" (id., p. 36). On the level of consciousness, it means that *H. habilis* had at a disposal "the *representation of the absent biological need situation*" and "*typical representation of the instrumental shape, as shape of the useful part of the instrument*" (id., p. 48). In other words, a rudiment of abstract thinking arose among *H. habilis*. On the level of language, the stage of *H. habilis* corresponded to that of sentence formation (cf. id., p. 131). We repeat: "the transition from the production of the instrument to the production of the tool involves the constitution of the sentence, which will be realized with the original dialectic of the productive forces and the relations of production in the development of *Homo habilis* and his transition to *Homo faber*" (id., p. 141).

Remarkably, Thảo was not the only one, who argued for the existence of linguistic capabilities among *H. habilis*. The same scholar who took part in giving its name to that species, the South African palaeoanthropologist Phillip Tobias (1925–2012), advanced the view that *H. habilis* had extreme brain lateralization. To him, the left hemisphere of *H. habilis* endocrania shows the first development of Broca's and Wernicke's areas, which are notably the areas devoted to language (see Tobias 1987). Thus, he "suggested that a *structural* change of the brain began with *A. africanus*, which exhibited an incipient development of Broca's area, would have consolidated with *H. habilis*" (Cela-Conde & Ayala 2007: 347). A remark is however needed. Tobias did not explicitly argue for linguistic capabilities among *H. habilis* until 1991 (cf. Tobias 1991), while Thảo judged that *H. habilis* was able to perform a kind of language already at the end of the 1960s.

Maybe Thảo set out his hypothesis a bit prematurely. But he was not alone. For instance, in 1969, the American physical anthropologist Ralph Leslie Holloway Jr.

(born in 1935) suggested the emergence of language among the tool-makers of Olduway on the basis of the cognitive skills required to produce choppers. While Tobias's analysis depended upon morphological data, Thảo and Holloway chose another way of thinking. In Holloway's words:

For my part, I believe that *Australopithecus*, or whoever made the Oldowan choppers, was human and possessed culture. The stone tools will not "tell" us precisely how the hominid organized his experience; they "tell" us that he possessed a cognitive structure necessary for language, a structure harmonious with language. (Holloway 1969: 407).

In short, Thảo's theory of language origins focused on *H. habilis* above all. The influence of Leakey's family upon Thảo's hypothesis was almost immeasurable. This could become particularly clear if we compare Thảo's sequence of species with that suggested by Spirkin, which was one of the main sources of Thảo. It should be thus useful to anticipate Spirkin's description of human evolution, along with his theory of the formation of language (see Chapter 8 for more details):

- i. *Australopithecus*: our pre-human ancestors inherited a set of vocalizations which was the support of the development of human verbal language (Spirkin 1966: 29); imitation and onomatopoeias (cf. id., p. 29, 32-33); vocal signals which syncretically meant actions, phenomena, emotions, etc. (cf. id., p. 37).
- ii. *Sinanthropus*: gestures and unarticulated polysemic vocalizations to communicate representations and perceptions concerning the surrounding environment during collective cooperative activities (cf. id., p. 39); context-related communication (cf. id., p. 51).
- iii. *H. Neanderthalensis*: vocalizations which referred to absent objects (cf. id., p. 42-43); the paratactic juxtaposition of vocalizations in order to reproduce the relations between things (cf. id., p. 54).
- iv. *Cro-Magnon*: articulated speech, sentences, morphological inflexion (cf. id., p. 36).
- v. *H. sapiens*: fully-formed articulated language and general abstract concepts (cf. id., p. 63); rational thought (cf. id., p. 63); comparison between the own thought with the opinions of the others, emergence of self-consciousness (cf.

id., p. 64).

Apparently, Spirkin ignored the discoveries of Olduwai. And the absence of *H. habilis* in the previous sequence led Spirkin to suggest that Neanderthal Man was the first human ancestor to develop abstract thought. Simultaneously Spirkin regarded *Sinanthropus* as the immediate follower of *Australopithecus*. As a consequence Neanderthal Man must be reckoned to be at the heart of Spirkin's theory, while Thảo largely denied every substantial linguistic development in Neanderthal Man.

For our purposes, it is important to emphasise that Thảo mentioned the notion of “*werdender Mensch*” (man in the making). This notion can be well understood if one also introduces the corresponding notion of *fertiger Mensch* (full-fledged man). In this case, too, we should mention the influence of Engels' *Dialectics of nature* (MEW XX: 446-447). The concept of *werdender Mensch* covers a period of human evolution which connects our prehomimid ancestors to us. During this period, according to Engels, our ancestors slowly began to use instruments, speaking, collectively hunting, cooperate, and so on. The dialectical law of the transition of quantity into quality dominates Engels' insight about evolution. As Graham (1987: 50) explains, to Engels “in the course of natural selection, different species developed from common ancestors; this transition could be considered an example of accumulated quantitative changes resulting in a qualitative change, the latter change being marked by the moment when the diverging groups could no longer interbreed.” In Engels' words: “First labour, after it and then with it speech – these were the two most essential stimuli under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man, which, for all its similarity is far larger and more perfect” (MEW XX: 448; trans. in Engels 1934). As a result, accumulated quantitative changes of this kind involved the emergence of the *fertige Mensch*, the full-fledged man. As we have seen, to Thảo, the accumulation of quantitative changes in tool production took place during the development of *H. habilis*. Like Engels before him, Thảo regarded language and instrumental activities as the preconditions for cerebral development:

It is clear that the soaring cerebral development of *Homo faber primigenius* came essentially not from foetation, but rather from the development of instrumental activity, which, at the end of the stage of *Homo habilis*, tended to reach a qualitatively superior form with the transition from the production of the instrument to the production of the tool. (Thảo [1973] 1984: 163)

This periodization coincides completely with our own conclusions drawn from the analysis of child language, according to which the stage of *Homo faber primigenius*, full-fledged man, corresponds with the child's fully constituted sentence at age 2. (id., p. 150)

In this vein, we understand the reason why Thảo had divided the genus *Homo* into two sub-genera, the man in making (*Homo habilis*) and full-fledged man (from *Homo faber primigenius* to *Homo faber sapiens*). The transition from the former to the latter is marked by cerebral development (the so-called *cerebral Rubicon*) as a consequence of instrumental activities and language. The main disadvantage of this approach is the idea of the slow transition as a unilineal sequence of species.

Interestingly, according to Engels and Thảo, the link between instrumental activities and cerebral development depends upon meat diet:

hunting and fishing presuppose the transition from an exclusively vegetable diet to the concomitant use of meat, and this is another important step in the process of transition from ape to man. A *meat diet* contained in an almost ready state the most essential ingredients required by the organism for its metabolism. [...] The meat diet, however, had its greatest effect on the brain, which now received a far richer flow of the materials necessary for its nourishment and development, and which, therefore, could develop more rapidly and perfectly from generation to generation. (MEW XX: 449; trans. in Engels 1934)

This assumption is interesting because some today's scholars agree with that reasoning (Manzi 2017: 40). Nonetheless, we must underline that, of course, *H. habilis* was a scavenger of the Savannah while *Australopithecus* still had a vegetarian diet. *Homo ergaster* was probably the first one of our ancestors to apply hunting strategies. By contrast, for Thảo *Australopithecus* already tried to collectively hunt. It could be useful to remember that this view was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Raymond Dart, who had discovered the fossils of the *Australopithecus africanus*, has been one of the first scholars who associated collective hunting with the most ancient phases of our evolution (cf. Dart 1953; for more details, cf. Giusti 1994: 75). It may also be useful to remember that, in the

same period, many anthropologists worked on peoples of hunter-gatherers who, according to their opinions, lived in conditions closer to those of our ancestors. The results of those investigations were presented during a symposium organized by the Canadian anthropologist Richard Lee (born in 1937) *Man the Hunter* in 1966 (for more details, cf. Giusti 1994: 76).

4.1. Tool-making in the Pleistocene: the Kafuan

The time has now come to say a few words about Thảo's theory of modes of tool production. Readers who are not at ease with currently available knowledge in the field are invited to take a look at figure 18. To understand Thảo's analysis, it is necessary first to see some of the discoveries on which his assumptions were based. In 1872, the French archaeologist Louis Laurent Gabriel de Mortillet (1821–1898) published a classification of the artefacts discovered in Europe using their dwelling place and their associated artefacts: Chellean, Mousterian, Solutrean, Magdalenian, Robenhausen. On that basis, the label of the Modes of Palaeolithic refers to the first disposal site where those artefacts have been discovered. That does not mean that the artefacts discovered first are also the most ancient or the most representative. Since we are dealing with documents of human activity, none of the terms employed to classify the technologies of Pleistocene is to be confused with subdivisions of time. There are, in fact, vast overlaps between the various technologies of the Palaeolithic and substantial interregional variability. Above all, there is no precise relationship with the different human species. As a matter of fact, the production of more elementary tools can survive and coexist with the production of more sophisticated instruments.

Today, the artefacts discovered in Olduvai Gorge give the name of a mode of tool-making, the Oldowan or Mode 1. Tools of this kind were produced during the Lower Palaeolithic era (2.6 million years ago up until 1.7 ma) by ancient hominids across much of Africa, South Asia, the Middle East and Europe. We have largely described Thảo's fascination with Oldowan artefacts. According to Thảo, before the emergence of Oldowan tradition, we should assume a previous stage he called Kafuan, i.e. a Lower Pleistocene culture of Uganda typified by crudely chipped

pebble tools. In 1919, Edward James Wayland (1888–1966) had discovered a lithic industry, in the stone assemblages collected from the terraces of the River Kafu in Uganda. Kafuan became established in the archaeological literature during the 1930s–1950s. After the discovery of Oldowan tradition, by the end of the 1950s, the Kafuan had almost disappeared from the literature and had tacitly ceased to exist (see de la Torre 2011). To point the fact, some scholars hold that the early stages of the Kafuan cannot be regarded as evidence of workmanship (see Clark 1958 and Bishop 1959). Meanwhile, the more advanced Kafuan artefacts were understood to be very close to the Oldowan. As a result, the Oldowan was becoming central in the debate about the earliest cultural evidence in Africa. Tháo was aware of difficulties of this kind: “The absence of any typical shape, even on the useful side, makes these pieces difficult to distinguish from natural instruments, and some authors attribute a purely physical origin to them” (Tháo [1973] 1984: 41). Nonetheless, to Tháo, the label of Kafuan should be safeguarded in so far as it serves to define the instrumental activities which were characteristic of the transition from ape to *Homo habilis* (Oldowan). In his words:

The *elaborated instrument* (Kafuan) characterizes the second phase of the transition stage. The work of elaboration presupposes, on the one hand, a *representation of the absent object of biological need* and, on the other hand, a *syncretic representation of the instrumental shape*. (id., p. 47)

We should add that Tháo argued that the existence of a creature corresponding to Kafuan is merely hypothetical: “Up to now, we have not yet found any bones that would allow us to picture concretely the Australanthropi who evolved from the second stage of prehomimid development. Prehistoric pieces, however, classified as *Kafuan* [...], can serve as proof of their existence” (id., p. 41). In short, Tháo had to admit the existence of Kafuan as a peculiar form of instrumental production in order to link the evolution of Kafuan stones “to the Olduvian type” (id., p. 44). For him, “semi-shaping that we can observe on the edge of the Kafuan” (id., p. 78) “was the fundamental condition for the development of the typical shape, which marks the first beginnings of productive labour with the transition from the Kafuan to the Olduvian” (id., p. 107). And this stage corresponds to “genesis of the functional sentence” (id., p. 98).

4.2. Tool-making in the Pleistocene: the Chellean

At this point, we would like to shift attention to more sophisticated modes of production. Tháo regarded as peculiar of *Homo faber primigenius* (*Pithecanthropus*). To him, “the production of the tool will first appear with the Chellean biface. Then only will man actually detach himself from nature, to emerge in the world of culture, as *Homo faber*” (Tháo [1973] 1984: 46). Chellean is a currently obsolescent name for a tool tradition which first examples have been discovered in Europe during the 19th century. In this connection, we should like to make a special point of the history of that label.

Between 1836 and 1846, further examples of hand-axes had already been collected near Abbeville in northern France. The so-called Abbevillian tool tradition is now labelled as Olduwan. Similarly, in the town of Chelles, a suburb of Paris, some artefacts had been discovered in the same period. They had been called Chellean. Given that they are similar to those found at Abbeville, anthropologists substituted the label *Abbevillian* for *Chellean*. The artefacts discovered in Chelles are now grouped with the Acheulean industry, while the label *Chellean*, in the sense of earliest hand-axe culture, has been replaced by Abbevillian industry and then by Olduwan industry.

After the Mode 1 or Olduwan, during the Lower Palaeolithic, another mode of tool production emerged across Africa and much of West Asia, South Asia, and Europe: the so-called Acheulean or Mode 2 (since 1.5 ma). Contrarily to Olduwian tools (or chopping-tools), which continued to be produced largely after 1.5 ma, Acheulean tools were worked symmetrically and on both sides. But before the discoveries of Olduvai Gorge, Acheulean artefacts discovered in Europe were seen as the most ancient ones. As we have already had occasion to note, De Mortillet’s classification depended upon 19th-century European findings. Those European artefacts were found in 1859 near Saint-Acheul, a suburb of Amiens (France) and have been labelled as Acheulean. Those artefacts are seen as the oldest occurrence in Europe of a bifacial (hand axe) technology. In effect, today we know that the earliest user of Acheulean tools was *Homo ergaster* or *Homo erectus*, who first appeared about 1.8 ma so that we know that Acheulean originated in Africa and

spread to Asian, Middle Eastern, and European areas. Instead, the European Acheulean artefacts are more recent of those found in Africa.

According to Thảo, Chellean industry preceded the Acheulean one: “during the Chellean period we notice that a perfecting of bifaces takes place. At the end of the Chellean, the first improvements in flake tools appear. With the transition to the Acheulean period the oval bifaces, the first pointed implements, and scrapers appear” (id., p. 169). In other words, the Chellean culture replaced the Olduvai (pre-Chellean) culture and was in turn replaced by Acheulean culture. It is also instructive to note that for Thảo Chellean period began at the beginning of the Middle Pleistocene (cf. id., p. 169). As a result, the Mode 2 or Acheulean was not a mode of tool production which first appeared during the Lower Pleistocene, as we know nowadays. As far as Thảo’s classification of modes of tool production is concerned, it is worth pointing out, quite apart from the fact that his classification largely depended upon the findings of his epoch, his classifications shed light on universal stages following a unilineal evolution. He absolutely did not understand that each culture can overlap in time with others, not necessarily linearly related. This fact depended upon Thảo’s belief of the dialectical evolution by stages of the genus *Homo*. And he ignored the fact that the production of more elementary tools can survive and thus there are vast overlaps between the various technologies of the Palaeolithic. We repeat: there is no precise relationship with the different human species.

4.3. Tool-making in the Pleistocene: the Acheulean

Mode 3 technology (160 ka–40 ka) emerged towards the end of Acheulean dominance and involved the Levallois technique, most famously exploited by the Mousterian industry associated primarily with Neanderthals. The Levallois technique, from the French site where it was first identified, is a very complex method of tool production that gives the object a predetermined form. The label *Mousterian* depended upon the site of Le Moustier, a rock shelter in the Dordogne region of France. Mousterian artefacts show a certain degree of predetermination of the end result. In 1856, in the German Neander Valley (in German *Neanderthal*)

near Düsseldorf, fossils of an archaic human were discovered the binomial label *Homo Neanderthalensis* was first proposed by the Anglo-Irish geologist William King in 1864. It was evident, however, that *Homo Neanderthalensis* cannot be considered the missing link between apes and humans. *Homo Neanderthalensis* skull was too similar to that of humans.

In 1907 in Germany, a jaw of a more ancient ancestor had been found. The fossil had been called *Homo heidelbergensis* (500 ka). Nonetheless, the vast majority of *Homo heidelbergensis* fossils have been found for the past 30 years. It is thus not surprising that Thảo did not mention this extinct species of the genus *Homo* that lived in Africa, Europe and western Asia between 600 ka and 200 ka. This point becomes particularly relevant when we consider that, according to Thảo, we should have the following sequence of species: *Sinanthropus* (early Acheulean), Acheulean Man, Neanderthal Man. Who was the Acheulean Man? Nowadays we might suppose that *Homo heidelbergensis* produced tools of the Mode 2 and probably exported the Mode 2 to Europe around 600 ka (cf. Manzi 2017: 86-87). To put it another way, *Homo heidelbergensis* could have been a good candidate for the role of Acheulean Man. But the matter is not quite that simple. Here too, we should remember that Thảo's classifications were based upon dating different from our own.

Additionally, we propose to consider *Homo ergaster* as a better candidate for the role of Acheulean Man. *H. ergaster* lived in eastern and southern Africa during the early Pleistocene (1.9 ma–1.4 ma). Remarkably the existence of this species has been emphasised only in the 1970s when the binomial name was published in 1975 by Colin Groves (born in 1942) and Vratislav Mazák (1937–1987). The specific epithet, *ergaster*, is derived from the Ancient Greek ἐργαστήρ *ergastér* – workman, in reference to the advanced lithic technology developed by the species, i.e. the Acheulean industry. Thảo could not have any knowledge of *H. ergaster* in the 1960s, of course.

We can now mention another one fact that shows to what extent Thảo's was largely oriented by available knowledge. The fossils of *Sinanthropus* Thảo referred to had been discovered between 1923 and 1927 during excavations at Zhoukoudian (Chou K'ou-tien or Choukoutien) near Beijing. In 2009, this group of fossil

specimens were dated from roughly 750 ka (see Shen et alii 2009). For Thảo, however, those fossils were dated from 400 ka (cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 170). For this reason, to him, Acheulean is a relatively recent mode of production. Once again, we know that the production of more elementary tools can be a common practice of more than one species and can survive and coexist with the production of more sophisticated instruments. But in Thảo's time, this fact was not quite evident yet.

Anyhow, Thảo's goal was to demonstrate that the signs of the degradation of stone-cutting techniques of the early Acheulean Man refer back to a social crisis provoked by the increase of production itself. In his words: "The undifferentiated structure of the original community began to be a fetter to the development of the productive forces" (ibid.). To him, "the use of fire and of little flaked tools had led to the formation of a household industry" and consequently

The damages caused to the community by the seduction of the housewives entailed violent reactions against the guilty, which created on the whole a permanently strained atmosphere, with frequent quarrels; this is where we can find the explanation for the astonishing loss of quality in lithic tools observed in many camps of the early Acheulean.

Instead, "the magnificent flowering of tool technique at the late Acheulean, which marks the transition from the lower Paleolithic to the middle Paleolithic, assumes that the social crisis had been resolved" (id., p. 173; see Chapter 6 for more elaborate treatment). In short, Thảo suggested an anthropological hypothesis on Acheulean Man's form of life which was not based upon fossils but rather upon artefacts and other evidence such as fire use. By the way, it should be remembered, however, that at Zhoukoudian, where it was thought that there was the oldest evidence of man-made fire, recent research has shown that the burnt material was deposited around the area by natural agents after natural flames (cf. Weiner et al. 1998). Evidence for the use of fire date only around 10 ka.

Before concluding, we should spend only a few words to illustrate what seems to us a peculiar way of interpreting fossils of Neanderthal Man. Thảo took for granted that *H. Neanderthalensis* was our direct ancestor. Although the English biologist Thomas H. Huxley (1825–1895), the Scottish anatomist and anthropologist Arthur Keith (1866–1955), and the French palaeontologist Marcellin Boule (1861–1942) had

already reasoned that the primitive traits of the skeleton of the Neanderthal Man show that it cannot be considered as a direct ancestor of *Homo sapiens*, in the 1950s some scholars such as Mayr regarded the unbroken succession of fossil sites of both *Homo Neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens* in Europe as evidence of a slow, gradual evolutionary transition from Neanderthals to modern humans. As we have seen, both Thảo and Spirkin had been largely influenced by this view. Today, however, we know that Neanderthals and humans are two distinct species.

5. Concluding Remarks

Thảo's theory posed a challenge to Marxism: could dialectic materialism successfully explain the origins of language? So Thảo rigorously pursued the implications of dialectical materialism to focus on the heuristic potentialities of that insight. To him, dialectical materialism gave the best explanation for the social origins of language without transcending the natural dimension. To him, language faculty is located in the brain and depends upon some bodily predispositions. But this does not mean that language faculty evolved in the brain alone. The fact is that language is first and foremost a part of social praxis. So, it is shared by a group within the concrete and material horizon of labour. Thảo meant by labour the process encompassing all the cooperative activities necessary for the production of the means of subsistence. And the language of real life was indissolubly bound to labour. The main aim of this chapter has been to explore to what extent Thảo assumption of the primacy of labour oriented his hypothesis on language origins.

At this point, it might be useful to remind the reader of some Soviet works devoted to social life in early palaeolithic man (see Debotz 1961 especially for the works of A.N. Severzov, P.P. Efimenko, J.I. Semenov, A.M. Zolotov, V.K. Nikolskii, B.F. Porshnev, S.P. Tolstov, P.I. Boriskovskii, V.V. Bounak). Some features emerge from the Soviet debates on the origin of humanity that deserve to be noticed. First, in the 1930s, many Soviet anthropologists devoted the attention to the question of the role of the geographical environment and of hunting in the process of hominization. Morphology was not enough to explain the evolution of physical type. By contrast, the level of development of productive forces and the

modifications in the geographical environment played a relevant role in our evolution. Secondly, evolution is a process in which the quantitative modifications, in accumulating, bring about the formation of a new characteristic. Thus, Soviet anthropologists suggested the theory of the two jumps in the evolution. The first jump led to the separation from the animal world (Australopithecus stage). The second one led to Homo sapiens. The history of society begins at the moment when tools have begun to be made by the Australopithecus. This fact marks the separation from animal world. Then, Soviet scholars suggested that the transition from the earliest human ancestor (Pithecanthropus erectus) and the modern human (Homo sapiens) is the Neanderthal stage. As the reader can see, many similarities between the main theoretical assumptions of the Soviet debate on the origins of humanity – which were largely based on dialectic materialism – and Thảo’s theory are not lacking.

For our purposes, it could be now useful to remember that some evidence confirmed Thảo’s hypothesis. In effect, the idea of the primacy of labour in a wide sense might not be said to be a specific characteristic of Thảo’s theory. We can now mention other scholars who, in the same period, are largely interested in the evolution of social practices. Semënov (1959: 37-39) and Yakimov (1973: 8) described the connection between tool-making and cognitive skills. Other scholars dealt with the connection between glottogenesis and tool-making in several different ways (cf. Oakley 1951: 72; Leroi-Gourhan 1964 and 1965: 41; Bronowski 1967; Critchley 1967: 72-73; Clark 1970: 143-147; Masters 1970: 309). These scholars widely discussed the primacy of tool-making over linguistic skills or vice versa. The relation between language and hunting, too, was largely debated (see De Laguna 1963; cf. also Lancaster 1968: 456; Clark 1970: 71-72, 102-103). Generally, what stands out when one read this literature is the fact that a language system provided for environmental reference and enhanced hominid exploitation for food resources in a given territory (cf. Hewes 1978: 35-37). And, interestingly, Hewes (1978: 38) highlighted “the utility of arm or hand pointing in spotting game” especially “when the potential prey is at a considerable distance.” Now we have the very same hypothesis already suggested by Thảo.

It is clear, from the very start, that Thảo was largely influenced by Mayer’s

modern synthesis and in particular by his suggestions concerning human evolution. Thảo, too, could be considered to be a “lumper” rather than a “splitter”. As we have seen, he argued for the existence of three great genera: anthropoids, prehominids (*Australopithecus* or *Australanthropus*), and *Homo*. In turn, *Homo* is divided into two sub-genera: *Homo habilis* and *Homo faber* – which is composed of *Homo faber primigenius* (*Pithecanthropus*), *Sinanthropus*, Acheulean Man, Neanderthal Man, and *Homo faber sapiens* (our species). The idea of a great chain of a few species in unilinear succession was largely popular in those years. What seems to be the most relevant point we must stress on is Thảo’s theory of unilinear development through dialectical shifts.

The idea species evolves through dialectical shifts obviously depends upon one of the main assumption of dialectical materialism (see below Chapter 9). But what is more relevant is the fact that for Thảo the development of material activities (collective hunting and tool making) determined the evolution of species. To him, material activities interact with the physical environment and thus create a new niche in which our ancestors lived. It means that cultural evolution provides our ancestors with the means to survive and evolve. Additionally, practical needs, indeed, stimulated the emergence of new behavioural traits. Thus, it has been interesting to highlight the way Thảo integrated paleoanthropological findings with his own view.

Did not only Thảo combine paleoanthropological findings with dialectical materialism and then with the idea of development by stages, he also introduced the central role assigned to labour by historical materialism in his own reconstruction. As we have already seen, historical materialism saw labour as the engine of human history. Interestingly, Thảo adopted a historical perspective to describe human evolution. This fact could be explained in so far as we assume that what interests Thảo is to suggest a theory of language origins. And to him, language is not a mere biological fact. Rather language must be regarded as interwoven with the development of material activities from the start. As such its evolution can be described by way of the categories of historical materialism. Given that our ancestors show a certain degree of social material activities, historical materialism could be successfully applied to the study of language evolution.

Nevertheless, this approach is not free of problems.

As we have seen, for Tháo artefacts are the starting point to suggest what kind of cognitive abilities are required to produce them. Given a certain degree of cognitive development, Tháo tried to show what kind of linguistic skills could correspond to those cognitive abilities. To put it another way, the development of both, cognition and language, is only one. In turn, both are interwoven with labour. More specifically, language and labour are two aspects of the main material behaviour. Assuming that the emergence of new practical needs involves material activities of a new kind, in a similar way, new practical needs involve a linguistic behaviour of a new kind. In turn, a new linguistic behaviour is the support of new cognitive skills. The circle has been closed: new material needs determine the emergence of new linguistic, practical, and cognitive skills. What is interesting to highlight is the central role played by both labour and language. They are the adaptive response to practical needs. As this discussion implies, the development of practical activities necessarily tells us something about language origins.

However, we shall take note of the fact that paleoanthropology is based on rare, partial and fragmentary evidence. This evidence serves to confirm or refute working hypotheses. And the competition of different disciplines (geology, physics, chemistry, botany, archaeology, biology, and so on) allows scholars to achieve a reckless reconstruction of the past. This alone makes Tháo's purposes too hard to reach. Nonetheless, he was aware of the weakness of his own hypothesis:

Naturally, what I present is only a set of working hypotheses intended, according to the rule, to be criticised and surpassed. Some points may seem adventurous: I thought that when certainty is not gained, it is always better to propose a solution that may be eliminated than to say nothing at all. For the very fact of refuting it will already be a step towards the true solution. [Naturellement, ce que je présente n'est qu'un ensemble d'hypothèses de travail destinées, selon la règle, à être critiquées et dépassées. Certains points peuvent sembler aventureux : j'ai pensé que quand la certitude n'est pas acquise, il vaut toujours mieux proposer une solution qui sera peut-être éliminée, que ne rien dire du tout. Car le fait même de la réfuter sera déjà un progrès vers la solution véritable.] (Letter to Lucien Sève, 14 June 1971; see figure 19)

But there is more. What makes hypotheses about language origins even weaker is the fact that we have no direct evidence of language evolution. As we have

already noted, there is no direct correlation between biological and cultural evolution. What is untenable above all is the naturalization of cultural development. Assuming that every species corresponds to a given stage of cultural evolution seems to be dangerous. One of the main consequences of this choice is the correlation between the development of the lithic production (Kafuan, Olduvian, Chellean, and so on) and the evolution of species set out by Tháo.

Maybe this is not the right way to evaluate Tháo's theory. As Lecerclé (2006: 49) states:

We have here a very attractive myth. But a myth none the less: the latest developments in anthropology, genetics, and primatology probably preclude us from considering this description of the origin of language as corresponding to the facts. [...] But a myth does not need to be "true" in the sense of positive science to be effective [...] It is enough for it to be relevant to our philosophical concerns and, so far as possible, *correct*. [...]

We cannot underestimate that Tháo was convinced he was doing scientific research. In his words: "As you know, I am a simple scientific worker, devoted to the search for truth for herself. I can say, at the age of 54, that I never had any other ambition than to serve science [Comme vous le savez, je suis un simple travailleur scientifique, dévoué à la recherche de la vérité pour elle-même. Je puis dire, à l'âge de 54 ans, que je n'ai jamais eu d'autre ambition que de servir la science]" (Letter to Rossi-Landi, Hanoi, 8 September 1971 ; see fig. 11). Quite apart from that fact, what Lecerclé tell us is the correctness of Tháo's theory should be sought in his approach to language. Assuming language as material praxis which is interwoven with labour and social life, Tháo admitted that language is not only the agent of a social praxis but also the product of the processes that constitute this praxis. Language and labour "as attributes of the social body, they presuppose one another." (Lecerclé 2006: 182). Of course, "one speaks a language only as a member of a linguistic community" (id., p. 185). To ensure that this sentence would be perceived as obvious, we must add that for Tháo "language is at once the expression and form of constitution of the human collectivity" (id., p. 195) exactly because language is essentially interwoven with social practical life, it is "the umbilical cord, which is also the social bond, uniting the individual to the socius"

(ibid.). On that basis, language is simultaneously the condition, expression, means, and product of labour. That is what Thảo's *myth* still tells us.

Chapter Eight

How Did Language Begin?

Die Sprache ist so alt wie das Bewußtsein - die Sprache ist das praktische, auch für andre Menschen existierende, also auch für mich selbst erst existierende wirkliche Bewußtsein, und die Sprache entsteht, wie das Bewußtsein, erst aus dem Bedürfnis, der Notdurft des Verkehrs mit andern Menschen.
(K. Marx)

1. Preliminary Remarks. - 2. Marx's and Engels' Theory of Language and Consciousness. - 3.1. Spirkin's Theory: Introduction. - 3.2. Spirkin's Theory of The Formation of Language. - 3.3. A Historical Overview of Psycho-Motor Theories of Language. - 3.4. From Unarticulated to Articulate Speech in Soviet Debates on Language Origins. - 3.5. Linguistics in the USSR during the 1960s and 1970s: the case of Abaev. - 4.1. The Debate on Gestural Origins of Speech: A Brief Overview. - 4.2. Anthropoid ape communication. - 4.3. Gestural Origins of Human Language. - 4.4. Glottogenesis, Tool-making, and Hunting. - 4.5. Language, Cognition, and Brain.

1. Preliminary Remarks

To Thảo the question of formation of consciousness was the same of the origins of language. As we have already said, Thảo's conception of social labour is the precondition of a more general theory of language and consciousness. Through social collective activities, language and consciousness emerged as human-specific bio-social facts. As this discussion implies, glottogenesis and anthropogenesis are two connected processes. We need to repeat that Thảo justified his hypothesis by accepting some assumptions of Marxism and seeking to link the results of empirical sciences such as psychology and anthropology. In the next pages, we will focus on the specificity of Thảo's approach against the background of the main trends of the anthropological research of the time. Given this scenario, Thảo's insight seems to be one of the most radical in so far as he assigned to gestures and

multi-modality a key role to explain the formation of language and thought.

Firstly, Thảo's theory will be compared with some trends of Soviet anthropology. A comparison between Spirkin and Thảo seems to be necessary and really useful to understand Thảo's approach. The two scholars, Spirkin and Thảo, were similar by age, cultural world, philosophical education, political ideas, and scientific interests. And, in the same period, as we have already seen in Chapter 5, Spirkin tackled the issue of the nature and origin of consciousness. As has been seen, Thảo's theory deeply depended upon the classics of Marxism. And the same goes for Spirkin as well. But, they offered two different interpretations of the same assumptions of Marxism-Leninism. As we will see, they answered the same question concerning the origins of language and consciousness in two different ways.

It is clear (see Chapter 5), that to Thảo ([1974: 38] 2009: 299-300) the works of Spirkin is part of a broader debate on the nature of consciousness which took place in the USSR in the late 1950s. "Toward the end of the fifties, a riveting and impassioned general discussion on the nature of consciousness was beginning in the Soviet Union. [...] the classics of Marxism-Leninism had not yet specifically pursued a concrete science of consciousness." In his own way, Thảo's theory, too, must be regarded as a contribution to this kind of debates which took place in the Eastern Countries. Consequently, it could be useful to compare Thảo's theory with some Soviet anthropological, linguistic, and neurophysiologic evolutionary explanation of the formation of language.

But nobody can dismiss the fact that the main target of Thảo's ILC was the French public. For this reason, a brief overview of the main trends of Western anthropological research will be summarised in order to evaluate the pertinence, relevance and consistency of Thảo's theory compared to the proposals of the Western anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s. This comparison will allow us to recapitulate and historically evaluate the main arguments of Thảo's theory of language evolution.

2. Marx's and Engels' Theory of Language and Consciousness

As has already been said, Marx and Engels did not suggest a systematic theory of the origins of language and consciousness. They merely offer some elements to approach the issue from their philosophical point of view. In the following lines, a brief schematic overview of their main assumptions concerning language and consciousness will be put in place. In this vein, the starting point of Thảo's theory will be clarified it and will be easier to establish a comparison with other Marxist theories of the origins of language.

1. Consciousness is a peculiar way of existence of matter.

A. Marx argued that the subject of knowledge, or of practices, is matter (cf. MEW III: 533). The material essence which defines the human knowing subject is nothing other than the practical life, labour.

B. Labour is a process in which both human beings and Nature participate. It is the starting point of the peculiar way human beings start, regulate, produce, reproduce, transform, and control the material re-actions between themselves and nature (cf. MEW XXIII: 192-195).

C. To Engels, dialectics reduced itself to the science of the general laws of motion of both the external world and human thought. They are two sets of laws which are identical in substance, but differ in their expression in so far as the human mind can apply them consciously, while in nature and also up to now for the most part in human history, these laws assert themselves unconsciously, in the form of external necessity, in the midst of an endless series of seeming accidents (cf. MEW XXI: 293).

2. Consciousness is to be conscious of the own material existence.

A. Consciousness is conscious existence, consciousness of the actual life-process (cf. MEW III: 26).

B. Consciousness is at first consciousness concerning the immediate sensuous environment, i.e. the limited connection with other persons and things outside the individual who is growing self-conscious (cf. MEW III: 31).

C. Self-consciousness arose as a result of social interactions (cf. MEW XXIII: 67, footnote 18).

3. The language of real life (cf. MEW III: 26, 30-31).

A. “Language is as old as consciousness.” They arose together from the need to of intercourse with other individuals.

B. Both language and consciousness are social products. To Marx and Engels, ideas and conceptions arise from concrete social relations and practices.

C. The mind is not a separate substance independent of matter but rather the embodied capability of producing representations. More specifically, the mind obtains the contents of its representations from interactions with the surrounding environment and the intercourse with the other individuals. Consequently, there are not *a priori* concepts. In the same way, representations are never totally disconnected from social practice. Furthermore, representations always require the support of signs. And linguistic signs essentially take the shape of material sounds. As a result, human symbolic cognition arises from real intercourse among human beings and takes place because of the materiality of sounds.

D. “language is practical consciousness” (MEW III: 30). Language is a tool to solve practical needs.

4. Engels explained, “the origin of language from and in the process of labour” (cf. MEW XX: 444).

A. To him, the erect posture is *the decisive step in the transition from ape to man*. The erect posture freed hands from the task of walking. Our pre-human ancestors – a particular highly-developed race of anthropoid apes – began use hands to make tools. Engels called *labour* the skill of consciously mastering the environment with tools.

B. Labour and social life brought out the necessity to communicate with others: humans in the making arrived at the point where *they had something to say to each other*.

5. The mind reflects the material world.

A. Marx wrote: “the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought” (Marx 1887: 14; cf. MEW XXIII: 27). And Engels wrote “we again took a materialistic view of the thoughts in our heads, regarding them as images [Abbilder] of real things instead of regarding real things as images of this or that stage of the absolute concept. [...] Thereby the dialectic of concepts itself became merely the conscious reflex of the dialectical motion of the real world” (Engels 1946: Part IV; cf. MEW XXI: 293).

B. Consciousness arose as a result of the relationship between material conditions of life (economic base) and the intellectual or spiritual world (culture, philosophy, art, etc.) (cf. MEW XIII: 1-11).

3.1. Spirkin’s Theory: Introduction

According to the previous recapitulation of the main assumptions concerning language and consciousness in Marx’s and Engels’ writings, we should now pay special attention to Spirkin’s conception of the relationship between language and consciousness. In addition to this, Spirkin’s comparison between animal communication systems and human language will be analysed before we say a few words concerning his theory of the formation of human speech and the role played by labour in that process. Then, a brief historical overview of psycho-motor theories of language will be useful to understand Spirkin’s conception of the transition from unarticulated to articulated speech.

Let’s start with the remark that Spirkin’s theory made extensive use of Engels’ theory on the part of labour in the origins of speech. So conceived, Spirkin consequently, explained, language gradually arose from vocal and motor reactions of animals but slowly became a means to outperform the efficacy of collective cooperative activities. Particularly interesting is the fact that, according to Spirkin, the gestural moment in prehistorical languages had only been a support for the association between sounds and images of states of affairs. Accordingly, the core of human speech is the ability to designate things and notions through vocalizations. To put it another way, there is no genetic relation between gestures and fully-developed languages. The development of both the brain and organs of speech lead

language from the diffused polysemic sounds towards articulated speech. To Spirkin, language is old as consciousness, of course, but consciousness immediately reflects reality while language could refer to reality by way of consciousness. He consequently declared that consciousness is the direct result of the physical and practical interactions with the surrounding environment while language is a means to designate already perceived things and direct the attention of the fellows to those things. The designative function of language depends upon the mechanism of conditioned reflex. In this way, language is the material support of thought and consciousness merely.

Like Spirkin, Thảo asserted that consciousness is a social product and arises during collective cooperative activities. In this vein, consciousness is the subjective lived experience of the social *milieu*. The prehistorical language of real life is a collective non-conscious multimodal system of non-wholly arbitrary vocalizations and gestures. It is the condition for having the transition from the physiological and neurological preconditions of thought to consciousness. But Thảo's conception of the language of real life, in general, leads him far away from Spirkin's hypothesis. In fact, consciousness is nothing but the idealized form of inner language in so far as the subject addresses to the self the signs employed during collective cooperative activities. In the flow of inner language, the gestural moment is still at work in the form of evoked, sketched-out, and outlined nervous stimuli. So, it is the fundamental support of vocalizations, arbitrary signs, and thinking. This is the peculiar way Thảo developed Marx's assumption of the materiality of signs as the sensuous base of thought.

Despite Thảo invoked Spirkin's theory of indicative gestures as the fundamental key to explaining the formation of speech, there are essential divergences concerning the linguistic development of consciousness and the role played by the gestural moment in the formation of language. It seems thus quite relevant that Thảo's materialistic insight leads him to support the idea that systems of arbitrary signs (i.e. a part of fully-fledged languages), too, deeply depended upon a subconscious and fundamental system of evoked, outlined, and sketched-out gestures and vocalizations. Then, Thảo rejected Spirkin's theory of associations between sounds and images. To Thảo, language produces tendential images and

idealized meanings. In the same way, he did not consider the language as a result of conditioned stimuli. Assuming that, the language of real life is a system of motivated signs in which the signifier produced the signified. As a consequence, consciousness cannot exist without the language of real life – and consequently, it cannot reflect mind-independent reality. To Thảo language of real life takes precedence over consciousness in so far as it conveys still unconscious meanings.

3.2. Spirkin's Theory of the Formation of Language

As we have already mentioned in Chapter 5, according to Spirkin (1984: 112), “consciousness could only emerge as a function of a highly organized brain which evolved through labour and speech.” Thus, consciousness has a “pre-history” as well as a “social history” (id., p. 110). It is the product of natural evolution and “the sum total of the practical and cognitive activity of countless generations throughout the centuries.” The development of labour “promoted close cohesion among the members of society, increasing the incidence of mutual support and joint activity” (id., p. 115). Simultaneously, “the facial expressions, gestures, and sounds used as instrument of communication, in the first place among the higher animals, served as the biological need for the formation of human speech.” In this instance, language originally served as an instrument of communication during collective cooperative activities: “human beings now had something to say to one another.” Specifically, “language ensured uniform formation of ideal phenomena in all the individuals engaged in communication, which was a pressing need of joint production activity” (ibid.).

Then, language slowly became an instrument of thought. Indeed, “language is instrumental in the transition from perceptions and representations to concept” (id., p. 117). The main function of language is indeed to designate things and concepts. For this reason, Spirkin suggested that language arose from the physiological mechanism of conditioned reflex: sounds pronounced in a given situation were associated in the brain with the corresponding object. As this discussion implies, language slowly became a set of sounds associated with concepts, the ideal phenomena of consciousness which, in turn, reflect the reality.

Only in this case, we can affirm that “language reflects, in the final analysis, the structure of being.” In detail, Spirkin adopted the theory of the triangle of reference (see Ogden & Richards 1923; the triangle can be traced back to the 4th century BC, in Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*: in this regard cf. Coseriu 2010: 100-108). The triangle describes a simplified form of relationship between the concept (reference), an object or referent, and its designation (sign, signans). In this manner, the relation between language and reality would be mediated by thought. As a result, language is nothing other than a nomenclature and it does not coincide with consciousness in so far as it is only a support of rational thought.

To Spirkin (1966: 9) rational thought is the human-specific form of reflection of reality. And language is the main support of that form of reflection. Essentially, language is “a procedure or mechanism to establish relationships between sounds and the images of the objects” (ibid.). Before being a historical and social product, human language has had a natural prehistory. So Spirkin described how the instinctive sounds of animals became articulated human language.

Among animals, one could already observe the mechanism of conditioned reflex: some movements become conditioned stimuli, signals of some unconditioned stimuli. In this way, signals of animals may be an instrument to induce the reaction of the others. In other words, the sounds and movements instinctively produced by animals simultaneously appear with given actions. The sounds and movements link together in the brain of the animals (id., p. 25-26). Among apes, one could observe vocal signals (sexual vocalizations, defence-vocalizations, vocalizations of mothers, etc.) and motor signals (call-gesture, indicative gesture, threat-gesture, rejection-gesture, etc.). Animal signals, however, “did not constitute a language” (id., p. 27) because they have not the same structure and the same function of human language. In fact, this one is an intentional means of communication which reflects the reality by means of a shared system of associations between sounds and collective experiences (id., p. 27). By contrast, the sounds of animals are instinctual and involuntary uttered as a consequence of some biological needs or events without the intention to communicate with the others. Conversely, among our pre-human ancestors’ collective cooperative activities had been the condition for having the transition

from spontaneous and emotive utterances to language as a means to “intentionally designate things” (id., p. 31).

According to Spirkin, the indicative gesture supported the emergence of the designative function of vocalizations. In effect, indicative gesture allowed making more precise the referent of emotional sounds. In this vein, vocalizations became signs of things and stopped being emotional utterances (id., p. 31). Thus, vocalizations and gestures were matched together to communicate perceptions and representations concerning the mind-independent world. Gestures were an essential part of the process of communication (id., p. 39). After that, indicative gestures were subordinated to vocalizations.

It could be useful to have a glance at Spirkin’s description of human evolution in Chapter 7 before we illustrate his theory of the formation of language. Spirkin (1959: 294) stated that “labour” is the “key form of man’s activity”. And the “key factor of the realisation of labour” is man’s social environment. The urge to communicate with the others depends upon the objective conditions of collective labour: to satisfy material needs (cf. id., p. 295). On that basis, language arose “from collective labour and together with labour” (ibid.). Or, to put it another way, language “appeared as an indispensable medium in the relationship between men and nature.” Our ancestors manufactured tools and made regular use of them³³. Activities of this kind needed a closer contact with the fellows, a more regular control of collective activities, and an increasing shared knowledge of skills and experience. In this way, language met this urge.

To Spirkin, “the formation of speech was preceded by a long progress in the development of vocal and motor reactions in animals, genetically close to man” (id., p. 295). Spirkin described the two basic stages in the formation of speech: i) “the period when there was no proper articulated speech” and ii) “the period after it emerged” (id., p. 299). During the first period “in the course of labour the gestures of apes were transformed into the fairly elaborate generalised gestures of

33 In this regard, Spirkin invoked the Russian translation of Noire 1880 (Nuare [1880] 1925) and Morgan 1877. Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) was deeply influenced by Morgan’s theory of progress. To Morgan, the formation of the fully-fledged languages needs three stages: i) gesture language using natural symbols; ii) the monosyllabic language, the first phase of the articulate language; iii) syllabic language.

men” (id., p. 296). And our ancestors received the heritage of phonatory abilities of the animals closed to them. Thus, they could imitate the sounds of nature and utter their emotions. Gestures, mimetic expressions, and emotional utterances have been, however, a mere support of the formation of human-specific speech. In effect, the key factor in the evolution of language was the development of both the phonatory organs and the cognitive abilities to associate sounds and images.

According to Spirkin, the turn from animal signals to linguistic sounds “occurred when the still unarticulated sounds had ceased to be connected with emotions and became associated with real objects or rather with the images of these objects” (id., p. 297). On that basis, sound imitation did have “a very limited part” in the formation of language (id., p. 298). In the same way, gestures merely supported the designation: “gestures would determine the direction of a sound and fix it upon an object” (id., p. 297). In this manner, Spirkin established on what material basis speech became capable of meeting the urge to communicate during collective cooperative activities in a better way.

Interestingly, Thảo set out a theory of indicative gesture as the fundamental key to explaining the formation of human language which is very similar to Spirkin’s one. In the following lines, the main common assumptions of the two theories will be listed.

Thảo’s theory of language origins started with the assumption that “the apes we know, strictly speaking, have no language” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 4). To him, “the anthropoids lack the most elementary linguistic sign: the indicative gesture.” The various expression in animals (gestures, cries, etc.) “can also serve as signals for determinate behaviours, but, taken strictly, they have not any meaning signifying an object” (ibid.). In other words, the most elementary linguistic sign is the indicative gesture which tends to an object and, in this way, means the object.

As Spirkin, then, Thảo did not dismiss the idea that language refers to reality. And, along with the Soviet anthropologist, Thảo asserted that our pre-human ancestors had at a disposal the indicative gesture as powerful means to signify things and join their common attention. As a matter of fact, “the original form of the indicative movement thus can be defined as *guidance at a distance*” (id., p. 6). The guidance at a distance “obviously derived from the contiguous guidance used

by the anthropoids” but the guidance at a distance differs from the contiguous guidance because it arose in a new social context. As Thảo put it, “the development of adaptive labour played a determining role here” (ibid.). The same applied to Spirkin.

Given the needs to coordinate collective efforts, “the guidance movement does not consist in simply tracing a direction, it has essentially the function of a call” (id., p. 9). Indeed, “the indicative gesture thus contains two moments, the gestural moment and the exclamatory moment.” And “at the prehominid stage, when the cry [which was emotional merely] accompanies the indicative gesture, it takes, thereby, the meaning of object.” In this vein, the cry “becomes the exclamation that defines the original form of verbal language and indicates the object as an object of work: the ‘this here!’.” Thus, as Spirkin before him, Thảo, too, suggested that the indicative gesture had been an essential support of vocalizations and allowed vocalizations becoming meaningful. The similarities between Spirkin’s and Thảo’s theories of gestural indication as support of vocalizations could lead us to suggest that Thảo had been influenced by Spirkin. But it is not right. In effect, Thảo assigned to gestures a more relevant role than Spirkin.

3.3. A Historical Overview of Psycho-Motor Theories of Language

As has been said, for Spirkin the core of the human-specific language is the ability to associate sounds with images of things. To Spirkin, human-specific speech results from the following development of i) sounds of nature are heard; ii) those sounds are reproduced in front of the thing; iii) the reproduction of sounds entails certain movements of muscles; iv) these movements of muscles are associated with the image of the things that causes the sounds reaction; v) the repetition of the same experience fixes the association of sounds, the movement of muscles, and images of things (cf. Spirkin 1959: 297). As this discussion implies, first linguistic sounds were onomatopoeias and interjections whose function was to designate things in so far as they were associated with the images of the things.

Darwin had already underlined the ability of our ancestors to associate sounds with ideas. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin suggested the continuity between

animal communication systems and human language. The difference between human language and animal communication does not concern semantics – expression of desires and needs – or articulation of sounds – proper of a wide range of species of birds, but rather human “almost infinitely larger power of associating together the most diversified sounds and ideas” (Darwin 1874: 85-86). One must also remember Darwin’s principle of the acquisition of associated serviceable habits – which are then inherited by offspring:

certain complex actions are of direct or indirect service under certain states of the mind, in order to relieve or gratify certain sensations, desires, &c.; and whenever the same state of mind is induced, however feebly, there is a tendency through the force of habit and association for the same movements to be performed, though they may not then be of the least use. (Darwin 1872: 1)

This principle played a relevant role in Spirkin’s theory (cf. Spirkin 1966: 25-26)

In the 1870s, in Germany, naturalistic approaches to language began to assume a psycho-motor theory of speech (see Formigari 2010). The most relevant precursor of this theory was the German philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841). Contrary to idealism, some scholars suggested that speech was originally non-communicative. For instance, Steinthal (1881: 361) admitted that vocal reflexes are the precursors of speech and articulated sounds. According to Hermann Paul (1846–1921; see Paul 1886), Hermann Lotze (1817–1881; see Lotze 1852), Berthold Delbrück (1842–1922; see Delbrück 1901), and other German scholars, every psychical excitation corresponds to reflected corporeal movement. On that basis, the speech was originally a mechanical *reflex-action* (Reflexbewegungen). According to the supporter of psycho-motor theories, voice has principally the function of motor and mechanical externalization of perceptions and experiences. For this reason, vocalizations have been called “reflex-sound” (Reflexlaut). And the Russian linguist Aleksandr Potebnja (1835–1891) stated that the human-specific power to designate things depends upon the ability to associate reflex-sounds to past experiences (see Potebnja 1862 and Fontaine 1995). Remarkably, Potebnja had been explicitly invoked by Spirkin (1966).

To Spirkin, the association of sounds to experiences entails the turning of emotional sound into symbols of things. To him, the formation of language

depends upon the mechanism of conditioned reflex suggested by Pavlov. Specifically, Pavlov learned from his masters – especially Karl Ludwig (1816–1895), Claude Bernard (1813–1878), and Ilya Faddeyevich Cyon (1842–1912) – that organism is a self-regulating system. More specifically, Pavlov’s psychological theory was based on the notion of “conditional reflex.” Under given experimental condition, the conditional reflex is the response of a given subject after the presentation of a given conditioning stimulus.

Pavlov noted that dogs systematically drooled while he entered the room because they associated Pavlov’s presence (conditioned stimulus) to the food (unconditioned stimulus: the food usually causes salivation). Thus, one could define conditioning as the basic mechanism of learning by which a stimulus (called conditioned) may be associated with another stimulus (unconditioned) following repeated associations between the presentation of one and another stimulus³⁴.

Interestingly, Bexterev in his *Objective Psychology* generalized the mechanism of reflex and employed it also for explaining the more complex processes of thought and language (cf. Bechterev 1913: Chap. VIII-X). On that basis, he called *symbolic reflexes* reactions that fix some conventional links between the state of affairs and words, gestures or pantomimes (id., p. 371). To Bexterev, language learning is the result of some associations and dissociations of cerebral traces under environmental influences that imply verbal-motor reactions. Gestures and pantomime are for him the direct completion of speech exactly because they reinforce the effects of speech (cf. id., p. 384).

The main conundrum of psycho-motor approach to language origins is that we cannot explain three facts at least: i) psycho-motor approach cannot explain the gradual development of human cognitive skills because it takes for grant the ability to associate sounds with sensations, images and so forth, and limits itself to

34 The work of Pavlov was well known in the Western countries thanks to the writings of John B. Watson. Remarkably, Pavlovian term “conditional reflex” (условный рефлекс) had been mistranslated from the Russian as “conditioned reflex”. Consequently, other scientists read Pavlov’s theory as he had reasoned that reflexes are conditioned and have been produced by virtue of a process called *conditioning*. Instead, Pavlov said that the reflex is conditional because it may be involved by way of given experimental conditions. But the idea of “conditioning” as an automatic form of learning became a key concept in comparative psychology.

describe the development of articulate speech; ii) then it cannot explain the shared nature of signs within a community because the first producer of signs seems to be alone; iii) the psycho-motor approach to language seems to describe the conditions of language learning within an already established community of speakers. But we should rule out the possibility of language learning given the phylogenetic scenario. We can now appreciate Spirkin's own contribution to the debate. Crucially, introducing gestural indication, Spirkin offered a better support for associationism. In fact, the gestural indication established a fixed referent of vocalizations among our pre-human ancestors.

3.4. From Unarticulated to Articulate Speech in Soviet Debates on Language Origins

Thảo's invoked Spirkin's writings in a very interesting page which was devoted to the evolution of vocal cords:

We must, of course, take into account here a considerable difference: the child comes into the world with the anatomy of *Homo sapiens*, and he has been brought up in a civilized society. Even though his cortex has not completely matured, his first words, at the *prehominid age*, already display the beginnings of articulation, of which Australanthropus was undoubtedly incapable. It is true that the transition to erect posture had to bring about a thickening and rounding of the vocal cords, with a certain softening of the lower jaw, so that Australanthropus probably could emit more varied sounds than the anthropoid [in the footnote, Thảo invoked Spirkin 1966]. (Thảo [1973] 1984: 55)

According to Spirkin (1959: 299), generally, "a historical approach will show that all development takes place through transition from a less to a more differentiated state." It means that language arose from unarticulated speech, the juxtaposition of entire sound units. This unarticulated speech was at a disposal of the Pithecanthropus. Unarticulated speech "had neither phonemes nor a more or less clearly differentiated vocabulary" (id., p. 307). It was an undifferentiated sound complex. And the formation of language "leads from undifferentiated, syncretically combined formations towards individual, relatively monosemantic components designating notions" (id., p. 307-308).

In the Russian tradition, the theory of the development of language from

syncretic to analytical components was largely debated. For instance, it was the essential principle of Marr's glottogenetic theory: a language develops apart from a diffuse and syncretic state towards a more differentiated one (Chown 2005). Marr argued for the diffuse nature of sounds and syntax and the polysemic nature of words during the prehistory. The Russian philologist Aleksandr N. Veselovskij (1838–1906) had already employed the term “syncretism” in a similar way. And, for this reason, Chown (2005) insisted that it seems quite possible that Marr's term “diffuznost’,” which gradually became an integral part of his works, corresponds to the term already employed by Veselovskij. Chown (2005) also remarked the relevance of Levy-Bruhl's anthropological approach and his idea of homogeneity which dominates the souls of primitives. In 1935, the Soviet linguist Lev Vladimirovič Ščerba (1880–1944) who spoke of interjections as very old “diffused sounds” (Velmezova 2008). Like his master I.A. Baudouin of Courtenay (1846–1929), Ščerba considered the diffuse sounds to be older than the sounds forming the modern linguistic systems. Notably, Ščerba was invoked several times by Spirkin (1966: 35; id. 1959: 300).

To Spirkin (1959: 304) “the rudiments of articulate speech among the Neanderthals were further developed with the advent of Cro-Magnon man at the beginning of the Late Paleolithic.” That is to say, the Cro-Magnon man began to develop human-specific phonetic abilities and to differentiate individual articulated sounds. To Spirkin, however, “the word is not the beginning of speech” (id., p. 307). The sentence is rather “the real speech unit.” It means that prehistoric diffused sounds became sentences composed of articulated sound-units.

Spirkin's (1966) assumption that the formation of speech must be regarded as the transition from inarticulate to articulate speech seriously depended upon the theory of the Russian anthropologist of Viktor Valerianovich Bunak (1891–1978) – who had been the director Department of Anthropology of Moscow since 1923 (cf. Bertrand 2002: 314). In turn, Spirkin (1966) was invoked by Thảo ([1973] 1984: 55). Bunak had been dealing with the anatomy-physiological development of vocal organs for a very long time. To him, articulated language arose among our human ancestors and not before. Before the emergence of humankind, one could hypothesize a stage in which our pre-human ancestors employed isolated

monosyllabic inarticulate polysemic words. After that, our human ancestors began to associate words with different meanings.

Bunak, like Spirkin after him, set out that “neither of the enumerated kinds of gestures is the basis for the development of abstraction and it cannot substitute the activity of vocal organs” (Bunak 1959: 321; see also Bunak 1951). In effect, both of them considered the gestural moment as a contingent and disappearing moment in the formation of language. Against that, Thảo assigned to gesture a great value in the evolution and functioning of language. But Thảo and Bunak disagreed also in considering the formation of thought. The primacy of gestures leads Thảo to assign a relevant role to gestures in the formation of abstract notions. Instead, Bunak assigned the same function to articulate speech.

Like other anthropologists of the epoch, Bunak (1959: 313) regarded “the consistently growing use of outside objects (stones, sticks) for getting food, for defence and attack” as the leading factor that directed the evolution of ancient hominids. Regarding language, “speech develops in close connection with the development of thinking” (id., p. 310). But the formation of thought and the formation of speech are the results of two different processes which, at a certain point of human evolution, converged (for a similar assumption see the paragraph devoted to Vygotsky in Chapter 6). In detail, Bunak stated that

the development of speech in its initial stage can be characterized as the process of fixing for each sound a definite logical meaning based on the delimitation and generalization of perceptions. At the same time, this logical meaning can be referred only to the sounds pronounced with a more definite position of vocal organs than the diffusive sounds of animals. (id., p. 311)

Thus, Bunak regarded speech as “voiced sounds with a definite logical meaning” (id., p. 310). According to him, sophisticated vocal organs are the preconditions for having abstract thought. Sounds fixed the first perceptive generalization and allowed to develop more complicated forms of thought. The peculiar quality of sounds to allow rational thought depends upon the ability to articulate and differentiate sounds: “The faculty of abstraction was fixed in coordination with the perfection of the vocal activity” (id., p. 316).

Against that, Thảo regarded the development of gestures and their

internalization as the main key to explaining the evolution of thinking. To him, this process began indeed when “emission took on an objective, or linguistic meaning for the first time by being linked to the original indicative gesture” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 56). In this way, the gestural moment had a primacy over the vocal one and it was sufficient to allow the development of abstract thought by way of the evoked movements of the body (see his theory of the sign of representation: Chapter 10). More in detail, Thảo believed that the gesture is sufficient to allow the formation of first notions – even if they were confused. As a matter of fact, gestures radically changed the perception of the world already among our pre-human ancestors (see above Chapter 5).

By contrast, Bunak (1959) insisted that the labour alone could explain the emergence of first general notions and speech intervened only in a second moment to fix those notions: “the connection of certain manual movements with primordial notions promoted the fixation of the connection between the latter and more or less vocal sounds” (id., p. 316). In other words, unlike Thảo, Bunak did not see language as the necessary condition of the social life of our ancestors. To him, speech intervened from the outside as a support of memory. Then, articulate speech allowed creating more and more sophisticated notions.

Thus Bunak (1951 [= *The Origin of Speech on the Basis of Anthropology. Symposium on the Origin of Man and Ancient Distribution of Mankind* (in Russian), Moscow]; 1959) described the anatomical modifications which had been the preconditions of articulate speech. Descending of larynx, differentiation of certain laryngeal muscles, the thickening of the free border of the vocal cords and other structural changes, necessary for exact articulation, are morphologically connected with the formation of the cervical vertebrae curve, with the erection of the body, the diminution of the masticatory muscles, and the relative dimensions of the low jaw, etc. In a similar way, but in the English-speaking world, this point of view was also suggested by Lieberman (1972, 1973, 1975) and Lieberman, Crelin and Klatt (1972).

Quite differently, Thảo ([1973] 1984: 56) focused on the evolution of the brain to explain the development of articulate speech, rather than, like Bunak, on the development of vocal organs. Thảo highlighted that “*Australanthropus* did not yet

exhibit this phenomenon of vocal inhibition [i.e. the motor mechanism of articulate speech in present-day man, which essentially involves the inhibition of sounds immediately after their emission and allows one to differentiate them by passing distinctly from one to the other].” In fact, the whole structure of the brain was too similar to that of the anthropoid – even if the brain of the Australanthropus was larger than the brain of the anthropoid.

Contrarily to Thảo, Bunak neglected the gestural connection as a key factor to explain the polysemic but coherent value of first vocalizations among our pre-human ancestors (in this regard see below Chapter 11). This led him to argue for a stage of polysemantic unconnected words-sentences in a small number: “The speech at that stage consisted of monosyllabic, invariable, unconnected, polysemantic words. [...] this form of speech can be called the stage of isolated, unconnected utterances” (Bunak 1959: 318). On that basis, even if like Thảo Bunak insisted that “the original notions were polysemantic, included the idea of action, an acting subject, the object of an action, of the aim of an action and its means,” however, he did not hypothesize the existence of the functional sentence as juxtaposition and association of vocalizations by way of gestural connections (see below Chapter 11).

3.5. Linguistics in the USSR during the 1960s and 1970s: the case of Abaev

According to Sériot (1986: 147), the Soviet linguistics between the 1960s and 1970s tried to present itself as Marxist-Leninist, sociological, and historical. Soviet linguists thus shared with anthropologists like Spirkin and Bunak and philosophers like Thảo the same theoretical framework. Linguists and anthropologists shared some field of research, too. In detail, the question of the origins of language was largely debated also among linguists. For instance, the Soviet linguist Vaso (Vasily) Ivanovich Abaev (1900–2001) insisted that “no general theory of language can be considered complete if it does not include a conception of the origin of language” (Abaev: 1970: 234, from Sériot 1986: 150). This interest in the question of the origins of language is really fascinating since one considers that this issue was considered to be a philosophical one among Western linguists of the same epoch (cf. Sériot

1986: 150 – even if there were some exceptions).

From this point of view, one could summarise some affinities between Spirkin's theory of the origins of language and Abaev's conception of the formation of speech. In this vein, it could also be possible to appreciate Thảo's insight. In effect, the three authors shared the idea that the essence of phenomena must be found in their genesis. And they suggested three theories of the evolution of language which have the same materialist assumptions in common. But there are also some divergences that showed the originality of each of them.

Spirkin, Abaev, and Thảo asserted that the evolution of language is parallel to the progress of humanity (cf. Sériot 1986: 161-162). The three authors believed that language arose during collective cooperative activities. And they agreed that the development of brain and intelligence is not apart from the socio-productive organization (cf. Abaev 1970: 237, from Sériot 1986: 159). At the same time, an optimal glottogenetic theory must discover the reasons for the development of language in the very sources of language (cf. Abaev 1970: 243, from Sériot 1986: 159). Simply put, language has in itself the potentiality of its development. The causality of linguistic changes is therefore both external (the socio-political conditions) and internal (Sériot 1986: 163). But the external conditions influenced the inner development of language.

The thesis of the progress of language is based on the idea of the gradual improvement of the autonomy of words over time: in ancient languages, words depended on context much more than in modern languages. And the progress in language is thus assimilated to a continuous movement towards monosemy. Spirkin, Abaev, and Thảo argued for the idea of an increasing specialization of the lexicon. But Spirkin and Thảo did not agree with Abaev who set out that the formation of the lexicon is more important than the syntax (cf. Abaev 1970: 235 from Sériot 1986: 165). In fact, both Spirkin and Thảo suggested that language evolution must be regarded as the process that leads a holistic multimodal system of syncretic signs to fully-developed sentences as sequences of words. And they also suggested that syntax plays a relevant role to determine the power of rational thought. But Thảo's antisaussurism led him to accept the idea the language is composed of parts (the words) whose value does not entirely depend upon

syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations with other signs. There is a system of non-wholly arbitrary signs that constitutes a set of fundamental motivated signs whose meaning is rooted in their material form.

Spirkin, Abaev, and Thảo suggested a substantialist conception of language. Language is an empirical, factual, and substantial phenomenon that exists outside the subject and independently of him (cf. Sériot 1986: 169). As a consequence, to Spirkin, Abaev, and Thảo, a theory of language does not construct its object, but it rather finds its object in nature. In effect, Thảo ([1973] 1984: 17) admitted that the “language of real life is thus prior to consciousness” and “the existence of a language belonging to reality itself, prior to consciousness, from which consciousness draws its meaning.” Thus, it precedes the observations of researchers.

To Spirkin and Abaev, the lexical forms are not motivated, and therefore have no meaning in themselves. Abaev (1970: 235; in Sériot 1986: 151), in detail, rejected Noiré’s theory because he did not agree with the idea that some working cries would have been identical for all the primitive hordes. Spirkin, instead, asserted that motivated signs were merely a support for arbitrary signs. Against that, Thảo asserted that language essentially depends upon a system of non-wholly arbitrary signs, nowadays too. And it depends upon the primacy of gestures. From Thảo’s perspective, instead, Abaev and Spirkin seem to overvalue the role of the voice.

Spirkin, Abaev, and Thảo regarded language as a reflection of the world as well as an instrument to name things (Abaev 1970: 256, 260, from Sériot 1986: 154). To them, the formation of language is a gnoseological process in which language tends to be more and more adequate to reality. To Spirkin and Abaev, if we assume the point of view of the subject, the reality is already structured, before language organizes a conceptual organization of contents of thought. Language is a stock of names, a nomenclature. By contrast, Thảo insisted that language of real life entails a peculiar way of perceiving mind-independent things. Once again, the originality of Thảo’s dialectical-materialist glottogenetic semiology was the fact that he regarded non-wholly arbitrary signs as the origins of consciousness, human-specific perception of reality, rational thought, and fully-fledged languages. Those signs produced their tendential image whose internalisation involves the most

elementary forms of meaning. As this discussion implies, Thảo totally refused every kind of associationism. Those signs also change individual's attitude towards the mind-independent world. As a result, fundamental signs are the preconditions for having rational thinking in so far as it is based on the assumption of the mind-independent existence of external things.

4.1. The Debate on Gestural Origins of Speech: A Brief Overview

As has been seen in previous paragraphs, Thảo's conception of the origins of language deeply differed from other dialectic-materialist theories set out in Eastern Countries throughout the same period. The main peculiarities of his conception must be seen in the role assigned to gestures. To put Thảo's theory in historical perspective, a brief panorama of the Western debate on the gestural origins of language from the publication of PDM (1951) to Thảo's articles on the semiology of real life (1974, 1975) could be useful.

According to Hewes (1978: 46-56), the question facing the role of gestures in origin, development, and nature of human language was largely debated during the period considered (at least 200 papers and books). One could, however, lay down the general outlines which had been followed by the contributors. Taking the cue from Hewes (1978), it seems that the debate on the phylogeny of sign language in Western countries revolved around nine main issues: i) anthropoid ape communication; ii) gestural origin of human language; iii) the interconnected development of gestural and vocal languages; iv) glottogenesis and tools; v) hunting and glottogenesis; vi) language and thought; vii) cognitive demands on human brain; viii) the antiquity of spoken language; ix) sign languages and writings after the shift to speech. From this point of view, it seems quite clear that Thảo's theory dealt with almost every one of those issues in a more or less detailed way.

Leaving aside both the sceptical attitude towards the topic of the origins of language (see for instance Viertel 1966 and Vetter 1969) and the efforts to legitimate this field of research (cf. Mounin 1967: 22; Olschewsky 1969: 734; Jakobson 1970: 444-445; Fillenbaum 1971: 256-262; Wescott 1967 and 1974), it could be quite interesting to briefly recapitulate the main trends of the debate on the

origins and development of non-verbal linguistic skills.

4.2. Anthropoid Ape Communication

The question of language origins firstly faced the assumption of the purely vocal nature of language or the possibility to detach language from the vocal support (cf. Mead 1956: 175; Jakobson 1964: 217). To Thảo language slowly arose from a set of fundamental signs. The main feature of the fundamental signs is to be non-wholly arbitrary. The signs our pre-human ancestors employed were indicative gestures and vocalizations which were meaningful in themselves. So the bond between signifier and signified was not totally arbitrary. The human articulate and fully-developed speech cannot be possible if it is not preliminary based on some fundamental signs. To be efficacious, Thảo added, also ordinary languages require the support for some motivated signs: facial movements, onomatopoeias, inflexions, stress, syntactic reversal of the normal order of words and phrases, indexicals, pointing, etc.

Since one assumes that linguistic skills transcend the limits of vocal productions, a comparison between the communication of anthropoid apes and humans becomes useful. Vocal abilities of anthropoid apes seemed to be too rudimentary. But as soon as some scholars (cf. for instance Kainz 1961: 102-107, 193; see also Kortlandt 1967, Altmann 1968, Diebold 1968, Goodall 1968: 291; Bertrand 1971, Ploog 1972; Kortlandt 1973; Stokoe 1974 in Harnad et al., 1976: 505-513) had been regarded verbal skills of apes as part of more sophisticated and multimodal system of communication (facial expressions, movements of the lips, hand and arm signals, body postures, olfactory signals, etc.), primate's gesture-based communicative systems could be seen as capable to offer some elements to explain the transition from animal semiotic skills to those of humans (see Hinde 1972; cf. also Goodall, 1973; 163, 166-167; Stephenson 1973: 201-202).

But “all of these studies stress the overwhelming affective or emotional nature of primate signalling, and the minimal amount of environmental referential information which is transmitted” (Hewes 1978: 15; cf. Andrew 1963: 1040; Reynolds 1968: 388-389; Wind 1970: 79-80). Among apes, hand gestures are few and

the use of the hand is reduced to the contiguous perceptive field. Interestingly, some experiments of Rumbaugh, Gill, and Wright (1973) offered a support to suggest that “life in open-country environments may have been involved in hominid use of gestures made beyond the usual close range of pongid arm and hand signalling” (Hewes 1978: 18). Another really important point is the question if apes could be self-conscious (see Gallup, McClure, Hill, & Bundy 1971) or they do not (cf. Mead 1956: 168; Eccles 1973).

Thảo ([1973] 1984: 19) admitted that primates could recognize indicative gestures as such: “when the finger is pointed in order to indicate an object to an ape, his look follows the extension of the experimenter’s hand gesture to the indicated object.” But “gestural activity of apes denotes feeling and action” (id., p. 20) rather than “meaning of the object” (ibid.). On that basis, apes cannot employ indicative gestures even if they do it in a less “intellectual” way than humans. According to Thảo, “the indicative gesture marks the most elementary relation of consciousness to the object as external object” (id., p. 5). The animal perceives the object as part of the own behaviour: “the object is not detached from his own sensory-motor organization” (ibid.). The transition from animal communication to that of the hominid occurred during the prehistory of humankind when our pre-human ancestors began to collaborate and cooperate. More specifically, the use of instruments during purposive cooperative collective activities required the employ of gestures displayed at a distance. Thus, although anthropoids, too, live in society and collaborate, the use of instrument marks an essential difference between hominids and animals in so far as it entails the need to communicate at a distance. And this kind of communication implies the awareness of the object as an external thing.

4.3. Gestural Origins of Human Language

Some scholars suggested that gestures preceded the speech (cf. Critchley 1967: 36; Wind 1970: 80; see also Hewes 1973a, 1973b; Hewes 1978). But not everyone was in agreement with this option (see for instance Päscht 1955, Bunak 1959; Révész 1959; cf. also Kainz 1962: II, 580; Salzinger & Salzinger 1967: 31; Lenneberg 1967;

Bateson 1968: 618-619; Kristeva 1968: 53; Zhinkin 1971: 88; Fischer 1973). According to other scholars, inarticulate vocalizations were originally subordinated to gestures or to pantomimic and mimetic activities (cf. Drexel 1951: 63-64; Diamond 1960: 265-269; Kainz 1962: II, 580; De Laguna 1963: 6; Collinder 1965: 22; Goggin 1973: 175). Thảo accepted that imitative skills are the condition for having a more sophisticated semiotic behaviour. The developed indicative sign is composed of a signifier that evokes a motor schema or tendential image which constitutes the meaning of that sign (see below Chapter 10 for more details).

Thảo called the verbal moment of the developed indicative sign *syncretic word*: it totally depends upon gestures and as gestures convey a condensation of aspects. And contrary to fully-fledged sentences, the developed indicative sign remains context-related essentially. One cannot deny that Thảo argued for a multimodal theory of language. To him, the nature of first vocalizations cannot allow us to regard them as sentences or sentence-like utterance in so far as those vocalizations do not essentially differ from emotional cries (see below Chapter 9). Thảo ([1973] 1984) called that vocalization (or words, in a wide sense) *diffuse sounds*. Those sounds could be considered as words, in a wide sense, in so far as they are accompanied by gestures: “The gestural sign developed in this way is reinforced each time by a *diffuse sound*, of emotional origin, but which is now related to the tendential image projected by the gesture, and in this way, obtains value as a *word* with an objective meaning” (id., p. 56). In support of his position, Thảo set out a theory of the primacy of gestures over vocalizations among our pre-human ancestors, without dismissing the multimodal nature of proto-language.

4.4. Glottogenesis, Tool-making, and Hunting

According to Thảo, during goal-oriented cooperative activities, the fellows exchanged to each other indications at a distance. During the recession of tropical forests toward the end of Tertiary Period (2.58 ma), Thảo wrote, the first examples of Australanthropus began to live in groups, working in coordination to survive and adapt themselves to new environmental conditions. The Australanthropus *prepared and conserved instruments* and got means of subsistence from *collective*

hunting. Those cooperative activities required a certain distance between individuals and, as a result, the Australanthropus displayed guidance *gestures*. Guidance gestures were first referred to objects that were perceptible in the environment. Since the systematic use of guidance gestures had been established, those signs began to indicate absent objects of biological needs and entailed the cognitive representation of them.

As we have already made in Chapter 7, once again, we should mention other scholars who, in the same period, are seriously interested in the evolution of social practices. Semënov (1959: 37-39) and Yakimov (1973: 8) described the connection between tool-making and cognitive skills. Other scholars dealt with the connection between glottogenesis and tool-making in several different ways (cf. Oakley 1951: 72; Leroi-Gourhan 1964 and 1965: 41; Bronowski 1967; Critchley 1967: 72-73; Clark 1970: 143-147; Masters 1970: 309). These scholars largely discussed the primacy of tool-making over linguistic skills or vice versa. The relation between language and hunting, too, was largely debated (see De Laguna 1963; cf. also Lancaster 1968: 456; Clark 1970: 71-72, 102-103). Generally, what stands out when one reads this literature is the fact that a language system provided for environmental reference and enhanced hominid exploitation for food resources in a given territory (cf. Hewes 1978: 35-37). And, interestingly, Hewes (1978: 38) highlighted “the utility of arm or hand pointing in spotting game” especially “when the potential prey is at a considerable distance.” Now we have the very same hypothesis of Thảo again.

4.5. Language, Cognition, and Brain

Thảo refused the assumption that linguistic phenomena can be explained by physiological correlates and neural basis. The prehistorical language of real life – and especially indicative gestures – “effects the fundamental mediation between social practice and lived knowledge” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 35). Consciousness is always consciousness of both, the object a sign tends to and the act of signifying. So Thảo seems to suggest a theory of the co-evolution of material activities and cognition. And language would be the intermediary that allows the bi-directional interactions between mind and material activities.

Thảo ([1973] 1984: 17) admitted that “*the language of real life is thus prior to consciousness*” because “the existence of a language belonging to reality itself, prior to consciousness, from which consciousness draws its meaning.” “On the one hand” consciousness “*stands out from the material movement which produces it*” (id., p. 27). On the other hand, consciousness “cannot be separated from that material movement from which it stands out.” The material component of consciousness is, however, only one aspect of consciousness. Consciousness is a certain form of motion of matter. But consciousness is not a mere material motion. Thảo did not neglect that “consciousness, in so far as it actually exists must have something material in itself” (id., p. 26). That is the “*idealized form of the motion of inner language*” (id., p. 29). To Thảo, then, “the subject is *conscious* of what he thinks, thanks to the internal perception, starting from the kinesthesia, and visual and auditory associations of the outlined motion of his gestures and of his voice” (id., p. 16).

During the period considered (1951-1975), scholars discussed another very important aspect of the gestural origins of language: it is the connection between language and both, neuro-anatomical prerequisites and its cognitive effects. To Von Eickstedt (1963: III, 2040) – who adopted the gestural hypothesis – the inner speech and its sophisticated cognitive consequence, appeared after the emergence of the fully-developed speech. Hewes (1978: 40) regretted that “more experimental data are needed to determine if internalized manual gesture is less effective than internalized vocal language with highly complex manual activity related to crafts, tool using, etc.”

In this regard, Thảo explained the way in which a bodily-displayed gestural-verbal sign could be internalized and idealized by the ego. The pre-conscious, collective, and semiotic structure of social practices involves the development of individual cognitive skills. In this way, to Thảo, Husserl’s *noesis* could be understood as the sub-conscious system of sketched-out and evoked bodily vocalizations and gestures. In the same way, Husserl’s *noema* may be reckoned to be the tendential meaning after its intellectual internalization and conceptualization. For this reason, Thảo stated that, in inner language, “subject’s act of signifying the real, the material, takes the form of an *ideal indication* or *intentional sighting* [visée

intentionnelle] in the *informality of lived experience* [intériorité du vécu]" (id., p. 22). The intentionality (noesis), in this instance, is the psychic act of signifying whose co-product is the idealized meaning (noema). On that basis, one could say that the intentionality tends to reveal the pre-conscious meaning to consciousness.

We are back to where we started. The main aim of Thảo was to suggest a theory of the origins of consciousness which rooted human cognition in natural evolution as well as in the human social history. His main effort was to show how it could be possible a dialectic-materialist theory of consciousness which did not reduce consciousness to material motion and neuro-physiological mechanism: "such a definition would, in fact, equate consciousness with mere physical movement [...]. It remains, nonetheless, that consciousness displays an incontestably ideal character [...]" (Thảo [1974: 38] 2009: 300-301). A new semiotic model and a very interesting conception of inner language as based on a subconscious system of outlined gestures and vocalizations which are the internalized version of the language of real life allowed him to emphasize how consciousness and thought cannot be reduced to mere passive matter. At the end of his ILC, Thảo summarised his approach in the following way:

Thus in its human sense, the psychic cannot be directly understood in terms of the biological. It implies the mediation of social determining factors, based on the historical dialectic of production forces and productive relations, and developed in language. (Thảo [1973] 1984: 194)

Chapter Nine

Language Development in Children and Some Epistemological Remarks on Thảo's Approach

Naturellement, ce que je présente n'est qu'un ensemble
d'hypothèses de travail destinées, selon la règle, à être
critiquées et dépassées. Certains points peuvent sembler aventureux:
j'ai pensé que quand la certitude n'est pas acquise, il vaut
toujours mieux proposer une solution qui sera peut-être éliminée, que
ne rien dire du tout. Car le fait même de la réfuter
sera déjà un progrès vers la solution véritable.
(T.D. Thảo)

1. The Empirical Foundation of Thảo's Theory. - 2. Thảo's Approach and the Nativism. - 3.1. The Developed Indicative Sign in the Ontogeny. - 3.2. The Developed Indicative Sign in the Phylogeny. - 3.3. The Deductive Method. - 4.1. The Semiotic of the Developed Indicative Sign (I). - 4.2. The Semiotic of the Developed Indicative Sign (II). - 4.3. The Language of the Child / The Language of the Adult. - 5. The Experimental Data. - 6. Thảo's Scientism. - 7. Thảo's Representation of Language.

1. The Empirical Foundation of Thảo's Theory

As every other scholar who tackles language origins, the problem Thảo faced concerned the absence of direct empirical data that could confirm or infirm his hypothesis. He was thus forced to base his own hypothesis on indirect data: archaeology and psychology offered Thảo some evidence that he assumed as the empirical starting point to suggest his own hypothesis.

Thảo ([1973] 1984: 48-49) described the birth of language by assuming as a working hypothesis the *biogenetic fundamental law* set out by Haeckel ([1899] 1900: 80):

I established the opposite view, that this history of the embryo (ontogeny) must be completed by a second, equally valuable, and closely connected branch of thought - the history of race (phylogeny). Both of these branches of evolutionary science are, in my opinion, in the closest causal connection; this arises from the reciprocal action of the laws of heredity and adaptation... 'ontogenesis is a brief and rapid recapitulation of phylogenesis, determined by the physiological functions of heredity (generation) and adaptation (maintenance).

Remarkably the same theory was also set out by Engels (MEW XX: 452) as well:

For, just as the developmental history of the human embryo in the mother's womb is only an abbreviated repetition of the history, extending over millions of years, of the bodily evolution of our animal ancestors, beginning from the worm, so the mental development of the human child is only a still more abbreviated repetition of the intellectual development of these same ancestors, at least of the later ones. (trans. from Engels 1987: 460)

Thus, Thảo regarded the child between 14 and 20 months as the touchstone to suggest a plausible description of the formation of language (see fig. 16 for more elaborate treatment). Thảo called this period of the life of the child *the age of the prehominid*. To him, for instance, the child at about 14 months shows the first attempts to perform indicative gestures. To make another example, at about 19 months, the child shows the ability to abstract from the present situation and thus has at a disposal the representation of the absent situation. In this regard, Thảo invoked the works, among others, of Pichon (1936: 59), Piaget (1950: 70-72), and Gouin-Décarie (1962: 148-150).

As we have said in previous chapters, the most ancient prehominid ancestor is called by Thảo *Australanthropus* although today one called that species *Australopithecus*. At the time, the findings of archaeology and anthropology seemed indeed to suggest that the *Australanthropus* was the transition from the anthropoid and the genus homo: the member of this species lived in group and began to systematically use instruments (Thảo invoked the works of T. E. Konnikova, Spirkin, S. L. Washburn, Henri V. Vallois, A. C. Blanc, V. I. Kotchetkova, L. S. B. Leakey, P. V. Tobias, J. R. Napier, etc.; for more details, see fig. 20 and Chapter 7). For this reason, Thảo suggested that they also began to employ indicative gestures.

The question facing Thảo at this juncture is the way to describe the nature and

function of those indicative gestures and their development given that there is no direct proof of that symbolic behaviour. The solution he proposed was to study the formation of language in the child and thus to suggest analogies between the language of the child and the symbolic behaviour of our ancestors. In other words, Tháo established the following analogy to guide and confirm his theory: the child is to a symbolic behaviour as our ancestors were to a similar symbolic behaviour. Thus, Tháo proceeded from the more known data of psychology to the less known hypothesis on the symbolic behaviour of our ancestors. And the findings of archaeology offer some elements to confirm or infirm those analogies. In effect, as we have seen in previous chapters, Tháo developed the findings of archaeology to abduct some hypotheses on both, the social relations of our ancestors and their symbolic behaviour.

2. Tháo's Approach and the Nativism

The analogy between the development of language in the child and the symbolic skills of our ancestors is based, according to Tháo, upon the innateness of some of modern human symbolic abilities. Tháo stated that the child *reactivates* the symbolic predispositions already acquired by the species in the past ages. More specifically, the anatomical, physiological and cognitive development of the brain entails the slow formation of some native symbolic abilities. Here are some examples:

such a structure [the pointing] is stabilized in the hereditary form of the prehomínid ancestor's nerve synapses toward the end of the stage of his development, and it is their reactivation in ontogenesis that we have witnessed in the observation of the child who pointed the finger. (Tháo ([1973] 1984: 67).

the early drawings of the child of 16-17 months, or about the middle of the prehomínid age, appear as a *reactivation of the syncretic sign of representation of the instrumental form*. (id., p. 75)

It is there, in all likelihood, that we must search for the origin of the functional sentence [see below Chapter 11], whose *reactivation* is seen in the child in the second stage of the prehomínid age. (id., p. 92)

Such a structure [the enumerative functional sentence: see below Chapter 11] is reactivated in the sentence of little Génia [...]. (id., p. 103)

The gesture is reinforced by speech, and there results by juxtaposition and synthesis of the two elementary sentences, the correlative functional sentence [...] whose reactivation was observed in the child's utterance. (id., p. 104; see below Chapter 11)

[...] a gesture which we have interpreted as a reactivation of the insistent syncretic representation of the instrumental form, [...]. (id., p. 108; see below Chapters 10)

The progress of the child's drawing, from 16 to 19 months, thus appears as a *reactivation* of the development of the sign of representation of the instrumental form [...]. (id., p. 109; see below Chapter 10)

the child is only trying to master a structure [the structure of the *questioning*: see below Chapter 11] inherited from the ancestral past [l'enfant ne fait que s'exercer à maîtriser une structure héritée du passé ancestral] (id., p. 118)

And the list goes on. According to Thảo, the most fundamental symbolic skills are inherited structures which are *a priori* for the child and *a posteriori* for the species. These structures gradually arise during the ontogeny. Thus, language acquisition is not totally explained as the result of learning as the Behaviourism claimed. Another way of saying this is that the child is not a passive learner who responds to environmental stimuli. The child rather reactivates certain skills which depend upon a genetically predetermined maturational process.

To Thảo, the development of the brain determines the stages of the formation of symbolic abilities. Thus, the child has not at a disposal at birth the knowledge of the same linguistic structures of the adult. In support of his position, Thảo defended the idea of the discontinuity and peculiarity of symbolic skills in the child. In effect, according to him, symbolic skills of the child are structured on different lines to those of the adult.

According to the examples, the inherited symbolic skills of the child cannot be reduced to communicative and linguistic ones. Thảo described, for instance, the child's drawing and play to explain the formation of some symbolic structures. This means that the inherited symbolic structures are not restricted to a kind of a language-specific module. It seems that Thảo was suggesting that the formation of language in the child depends upon more general cognitive skills. In this vein, he agreed with the theory of general intelligence and general symbolic function set out by Piaget. To both, Thảo and Piaget, the symbolic abilities are a part of a more general development of cognitive skills from the most simple and concrete abilities

to the most general and abstract reasoning.

To Thảo, the inherited symbolic structures could be considered to be a kind of operational and procedural knowledge. The child is not aware of those structures but shows symbolic-structured actions. They symbolically act in the physical environment and manipulates signs they find in the social environment. On that basis, the experience triggers the formation of the most fundamental symbolic structures but not determinates them.

One could suggest that Thảo and Piaget have something more in common. As a matter of fact, both stated that symbolic skills arise through stages. And these stages are the same for all children in the world. But this assumption implies the need to explain why and how all children in the world show the same development by stages. Thảo's answer was that all children share the same phylogeny. The same nativist predeterminism has been suggested also by some neo-Piagetian psychologists (Pascual-Leone 1970; Case 1985; Karmiloff-Smith 1993).

Even if he did not tackle the issue explicitly, Thảo resolved the problem of Piaget's theory – namely, the explanation of the universal nature of the stages of development of the child – through the predeterminism. This solution does not allow explaining how language effectively emerges in the child. But Thảo had not to explain how the development of symbolic abilities takes place in the child. He simply assumed the predeterminism and the existence of inherited structures as a starting point to describe the symbolic skills of our ancestors.

In next paragraphs, we will illustrate the results of the application of this approach.

3.1. The Developed Indicative Sign in the Ontogeny

The first observable form of the indicative sign is the pointing. But the child at about 14 months already shows the so-called *developed indicative sign* [signe de l'indication développée]. To Thảo, it is not a simple indicative gesture because it could also imitate and reproduce objects in motion: it consists in the agitation of the hand which is alternately raised and lowered while being directed toward the thing going away. This gesture is obviously accompanied by vocalizations even if

their function is very weak to determine the meaning of the sign.

According to Thảo, indicative gesture produces a *tendential image* that must be regarded as the meaning they convey. In the case of developed indicative gesture, the tendential image this sign produces is nothing but the reproduction of the movement of the object. In detail, Thảo ([1973] 1984: 50) stated that this image is composed of three moments or three parts which are too confused each other:

1. The moment “of the *object*, produced by the tension of the hand and of the look toward the person going away”: this moment coincides with the gesture of the pointing that intends the object as external reality independent of the subject;
2. The moment “of the *motion* of this object or person”: this is the image “projected by the agitation of the outstretched hand”;
3. The moment “of the *form* as form of the motion of the object”: in other words, this moment represents the peculiar way the object is in motion.

As a result, Thảo assigns a letter to each one of those moments:

1. The moment of the object is “T” (in French text it is C): the “this here” (in French *ceci*) indicated by the pointing;
2. The moment of the motion is “M” (in French M): the motion (Fr. *mouvement*) represented by the motion of the hand;
3. The moment of the form is “F” (in French F, *forme*): this is the peculiar way the hand is in motion and represents the way the object is in motion.

Eventually, Thảo suggested the following general formula to summarise the signification of the developed indicative gesture, viz. the tendential image the gesture produces: “TMF”. This formula could be explained as “this here (T) in a motion (M) in some form (F).”

Interestingly, Thảo admitted that the situation in which the developed indicative sign is performed could determine the way to produce it: “According to the characteristic and needs of the situation, the developed indicative gesture will place stress more on one or another part of its structure” ([1973] 1984: 50). The three moments of the image produced by the developed indicative gesture could be more or less stressed according to the needs of the situation. In this way, from the general formula TMF, Thảo deduced six variations:

(1) The general formula that represents the stress on the moments of the object and its motion: TMF.

(2) The formula of the stress on the moments of the object and the form of motion: TFM.

(3) The formula of the stress on the moments of the motion and the form of motion: MFT.

(4) The formula of the stress on the moments of the motion and the object of motion: MTF.

(5) The formula of the stress on the moments of the form of motion and the object of motion: FTM.

(6) The formula of the stress on the moments of the form of motion and the motion itself: FMT.

Hence, the *polysemy* (polysémie) usually attributed to the language of the child. This is particularly true in the case of the vocal moment. The presumed *polysemy* of the language of the child depends upon the judgement of the adult who considers the vocal moment alone. In effect, Thảo remarked that the language of the child has been regarded by common sense as polysemic exactly because the vocalization is subordinated to the developed indicative gesture. This one shows modulations and shades of three moments. Thus, the polysemy of the vocal moment does not exclude the possibility to understand the sign exactly because as a whole it shows modulations and shades since the child stresses on one or the other moment of the gesture.

Piaget (1936) had already suggested that the sensorimotor schema is a totality that does not result from the association or synthesis of elements; it might be also clear why Thảo wrote that the signification of the developed indicative sign is a unity. The developed indicative gesture is a whole movement which can be divided into three moments. The child is also able to stress on one or another moment of the gesture without leading to a segmentation of the gesture into minimal parts. The signification of the developed indicative gesture is a closed system, a whole sensorimotor schema composed of three moments.

The gesture is a meaningful unity that always conserves the same shape and the same meaning. On that basis, the unity of the signifier is the condition for having

the unity of signified. Thus, there is no segmentation of the signified but rather a condensation of aspects within the same image.

The gesture could be modulated by the performer who stresses on one or another moment of the gesture. Specifically, Thảo argued that the moment which is less stressed correspond to a movement of the hand that is cut short. For instance, in the case of (2) TFM, Thảo ([1973] 1984: 53) wrote: “the motion of the hand which develops from its tension [i.e. the pointing: T] is cut short in such a manner that the emphasis of the gesture is shifted to second place to the moment of the form [the form of motion: F].”

3.2. The Developed Indicative Sign in the Phylogeny

After having described the structure of the developed indicative gesture in the child, Thảo applied his working hypothesis to phylogeny. To him, *the indicative gesture* (*geste de l'indication*) had probably marked the transition from anthropoids to hominids. Then the passage from *the circular-arc motion* (*geste en arc de cercle*) to *the straight-line gesture* (*forme en ligne droite*) took place because of needs which arose beyond urgent work situations (see below Ch. 10).

To Thảo, indicative gestures were at first realized as *circular-arc movements* among first prehomnids. The motion of the hand in a circular-arc was employed to carry the whole group in the same direction. For instance, it was the sign employed during collective hunts. This original form of indication had a structural disadvantage because “it actually implies an urgent work situation” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 11). In particular, “such a sign would have been much too strong in everyday life, when it was just a matter of the prehomnids drawing each others’ attention to a more or less interesting object and not preparing themselves for an attack” (id., p. 12). And, for this reason, the circular-arc form was “of rather limited use” (id., p 11).

To explain the development of circular-arc movements, Thảo argued for some hypotheses which can be made on the basis of archaeological data. The need to employ a weaker indicative gesture in everyday life led our ancestors to perform the *straight-line gesture* (the pointing). It could be considered to be the attenuated

form of the circular-arc movement. Before the emergence of Oldowan industry (2.6–1.7 ma), *elaborated instruments* (Kafuan instrument) produced with the systematic help of a second instrument required the *straight-line gesture*. This one directs the glance of the receiver “which follows the extension of the hand gesture stretched toward the object” (id., p. 12). Not only did the straight-line gesture refer to the current work-object, it was also employed to indicate “everything interesting that may be a possible work-object.” In this way, straight-line gestures developed even more sophisticated cognitive skills among our ancestors. In detail, the straight-line gesture is nothing other than that pointing that, as has been seen, marks the most elementary form of consciousness of self and of the object (see above Chapter 5). As we have shown above, “the cognizance of the developed indicative sign is produced only when the *subject addresses it to himself*” (id., p. 57).

Then Tháo suggested that “if, by virtue of the excitation of collective work, the straight line indicative gesture is prolonged for an instant, *the prehomimid necessarily follows the object in its motion*” (id., p. 56). This is the developed indicative gesture whose main practical function was to support the collective cooperative hunting. If one assumes that that gesture was accompanied by vocalization, to Tháo, one could then reason that “the developed indicative sign has thus been constituted in its fundamental formula, TMF (1).” In so far as the circular-arc motion gesture simply allowed “the concentration of the forces of the group on the object as the ‘this here!’,” the development of straight-line gesture led our ancestors to focus their attention on some properties of the object (T), i.e., the motion (M), and the form of motion (F).

3.3. The Deductive Method

Tháo’s theory of the evolution of language depended upon observations and experimental data concerning the development of the language in the child. Interestingly, he assumed that the language of our ancestors, as well as the language of the child, reflects the reality in some way. If, essentially, reality is matter in motion, the structure of the most fundamental forms of language must correspond to the reality, that is matter in motion. In effect, Tháo’s theory implies

at least three assumptions: i) the ontological insight of dialectical materialism according to which the reality is matter in motion in a certain form; ii) the language of real life is a useful means of production and problem-solving in so far as it evokes the elements of a scene; iii) language evolves through stages.

Thảo stated that the developed indicative gesture in its most elementary form could be translated in the formula TMF, this here (T) in a motion (M) in some form (F). Then, he listed six possible variations of that formula. Those variations exhausted the forms of the most elementary symbolic productions as far as every variation marks a stage in the development and evolution of language. Or, the evolution and development of linguistic skills is nothing but the slow and gradual transformation of each variation into the following one. In this vein, it seems that the evolution and development of language are summarised in the formula TFM and its six possible variations. One may well wonder, then, if Thảo's theory of language depended upon a deductive method of description.

To him, the analysis of experimental data – which was seriously influenced by some ontological and linguistic assumptions – involves the confirmation of the fact that the general formula of developed indicative signs slowly appeared during both the ontogeny and phylogeny through its six variations. In other words, the entire evolution and development of language are potentially contained in the general formula TMF, at least the most elementary stages of its evolution and development. The main task of the researcher is thus to clearly, chronologically arrange the gradual emergence of the six variations. Secondly, the researcher must describe the socio-historical conditions for the transition from one to another variation of the general formula of the developed indicative sign.

To Thảo, few examples are enough to describe the general structure of the language of the child. For this reason, one calls into question the fact that Thảo stretched the interpretation of the experimental data to highlight some structures which correspond to his ontological and linguistic assumptions. In any case, the inductive moment seems to have a subordinated role compared to the assumptions. Simply put, the experimental data concerning the linguistic development of the child seems to have a mere illustrative value. On that basis, it seems that the three assumptions of his theory and the general formula of the

developed indicative sign led Thảo to affect the reliability of the data, to restrict the field of appropriate examples, and to adapt them to a previous categorisation of phenomena. Then, it seems that Thảo described the evolution and development of language through a deductive approach in which he started from theoretical assumptions and verify them with data. Or, at least, he seems to prefer a deductive method to explain and illustrate his own hypothesis.

Thảo established a finite set of formulas (six) that can generate all the infinite occurrences. This set of formulas does not allow discriminating the truth or falsity of linguistic productions. And it does not allow determining the grammaticality of a linguistic production. It is rather an explanatory principle that marks the development and evolution of the fundamental linguistic practices. For this reason, Thảo's generativism had more to do with Hegel's conception of the Absolute than with Chomsky's linguistic generativism. Hegelian Absolute is the whole movement through various relative stages, the process of development with all its stages and transitions; it is the unity of thinking and practices, the dialectical set of figures in the becoming and the multiplicity. The Hegelian Absolute is no longer something static, which is already *in and of itself*, but it is a becoming, a being for itself, whose truth springs from a dialectical process, instead of being placed with original intuition.

In the same way, even if it is not the auto-sufficient totality of the real, the developed indicative sign coincides with the dialectical becoming of its own manifestations and variations. And, even if Thảo largely described the contingent practical needs that led our ancestors to employ new forms of the developed indicative sign, the historical development of the developed indicative gestures, however, seems to imply some kind of finality or teleology. Before concluding, we must also add that the study of the set of formulas was also conducted by Thảo against the background of a deep analysis of the objective social conditions of ancient societies in which those arose. This fact leads us to conclude that Thảo does not seem solve that tension between inductive and deductive method.

4.1. The Semiotic of the Developed Indicative Sign (I)

Remarkably, Thảo devoted a great amount of space to the semiotic structure of developed indicative sign. When Thảo introduced his own working hypothesis – the linguistic skills of the child at about 14–20 months may be assumed as the starting point to suggest a plausible theory of the evolution of human language – he stated that “we must first of all interpret the child’s language by itself” ([1973] 1984: 50). With this statement, Thảo claimed the right to study child’s language by its own features without regarding it as an imperfect form of the language of the adult. This assumption led Thảo to describe the own *code* (code) of child’s language.

The vocalizations of the child at about 14 months, Thảo stated, are usually called word-sentences. In other words, the adults consider those utterances used in isolation as vocalizations whose meaning is the same of a fully-developed sentence. A sentence “expresses a complete meaning,” an articulated *judgement* (judgement), a predicative association of words. From the point of view of the child, however, it is impossible that the word-sentence has the meaning of a sentence: “for if, at this stage, the child could give to his word the meaning of a sentence, it is difficult to see why he would not form the sentence itself.” The child does not distinguish the elements – such as the subject, the verb, and the object – that constitute the meaning as a whole.

Then, Thảo reasoned, the so-called word-sentence should not be taken as an equivalent of sentences uttered by the adult. Without reducing the language of the child to the fully-fledged language, it may be more useful to consider the isolated words of the child in their own semantic structure “which is not immediately evident to the adult.” As this discussion implies, Thảo refused to superimpose the structure of the sentence of the adult to the word of the child.

Thus, Thảo stated that the word of the child is perceived as polysemic by the adult: it means that the same word could be used to refer to several different situations. “We know that each of these words is applied to diverse situations with different meanings” ([1973] 1984: 49). The meaning of the words in child language cannot be reduced to the meaning of a sentence. In effect, the language of the child “is characterized by the appearance of a certain number of gestural signs with words used in isolation” (id., p. 49). For this reason, to Thảo, that language of the child “appears in two stages, one gestural and the other verbal, the gestural being

clearer than the verbal” (id., p. 50). For this reason, the verbal stage of the language of the child remains the same and then it conveys an inarticulate meaning. The situation radically changes since one describes the modulations of the gestural stage of the language of the child.

The vocalization has the function of reinforcing the meaning conveyed by the gesture rather than to determine it. In this instance, the gestural moment is more crucial than the vocal one to determine the meaning of the signs of the child: “the gestural being clearer than the verbal.” The gestural stage allows us to explain why the same vocalization could be applied to several different situations: the formula of developed indicative gesture “contains a certain number of possible transformations which will allow us to understand the *polysemy* of the word which reinforces the gesture” (ibid.).

As a consequence, “the gesture directly produces the meaning of the words [vocalization]” (id., p. 51). And the tendential image (signified) conveyed by the gesture (signifier) is a closed system, a whole sensorimotor schema composed of three moments. In other words, the three moments are reciprocally confused. For this reason, the meaning of the sign is polysemic, as has been seen, or “syncretic”. And one cannot forget that the context in which the sign is performed plays a decisive role to determine the signification of the gesture. The meaning of the vocalizations, in other words, required the gestural stage as well the extra-linguistic context of the speech act to be determined. In the case of sentences, instead, the syntagmatic sequence of words is theoretically enough to determine the meaning (but Thảo did not totally agree with this assumption: see the discussion of ordinary language in Chapter 3).

The nature of first vocalizations cannot allow us to regard them as sentences or sentence-like utterance. Those vocalizations do not essentially differ from emotional cries. Thảo called that vocalization (or words, in a wide sense) *diffuse sounds*. Those sounds could be considered as words, in a wide sense, in so far as they are accompanied by gestures. “The gestural sign developed in this way is reinforced each time by a *diffuse sound*, of emotional origin, but which is now related to the tendential image projected by the gesture, and in this way obtains value as a *word* with an objective meaning” (id., p. 56).

Those sounds are diffuse because of the rudimentary anatomy of vocal organs of the child. And especially of our ancestors who also did not have some cerebral areas that the child rather has. In short, children and prehominids are not able to clearly articulate sounds:

Even though his cortex [of the child] has not completely matured, his first words, at the prehominid age, already display the beginnings of articulation, of which Australanthropus was undoubtedly incapable. [...] Australanthropus did not yet exhibit this phenomenon of vocal inhibition, so that each sound he emitted was more or less prolonged in a diffuse form. Articulation was thus impossible, and the vocal emissions of Australanthropus must have been comparable to those of the anthropoid, although undoubtedly more varied. (id., p. 55-56)

On that basis, Thảo reasoned that “if we consider more particularly the verbal moment [of the developed indicative sign], we can say that the word appears at this level as *diffuse* on the plane of the signifier and *syncretic* on the plane of the signified” (id., p. 57). Assuming that the verbal moment is a “diffuse-syncretic word”, it cannot be described as a sentence-like linguistic phenomenon.

In conclusion, the developed indicative sign is a gestural-verbal sign composed of a gestural stage – which mainly conveys the meaning of the sign by modelling the signifier in six different ways – and by prolonged unarticulate vocalizations – which reinforces the gestural stage. That sign produces its own syncretic meaning – which is a tendential image resulting from the context-related performance of the sign.

4.2. The Semiotic of the Developed Indicative Sign (II)

Sometimes, the description of the gestural moment of the developed indicative gesture seems to contradict Thảo’s methodological assumption. The structure of the developed indicative sign seems to reproduce the structure of a sentence. T could be seen as the subject of an action (M) in a certain way (F). In other words, the three moments of the developed indicative signs seem to correspond to the three elements of a sentence: in detail, T could correspond to the subject, M to the verb, and F to the (ad)verb. Moreover, the different stress on each one of those

moments could involve a sophisticated way to express the *imperative mood* (mode impératif) – when the stress on the motion precedes the one on the form: MFT – or the *indicative mode* (mode indicatif) – when the stress on the thing precedes the one on the motion: MTF.

Thảo ([1973] 1984: 54) himself suggested this consequence when wrote:

We can thus say in general that we have a meaning of action in the *imperative mood* when the developed indicative gesture strongly supports a motion of a certain form so as to project the image of a motion (M) of form (F) entailing the “this here” (T): MFT (3). Inversely the meaning of action appears in the *indicative mood* when the mimicking motion is cut short so as to lessen the tension of the hand immediately. The moment of the “this here” then comes to the second level of the projected image and the meaning is then defined as “the motion of the this here in the form (F)”: MTF (4).

But, as we have noted above, the meaning of indicative gestures is produced by the movement of the body itself and does not depend upon syntagmatic relations of signs. In this way, the gesture is a meaningful unity that always conserves the same shape and the same meaning. It could be, however, modulated by the child who stresses on one or another moment of the gesture. In any case, the meaning the developed indicative gesture cannot be regarded as the sum of components. According to Thảo, this would be the structure of the sentence in so far as it is the sum of signs. Instead, the developed indicative gesture is a meaningful sign in itself.

And one cannot forget that the tendential image (signified) conveyed by the gesture (signifier) is a closed system, a whole motor schema composed of three moments. The three moments are reciprocally confused. And for this reason, the context in which the sign is performed plays a decisive role to determine the signification of the gesture. As this discussion implies, Thảo wrote that the six modulations of the developed indicative gesture “are thus more or less confused in a *syncretic* ensemble which cannot be differentiated except according to the situation” (id., p. 57). By contrast, the signification of a fully-developed sentence could be analysed in its components in a clearer way. And the meaning of a sentence depends upon the linear syntagmatic sequence of words while the meaning of the developed indicative sign depends upon the simultaneity of body

movements and vocalizations.

The gestural moment involves a “*modelling of the signifier* [modelage du signifiant; in the English translation, this syntagm is “modelling of the signifying act”].” In this way, it differs from sentences which are a sum of signs, and thus a sum of signifiers rather being a modulation of a signifier alone. Nonetheless, the gestural stage of the developed indicative sign seems to anticipate some features of fully-developed sentences. Though Thảo took the necessary precautions – and said that the gesture is a sign and it cannot be understood to be a sum of signs, the structure of the sentence seems to remain the starting point of his description.

4.3. The Language of the Child / The Language of the Adult

If we now consider the debate on the acquisition of language during the 1960s and 1970s (see for instance Slobin 1966, Coyaud 1967, Berthoz-Proux 1975), we could remark that Thảo was quite indifferent towards the main epistemological issues of that debate (the topic-comment theory, the pivot grammar, etc.). He simply regarded some psychological works as the starting points to develop his own theory. More specifically, his theory had drawn on some sources which offered him a corpus of examples of language development in the child.

But Thảo does not abandon to take a position on two topics which were extensively debated at that time: i) the theory of holophrasis (discussed, for instance, by Bloom 1970: 10) and ii) the continuity between the language of the child and the language of the adult. First, Thảo refused to reduce child language to the adult language. Second, he did not dismiss the assumption that the language of the adult is the result of the development of the language of the child. In the next lines, we will try to understand how Thảo conciliated these two ideas and dealt with the question of holophrasis.

The holophrasis is the use of a single word which seems to have the same value of a sentence. To Thảo one of the problems of this notion is the fact that one must presuppose that the child has a sentence-like structured thought, but they lack the grammatical tools to express it. Thus, he refused to admit that the child recognizes several aspects of the referent of the holophrasis without expressing them

syntactically. There are no underlying grammatical relations or deep structures beyond the so-called surface.

According to Thảo, the child does not dispose of the same linguistic system of the adult. On that basis, the language of the child cannot be considered to be a simplified version of the language of the adult. By contrast, Brown and Fraser (1964) regarded the language of the child as a *telegraphese or telegraphic speech*. According to this theory, the child performs vocalizations that are a simplified version of the language of the adult. In other words, the language of the child lacks some syntactical elements which are instead at work in the sentences of the adult. This theory, then, presupposes the point of view the fully-developed language to analyse the language of the child. At the same time, the authors neglect the peculiar nature of the language of the child.

To Thảo, the language of the child coincides with the movement of the thought of the child. The sequence of signs, as well as the stress on one or other moments of the sign, correspond to the attentional frame of the child. Simply put, the child highlights the aspects of the state of affairs which are considered more interesting. In this vein, Thảo set out that the reasoning and the language of the child entirely coincide. Thus, the use of a single sign does not mean a structured sentence. This one would be in fact a kind of *mentalese*.

Another problematic aspect of the notion of “holophrasis” concerned the primacy accorded to the vocal moment of the sign. The French Dictionary of Foulquié and Saint-Jean (1962) regarded the holophrasis as a “multisyllabic word”. To Thảo, instead, the language of the child combined vocalizations with body language, context, regards, etc. In this way, the language of the child must be analysed from a perspective that highlights its gestural-verbal nature. In effect, as the signifier is a diffused sound matched with a whole gesture, the signified is a confused syncretic image. On that basis, the signifier and the signified cannot be segmented: the language of the child cannot be understood to be a combination of ideal unities or discrete elements.

As a result, Thảo totally disagreed with Merleau-Ponty’s conception of linguistic development in the child. To Merleau-Ponty ([1960] 1964: 39), “language is made of differences without terms.” As Saussure before him, Merleau-Ponty ([1960] 1964)

refused to consider linguistic signs as meaningful in themselves. In other words, language is a system of signs. But he also recognized that “language is learned, and in this sense one is certainly obliged to go from the part to whole” (ibid.). To solve this conundrum, Merleau-Ponty asserted that “the learned parts of a language have an immediate value as a whole” (id., p. 39-40). Another way of saying this is that two discreet sounds are enough to have a system of relations and oppositions:

these first phonemic oppositions [of the language of the child] may well have gaps and be enriched subsequently by new dimensions [...] the important point is that the phonemes are from the beginning variations of a unique speech apparatus, and that with them the child seems to have “caught” the principle of a mutual differentiation of signs and at the same time to have acquired the *meaning of the sign*. (id., p. 40)

Clearly, Merleau-Ponty did not highlight the role of gestures in the language of the child and he also dismissed the role of diffused sounds. To him, the diffused sounds have actually no genetic relations with the fully-fledged language: “his babbling is often repressed by the opposition, and in any case retains only a marginal existence without its materials being integrated to the new system of true speech” (ibid.).

By contrast, to Thảo, the signs employed by the child are meaningful in themselves and they do not depend upon relations with other signs. They cannot be reduced to the verbal moments and they have a genetic link with the language of the adult. Merleau-Ponty rather considered the system of arbitrary signs as independent of motivated signs. To him, the babbling of the child depends upon rules that have nothing in common with the system motivated signs. As this discussion implies, the language of the adult does not develop from the language of the child.

To Thảo, the development of language may be described as a process of accumulation and qualitative shifts which depends upon the more general physiological and anatomical development of the body. Specifically, Thảo described a process of a slow sequence of refunctionalizations of a set of motivated signs whose use becomes more and more abstract and arbitrary. It does not mean that the motivated signs disappear or are totally integrated to a new system of signs. They continue to be at work and simultaneously they can also be employed

in new ways. Thus, Thảo preserves the peculiarity of each stage of linguistic development of the child – each stage is marked by a peculiar use of signs – without neglecting the continuity between the language of the child and the language of the adult.

5. The Experimental Data

Nativism led Thảo to regard the issue of mother-language acquisition as secondary to the process by which the function *language* is actuated. Interestingly, and despite all the differences, in the same period, Chomsky (1972), too, suggested something similar. But Thảo described how in-born semiotic skills gradually appear in the behaviour of the child during the ontogeny without taking into account communicative behaviour alone. He also analysed semiotic phenomena such as play, out loud monologues, imitation, painting, etc. To Thảo, the function *language* is the ability to perform a behaviour which produces its own meaning by way of gestures and vocalizations independently of the need to communicate.

As a result, the examples of linguistic skills in the child Thảo listed were extensively heterogeneous (play, the language in a strict sense, imitation, painting, etc.). He was obliged to reduce data to formal structures. As Trognon (1975: 344-345) has already noticed, Thảo suggested a code to translate the behaviour of the child into a formal system of semantic structures. In other words, Thảo argued for a symbolism which fulfils the function of interpretant of the behaviour of the child. But Trognon is wrong to reduce Thảo's formalism to Jakobson's theory of communication. Every sign could be interpreted by other signs. To Thảo, instead, the formalism was needed to make data homogeneous and comparable without assuming that the meaning of the behaviour of the child must be understood by way of that formalism. Simply put, the formalism is a heuristic device that does not prevent the behaviour of the child to be meaningful in itself.

Surely, the postulate of Thảo's theory is the assumption that ontogeny recapitulates the phylogeny. He described the behaviour of the child over a period of time and compared that behaviour with a hypothetical stage of human development. The fact that the essential condition that determines the emergence

of symbolic behaviour in the child should be sought in the phylogeny justified Tháo's choice to analyse a limited number of examples. As a matter of fact, the inductive generalization of a peculiar symbolic behaviour started from a few examples. To Tháo, indeed, every child shows the same symbolic development by stages. Another way of phrasing this is that listing a lot of observations is not needed.

His methodological approach led Tháo to interpret the semantic intention of the behaviour of the child to identify the inherent semantic structure. For this reason, Tháo took some examples to show the genesis of particular symbolic structures into account. He analysed a limited number of examples to explain the underlying symbolic structure of the behaviour of the child rather than constantly invoking the whole symbolic production of the child. Tháo isolated the context marked by the appearance and functioning of a given symbolic structure so as to describe its emergence.

To Tháo, symbolic skills in the child are intimately related to the development of the conceptual and cognitive skills that enable the child to organize his/her experience of the world. In the same period, this was the insight of the psychologist Sinclair de Zwart (1967), for instance. But ultimately, this was one of the main assumptions of Piaget's development psychology – for whom Sinclair de Zwart and Tháo developed a great admiration. On that basis, the same criticism of Piaget's approach could be addressed towards Tháo's theory, too (for instance Marion et al. 1974).

As Drévillon (1973: 281) remarked, Tháo's hypothesis lacked a solid basis of experimental data. Methodologically, Tháo mentioned observations concerning a few toddlers who are observed regularly every day for a few years. In effect, we have noted previously that the fast development of linguistic skills of children entails the impossibility of obtaining a sufficiently large number of observations concerning a given symbolic behaviour from the observation of a single child. For this reason, Tháo analysed the symbolic behaviour of some children who were the same age. This method had been employed by a wide range of scholars (for instance: Bloch 1913; Cohen 1925; Grégoire 1937; Leopold 1939-1949; Piaget 1923: 1024; id. 1936 and 1945). However, Tháo's sources took a few individuals into

account. At least, three problems seem to emerge in connection with the age-classification.

The age classification of the linguistic skills in the child is not without certain difficulties. As Cohen (1925) had already remarked, a child language that could be classified by age does not exist because one could observe a quick development and the coexistence of several skills that theoretically belong to different stages. Thus, it is not always simple to describe a system in progress and trying to isolate synchronic stages. As a consequence, Thảo's description of the development of the child seems to be confused. On the one side, in his descriptions, at about the same age, the child shows several different degrees of symbolic skills. On the other side, Thảo focused on every symbolic skill alone, from the simplest to the most sophisticated.

A second problem related to the age classification of the linguistic skills in the child concerns the teleological description of the stages of linguistic development. Certainly, Thảo repeatedly told us that the linguistic function of the child must be analysed independently of the language of the adult. But we cannot deny the fact that the language of the adult is the culmination of the process of linguistic development of the child. The two poles of that antinomy – autonomy of the language of the child and adults' language-oriented description – is maybe a conundrum relating to any other investigation into the language of the child.

The third conundrum of the age classification is the fact that the choice of the subject is made on the basis of the age independently of the social and cultural milieu of origin. This lack is interesting especially since, in the same period, sociolinguistics took its first steps in Western countries (see Hymes 1962, 1964, 1974; Labov 1966, 1969; Fishman 1970; Gumperz 1971; Haugen 1972;) after having had a great success in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s (for more elaborate treatment, see Brandist 2003, 2006; Simonato 2014).

6. Thảo's Scientism

Since the publication of PDM, Thảo developed his own approach in accordance with scientific data. The empirical data of anthropology and psychology were

considered as the starting points to speculate on the origins of language and consciousness. So he reasoned in PDM:

The absorption of the point of view of consciousness in natural reality is the sole conceivable way to escape from the phenomenological impasse. The fact is that the descriptions of antepredicative experience on which the whole edifice of the *Weltkonstitution* had to rest, have not given any really satisfactory result [...] (Thảo [1951] 1986: 124)

Thảo's aim was to outline "a scientific study of human existence" (id., p. 123-124). In the same way, Thảo stated that "it is no longer a question of setting aside the world in order to return to consciousness but rather of understanding the real movement by which nature *becomes* human by *constituting itself as spirit*" (id., p. 124). In other words, Husserl's phenomenological analysis of lived experience had showed how the subjective experience of the world depends upon the objective reality of mind-independent material world. So Thảo rejected the ontological gulf between the subject and the world and he illustrated how the lived experience is a product of natural and social history.

The same dissatisfaction was at work in ILC (see above Chapter 4). The Husserlian phenomenology assumed the task to describe what kind of subjective acts allow the emergence of a certain field of objects (the phenomena). So those subjective acts are the preconditions, without which a certain field of objects cannot be accessible to consciousness. For this reason, according to Husserl, the phenomena which appear to consciousness are unquestionable, while the existence of the mind-independent world is not apodictic. And the *epoché* is the operation which suspends the assumption that regards the mind-independent world as existent in itself. In support of his position, Husserl described the way in which everything we assume as real is something constituted by the consciousness. On that basis, Husserl took position against every kind of naturalization of consciousness because this approach uncritically accepts the point of view of science. Scientific concepts arise from our experience of the world, they are a way the subject interprets the own experience. The task of phenomenology is instead to describe the processes and operations which are the preconditions of the concepts of sciences.

Thảo's approach took it for granted that the results of life sciences are the best starting point to speculate on the origins of consciousness. That is to say, his point of view transcends the *epoché* and does not doubt the validity of scientific data – even if he was aware of their historicity, of course. Seemingly, to Thảo, the task of phenomenology runs out after having suspended the assumption of the existence of mind-independent world and having described the structures of consciousness. For this reason, dialectical materialism could integrate phenomenological descriptions and reveals the material origin of consciousness.

Ricœur (2004: 174) had already distanced himself from Thảo's theory and, in particular, he had regarded Thảo's approach as a return to the naïve attitude which takes for granted both the results of natural sciences and the existence of mind-independent world. In the same way, Derrida (1990: 32) had considered Thảo's theory as an attempt to bring transcendental philosophy back to the empirical world. Against that interpretations of Thảo's works, Lyotard (1954: 111) shared with Thảo the view that “the ‘natural reality’ that is discovered in the depths of lived experience, is no longer that which was presented to spontaneous consciousness before the reduction [the *epoché*]” (Thảo [1951] 1986: 128).

Since phenomenology had described how science and objective world are the results of operations of consciousness, Thảo rehabilitated the standpoint of sciences and assumed it as the starting point of his investigations. To Thảo, the mind-independent world cannot be reduced to conscious contents but rather the consciousness adapts to the material world. In this way, Thảo conducted a new kind of research that concerns the meaning, the validity, and the limits of both, the operations of consciousness and the concepts it produces. To explain the nature of consciousness, the *epoché* is not enough any more. The most elementary forms of consciousness cannot be explained without assuming that subjective lived experience of mind-independent world.

So Thảo could assume the findings of anthropology and psychology as empirical foundations of his own hypothesis on the origins of consciousness. It does not mean that he employed the methods of sciences to develop his theory. To him, the dialectical materialism alone could offer the methodological tools to correctly speculate about that field. But the dialectical materialism offers neither immediate

results nor empirical starting point to make detailed hypothesis on the origins of consciousness.

In other words, Thảo did not apply the methods of anthropology and psychology to his philosophical research. He rather employed the findings of those sciences to empirically justify and check his own hypothesis. Scientific methods cannot be the only appropriate base of philosophy. Instead, dialectical materialism is the method that compensates the lacunae of anthropology and psychology. Philosophy allows taking a further step forward in the field of research about the origins of thought and language. But the knowledge, which may be reached in that field, must be ultimately tested by sciences.

One could affirm that Thảo was a supporter of a moderate scientism – the belief that sciences alone can yield true knowledge about natural world, human being, and society. But one must also remark that Thảo took dialectical materialism more for granted than scientific findings. To him, dialectical materialism is the only source of genuine knowledge. For this reason, Thảo led his investigations in contexts to which science might not apply and where there is insufficient empirical evidence. And dialectical materialist assumption of the historical-related value of conceptions must be reckoned to be the most relevant factor that does not allow us to affirm that Thảo believed that science describes the world as it is in itself and is the only true way to acquire knowledge about reality. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Thảo demonstrated a certain naïve faith in scientific findings.

7. Thảo's Representation of Language

One could ask, now, what kind of representation of the object *language* Thảo's theory of the formation of speech conveyed. According to Thảo, the language of real life is matter in motion. And it exists as *the social matter* outside the consciousness of the subject. And it is composed of material gestural and verbal signs whose performance produces their meaning. Thus, human language is essentially a substance, an empirical phenomenon. Simply put, language is not the result of the representation of the researcher; it is not the product of the point of

view of knowledge. It is rather something that the researcher finds in the reality.

And, given the empirical nature of the fact *language*, Thảo accepted the results of empirical sciences with confidence. As an empirical fact, language must be regarded as a biological fact. As this discussion implies, anatomy, biology, physiology, and psychology offered some elements to investigate the nature of language. Language is based on some subconscious physiological mechanisms of motor memory. Given the objective bodily pre-subjective nature of the language of real life, Thảo set out that the subject is not aware of the system of evoked, sketched-out and outlined gestural movements which entail the idealized meaning of words and the content of rational thought. It does not matter here what is the point of view of the speaker.

But language is a social fact as well. As such, language seriously depends upon the development of social forces. It is indeed, first of all, an instrument of the reproduction of the society, a mean of production. In other words, language is part of social life. For this reason, the history of language cannot be separated from the history of societies and speakers.

To Thảo, language is also a gnoseological medium to have access to reality-in-itself as matter in motion. The history of language is the history of the development of the knowledge of the reality. For the same reason, language essentially tends better to represent the reality and the relations among mind-independent things.

Language also fulfils the function of a mean of communication. But it does not mean that the subject freely decides to communicate the own pre-linguistic thoughts to the others by means of language. Thảo rather insisted that communicative relationships among humans are a form of social relations and dismissed the idea that communication could determine social relations from the outside. The language of real life is an objective social entity that rather determines the emergence of individual consciousness. Indeed, consciousness is nothing other than the attention that each person pays to the own experience by way of the internalisation of the language of real life. In this manner, inner language is the inner subjective experience of the language of real life.

To Thảo, the essence of language coincides with the genesis of language. One

cannot forget that Thảo was interested in the material origin of consciousness and thought. For this reason, he introduced the question of the origins of language. On that basis, he dismissed any kind of investigations into the origins and nature of languages. Instead, the origins of human language allowed him to focus on some universal aspects of language which transcend the differences of languages. In this vein, the study of the formation of speech shows the core and essence of language. Indeed, the chronological sequence of linguistic abilities of our ancestors largely coincides with the development of linguistic skills in the child. These most ancient and most fundamental elements of human language are genetically inherited. As a matter of fact, Thảo regarded the development of language in the child as a process of reactivation of some symbolic skills acquired during the phylogeny. And, in the same way, the most ancient symbolic skills are the most fundamental elements of human language, nowadays too.

Not only do fully-fledged languages depend upon the phylogeny and ontogeny of linguistic skills, they also seriously depend upon a system of non-wholly arbitrary signs. The system of non-wholly arbitrary signs is the support for systems of arbitrary and conventional signs. As a consequence, according to Thảo, the linguistic study of language as a self-regulating system of arbitrary signs which depends upon the differential relations among them is too reductive. The essence of language transcends the narrow limits of linguistics and should be studied by other disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, and physiology. But Thảo's theory of language has probably been more radical in so far as he insisted that the system of arbitrary signs seriously depends upon the system of non-wholly arbitrary signs. In this way, the autonomy of the subject matter of linguistics is radically in question.

As a matter of fact, to Thảo, the scientific study of language must be conducted by a dialectic-materialist semiotics. This task is assigned to the philosophy, which reformulates the results of linguistics, psychology, anthropology, etc., so as to adapt them to the main assumptions of Marxism-Leninism. In other words, Thảo did not suggest the need of a dialectic-materialist linguistics but he rather advocated the need of a dialectic-materialist use of the results of linguistics as well as of other sciences which deal with language faculty.

Chapter Ten

The Dialectical Evolution of Language

Dans le développement du signe de l'indication, le sujet suit le "ceci" dans son mouvement, ce qui lui permet de se constituer une première image de la matière en mouvement.

Et les diverses transformations de la formule fondamentale de l'indication développée reflètent à grands traits, au niveau même du syncrétisme originel, la dialectique de ce mouvement de la matière.
(T.D. Thảo)

1. Preliminary Remarks. - 2.1. The Dialectic of the Straight-Line Gesture. - 2.2. The Dialectic of Cognizance. - 3.1. The Subjective Experience of the Developed Indicative Sign. - 3.2. The Dialectic of the Developed Indicative Sign. - 3.3. The Co-Evolution of Language, Mind, and Material Activities. - 4.1. The Sign of Representation. The Material Conditions. - 4.2. The Sign of Representation. The Perceptive Field. - 4.3. The Sign of Representation. The Signifier. - 4.4. The Sign of Representation. Some Cognitive Consequences. - 5.1. The Formulas of The Sign of Representation. - 5.2. Material Preconditions and Cognitive Consequences. - 5.3. The Sign of the Syncretic Representation of the Instrumental Form (9). - 5.4. The Sign of The Syncretic Representation of the Instrumental Form (10). - 5.5. The Differed Imitation (11). - 6. The Contradictions of the Sign of Representation.

1. Preliminary Remarks

The dialectic materialism – and especially its main sub-thesis, historical materialism – must be understood, inter alia, as the theory that argued that material conditions of society somehow determine its organization, development, institutions, and ways of thinking. With *material conditions*, one has to mean the given way of producing and reproducing the means of human existence. Thus, the study of the brain does not yield sufficient information on the activity of the mind. The role of social intercourse between humans cannot be dismissed. In this way, Marx stated thought (e.g. ideas, philosophies, religions, laws, etc.) is nothing but

“the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought” (Marx 1887: 14; MEW XXIII: 27).

But caution should be exercised when taking the interpretation of Thảo’s conception of language into account. Inner language is the result of the internalisation of language of real life – which, in turn, is part of material conditions of existence. As a further consideration, Thảo ([1973] 1984: 29) highlighted that both consciousness and inner language are subjective events. Each person assimilates the social experience in an individual way and on the basis of the own specific position in society (see above Chapter 5). Indeed, the thought arose from the inner dialogue that everyone engages with the image(s) of the others. The others could be the members of the own social group (e.g. family, fellows, etc.) as well as members of other social groups. In any case, consciousness is substantially based on existing social roles. It is instructive to note that Thảo was not interested in the analysis of the role of subjectivity in language but rather in the objective foundation of the subjective forms of language. For this reason, he preferred to investigate the ways language of real life as an objective form of language is the condition for having the dimension of subjectivity.

The dialectic materialism is not restricted to a deterministic description of the influence of social relations over thought. This is only the *materialistic* assumption of that doctrine. The dialectic materialism also explains how social relations – which remain the starting point of every analysis – *dialectically* evolve through stages. According to Thảo, the evolution of language is not simply the reflex of the dialectic of social relations. In so far as the language of real life is part of social relations, the formation and development of the language of real life show a dialectical structure like any other social phenomenon. In this vein, not only did Thảo suggest a materialistic theory of language evolution and set out that language depends upon social cooperative collective activities, but he also insisted that language dialectically evolves like any other mean of production.

Crucially, Thảo described the most ancient forms of language of real life – circular-arc gestures and straight-line gestures – and analysed the development of corresponding conscious cognitive skills. The precise extent of Thảo’s perspective still calls for further exploration. For the time being, we shall stress on the fact

that, in the following pages, the two descriptions – the one concerning the development of language and the other concerning consciousness – will be taken into account separately. However, we cannot neglect that they are two interacting phenomena. The only point we need to note for now is that both consciousness and language emerged by stages. To Thảo, indeed, language and consciousness did not arise suddenly but rather they emerged through three stages: sporadic, collective habitus and individual competence. That is, the language of real life and the corresponding forms of consciousness originally appear as sporadic events. Then, they are grasped as social stable phenomena and finally they become an available experience for the individual.

According to Thảo, the dialectic of language begins with the contingent and *sporadic* experience of the collective use of signs such as pointing. In this case lived experience of the target-object of pointing is too weak and undetermined to become a stable experience for the individual. The lived experience of the individual remains an epiphenomenon of the collective experience of the world. On that basis, the first real concrete lived experience of conscious contents such as the image of the target-object of pointing could be realized by the group as a whole. Only after this stage, the subject could internalise the collective lived experience and begins to perceive it as something that concerns him/her as an ego (*individual cognizance*). In this way, the subject realizes the undetermined experience of the first stage – the sporadic cognizance – in a more sophisticated way. And this is so because the subject went through the collective experience (*collective cognizance*).

On this issue, it could be useful to note that this description of the evolution in three stages of both language and consciousness represents only one side of the whole history. In effect, Thảo added a description of the evolution of language and consciousness resulting from the dialectic interactions with the physical and social environment. To him, the language of real life is a social behaviour. As such it also interacts with the physical environment. An interaction of this kind required permanent adjustments to the reality. In this instance, the language of real life evolved to represent mind-independent things in a more efficacious way. The language of real life became increasingly sophisticated because our ancestors tried

better to realize the relation of acquaintance between language and reality. So Thảo described this evolution as a dialectic marked by contradictions and improvements.

To avoid misunderstanding, let us take note of the basic purpose of Thảo's hypothesis on language origins. The central claim of Thảo's hypothesis is the description of the emergence of the most abstract contents of consciousness. It was the same problem tackled by the Husserlian genetic phenomenology (see for instance Hua VI). But Thảo's aim was exactly to explain what the Husserlian phenomenological analysis of the contents of consciousness must necessarily assume (see Chapter 4 for more details). Faced with this problem, Thảo seems to assert that the description of the evolution of language could be seen as the infrastructure of a phenomenology of consciousness. In stressing that, Thảo clearly implies that the description of language origins allows us to describe the forms through which consciousness and abstract thinking arise – from the simplest kind of knowledge to the more sophisticated ones.

Viewed from the perspective of Thảo, the language of real life appears to be the key to explaining the genesis of abstract thinking. Little wonder that every stage of language evolution corresponds to a stage of development of some cognitive skills. Or, to put it another way, the evolution of language shows the path that our ancestors had made, starting from animal dimension, to transcend the immediate experience of reality through more and more sophisticated forms of language. We shall recall what has been said in Chapter 3. One property belongs to the language of real life that is of the highest order of importance in this regard. The fact that language of real life reflects the real interactions with reality is what makes it the medium between practical life and consciousness. Every more developed stage of productive relations and interactions with the physical environment corresponds to a more abstract conscious content exactly because language of real life mediates between the two dimensions. Thus, the evolution of language must be regarded as the litmus test for determining the genesis of abstract thinking.

2.1. The Dialectic of The Straight-Line Gesture

To Thảo, first, indicative gestures were realized as *circular-arc movements*. The motion of the hand in a circular-arc was employed to carry the whole group in the same direction. For instance, it was the sign employed during collective hunts. This original form of indication had a structural disadvantage because “it actually implies an urgent work situation” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 11). And “such a sign would have been much too strong in everyday life, when it was just a matter of the prehomínids drawing each others’ attention to a more or less interesting object and not preparing themselves for an attack” (id., p. 12). And, for this reason, the circular-arc form was “of rather limited use” (id., p. 11).

The need to employ a weaker indicative gesture in everyday life led our ancestors to perform the *straight-line gesture* (the pointing). It could be reckoned to be the attenuated form of the circular-arc movement. The straight-line sign directs the glance of the receiver “which follows the extension of the hand gesture stretched toward the object” (id., p. 12). Not only did the straight-line gesture refer to the current work-object, it was also employed to indicate “everything interesting that may be a possible work-object.” In this way, straight-line gestures developed even more sophisticated cognitive skills among our ancestors.

The sporadic cognizance. Simultaneously to the dialectical development of gestures, according to Thảo, the cognizance, too, evolved. With *cognizance* (prise de conscience), one must mean the lived experience which accompanied the use of signs. The development of such a cognizance is composed of three moments and depends upon the development of gestural-verbal signs. To Thảo this most elementary awareness appeared sporadically. In detail, the sporadic cognizance is a psychological phenomenon that regards someone who is momentarily alone or is not seen by the others. Thảo made the following example:

If, for example, in a hunt one of the hunters lags behind the others, and the others call him by indicating the game with a gesture of the hand in a circular arc, it is evident that he does not have to call them in the same manner, since he is indeed lagging behind. (Thảo [1973] 1984: 10)

In this vein, individuals did not merely return the sign to the others, but they

address the sign to themselves.

To Thảo, the pointing “goes directly from the subject to the object” (id., p. 12). The circular-arc gesture, on the contrary, went from the others to the work-object. On that basis, it was meaningful for the group as a whole. By contrast, the straight-line gesture is “meaningful for others as well as for himself.” Thảo then reasoned: “it is equally for himself that he [the subject] takes up again the sign sent by the others.” More frequently, the straight-line gesture is employed during that activity. And in this case, the straight-line gesture could indirectly support a more stable form of individual consciousness. So Thảo insisted that the pointing could initially support the rising of self-consciousness only in a sporadic way. In effect, rarely the subject symbolically interacts with the physical environment outside of collective cooperative activities: “consciousness, which thus arose in a rather particular situation, still presents itself only in a *sporadic* manner as a *flash of consciousness*” (id., p. 11).

The collective cognizance. At the same time, “all the individuals of the group recognize each other in the others, since they at the same time address each to himself the sign which they return to one another, so that all merge in one and the same gesture where each sees himself in the others as in himself” (id., p. 12-13). This is the core of *collective cognizance* of the movement of indication. To Thảo, as a matter of fact, the straight-line gesture “has been internalized by the group” (id., p. 13). Thus, the collective exchange of signs involves the experience of signs as available tools for the group as a whole. And the straight-line gesture becomes an *acquis disponible* (available benefit, knowledge rather than *experience* as in the English translation of Thảo [1973] 1984): the group can use signs at will. In other words, the collective cognizance of the sign “permits a first generalization of the sign by making it available to the group outside of urgent work situations” (id., p. 14).

The individual cognizance. After that, the individual slowly produces and keeps within him/herself the stylized image (the record) of “a multitude of indicative gestures which always seem to call him in chorus to work on the object” (id., p. 13; the same happens with the inner language: see above Chapters 5 and 6). Another way of saying this is that the stylized image of the group is internalized by the individual and must be understood to be the record of semiotic collective exchange

of signs during collective cooperative activities which unconsciously influenced the individual behaviour. This psychic phenomenon is nothing but the internalisation of social relations.

Simultaneously to the internalisation of the image of the group, the signs employed by the group are internalised by the ego as well. So the sign “becomes for the individual available experience [knowledge, *acquis*]” ([1973] 1984: 14). As the subject has at a disposal the practical knowledge of the general function of the sign, they tend to apply it to every perceived object in general. This is the *individual cognizance* of signs as the internalization of the collective one. In this way, Thảo stated, “the generalization of the sign is completed.” Once the generalization of the sign is completed, the sign could be employed outside of urgent social practices. As a result, Thảo reasoned that

From now on the subject can systematically utilize this sign, of which he has become conscious in himself, in order to act on himself and others, to mobilize and direct the energies of the group for the appropriation of the object. From the very beginning this is obviously the foundation of the *practical role of consciousness* which will greatly expand throughout the history of hominid family. (id., p. 14)

Thảo introduced the practical role of consciousness, i.e. the conscious use of signs in order to act on him/herself and others. Conscious use of signs, in other words, provides a practical solution to real and concrete problems. On that basis, the conscious use of sign cannot be reduced to the expression of thought, but it rather plays a more fundamental role. But, unfortunately, Thảo did not say anything more about this distinction between the practical and theoretical role of consciousness.

2.2. The Dialectic of Cognizance

As has been seen above, “consciousness appears identically as *consciousness of the object and consciousness of self*” ([1973] 1984: 11). To Thảo, the self-awareness is supported by gestural-verbal signs which refer to objects and are exchanged during purposive collective activities. In this vein, the work-object is perceived in

itself and considered to be a mind-independent thing³⁵. As a matter of fact, the pointing supports the emergence of the most fundamental subject-object relation. It involves the image of the object posited as external to consciousness (see above Chapter 4)³⁶. Simultaneously to the emergence of the consciousness of the object as a mind-independent thing, the consciousness of self is produced. It is the “the image of that image, or the image of itself in itself” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 11). Thảo probably suggested that the perceptive image of the object is accompanied by the image of the own self during the act of pointing to the object.

In this way, to Thảo the pointing – which involves the awareness of the object as independent thing – becomes the support for having the image of the self who is pointing to the object. Given the primacy of social relations, firstly, the subject sees the others who are pointing, then the subject sees the other as similar to self and, consequently, becomes aware of his/her self as the actor who is pointing to the object: “this image of himself, which the subject finds in the others, presents itself as *within himself*.” And, for this reason, Thảo highlighted that “the relation to the self arises as a result of the relation with the other.”

The sporadic cognizance. According to Thảo “the cognizance of the indicative gesture began *sporadically*” (id., p. 12). In effect, consciousness “arose in a rather particular situation.” For instance, when the subject finds him/herself isolated

35 More specifically, with the statement “consciousness appears identically as *consciousness of the object and consciousness of self*” Thảo totally agreed with Hegel’s assumptions. To the German philosopher “for consciousness is, on the one hand, consciousness of the object, and on the other, consciousness of itself; consciousness of what for it is the True, and consciousness of its knowledge of the truth” (Hegel [1807] 1977: 58). To both, Hegel and Thảo, consciousness is not only relation-to-self but also relation to something else. But Thảo insisted on to the description of the formation of consciousness also the relation with other egos.

36 Thảo seems to agree with Hegel who stated: “Consciousness simultaneously *distinguishes* itself from something, and at the same time *relates* itself to it, or, as it is said, this something exists *for* consciousness; and the determinate aspect of this *relating* or of the *being* of something for a consciousness, is *knowing*. But we distinguish this being-for-another from *being-in-itself*; whatever is related to knowledge or knowing is also distinguished from it and posited as existing outside of this relationship; this *being-in-itself* is called *truth*” (Hegel [1807] 1977: 53-54). One must absolutely add that to Thảo the consciousness of the object does not become consciousness of the object as produced by the consciousness itself as Hegel affirmed. In fact, Thảo insisted that mind-independent things remain external independent entities even if they become the object of thought. The process of knowledge separates the subject and the object of knowledge even if they ontologically shared the same reality. So Thảo separated the question of epistemological realism from that of ontological monism (see above Ch. 4).

from the rest of the group, self-awareness first appears. But this kind of consciousness is not a stable state of mind yet. It “still presents itself only in a *sporadic* manner as a *flash of consciousness*.” More fundamentally, the origin of cognizance needs to be seen in the *collective cognizance* which is produced by the collective exchange of gestural-verbal signs during collective cooperative activities. In this regard, Thảo wrote:

Cognizance now develops into a collective cognizance where all the individuals of the group recognize each other in the other, since they at the same time address each to himself the sign which they return to one another, so that all merge in one and the same gesture where each sees himself in the others as in himself (id., p. 12-13).

The collective cognizance. In this context, the sign could be internalized by the group and became an available experience for the group. To Thảo, the exchange of gestural-verbal signs among prehomínids left the traces in the subject. “The prehomínid keeps within himself this stylized image of a multitude of indicative gestures which always seem to call him in chorus to work on the object,” Thảo said (id., p. 13). Such an exchange produces in the mind of the subject a sort of model (see above Chapters 5 and 6). Thảo made the following example:

It is a fact of common experience that we constantly feel around us the presence of our social environment, and this image essentially implies the typical form of gestures and words of people we know.

The individual cognizance. Slowly, the stylized image of the others – which accompanied the life of the subject – involves self-awareness. The subject addressed to him/herself gestural-verbal signs as if he/she addressed them to the others and received those signs by the others. In this way, self-awareness appears as *individual cognizance*: the gestural-verbal sign “*has been internalized not only for the group but for the individual as well*” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 14). The sign becomes available for the individual also when they are far from the pressure of biological needs and thus they begin to be aware of themselves as the same actor that points to several different objects in several different moments at various times.

Before concluding, one must insist that to Thảo the awareness of self and the

awareness of the “I” are absolutely not the same:

Consciousness, as it has just arisen, already implies the individual form of the *self* [soi]. If we consider its content, however, it still remains simply collective. Thus, it does not in any way contain the form of the “I” [moi]. (id., p. 15)

As we have shown above (Chapter 6 and especially paragraph 5), the use of personal pronouns and the awareness of the self-identity arose later in the history of the genus homo. Indeed, to Thảo, individual cognizance is still anonymous. It is still a sort of “mere herd consciousness or sheep-like consciousness.” Thảo was invoking the following passage of Marx’s and Engels’ *German Ideology*:

man’s consciousness of the necessity of associating with the individuals around him is the beginning of the consciousness that he is living in society at all. This beginning is as animal as social life itself at this stage. It is mere herd-consciousness, and at this point man is only distinguished from sheep by the fact that with him consciousness takes the place of instinct or that his instinct is a conscious one. This sheep-like or tribal consciousness receives its further development and extension through increased productivity, the increase of needs, and, what is fundamental to both of these, the increase of population. (MEW III: 30; English translation from Marx & Engels 1998)

To summarise, according to Thảo, the language of real life is an essential part of social practical relations. And the development of semiotic skills involves the formation of consciousness. The two processes go hand in hand. By way of language, consciousness arises as an epiphenomenon of social relations. Consciousness is not the subject of knowledge but rather the result of both, the dialectic of social relations and language of real life. As this discussion implies, Thảo partially agreed with Hegel’s theory of the relational nature of consciousness – which would be grasped by Husserl (see above Chapter 1 and especially paragraph 8) – but, against Hegel, to Thảo *consciousness* is nothing other than an epiphenomenon of the concrete experience.

Every subject carries within him/her the image of the symbolic behaviour of the others. In this instance, consciousness is nothing but the conscious lived experience of already socially established signs. At the same time, being aware of already socially established signs involves the awareness of both, the referent as mind-independent object – viz. the image of the referent – and the act of signifying

– the image of the act. Thus, it does not matter here of consciousness as pure self-consciousness of the own self as the actor of knowledge. At least, the subject has a sheep-like consciousness but is far from having something like subjectivity and individuality. The subject is merely aware of the self as a member of a group like everyone else.

The ego has no access to the self beyond the language of real life, semiotic interactions with the physical environment, and social relations. In other words, consciousness is not a pure substance but rather a result of the internalisation of language of real life as social fact. Consciousness is the result of the relation with both the others and the environment. For this reason, the most important achievement at this stage of the evolution of language is the fact that consciousness could play a practical role: it is the conscious use of signs to act on him/herself, on the others, and on the objects.

3.1. The Subjective Experience of the Developed Indicative Sign

After having described the objective structure of the developed indicative sign (see above Chapter 7), Thảo introduced some remarks on the lived experience involved in the use of that kind of signs. The developed indicative sign firstly unconsciously arises “on the objective plane of the *language of real life*” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 57). The developed indicative sign objectively communicates the two moments of the motion (M) and the form of motion (F), but the subject is merely aware of the moment of the thing (T). In other words, the subject is not aware of the sophisticated image conveyed by the developed indicative sign – i.e. the thing in motion in a certain form. In effect, the subject does not originally perform the developed indicative sign to represent the movement of the thing. The subject is simply aware of the fact that the gesture allows him/her to focus the attention of the partners to a certain object.

In the case of our ancestors, the interesting object is a prey because, according to Thảo, the developed indicative sign was a successful means to coordinate collective efforts during the hunting. In any case, the subject simply follows the object in motion and unconsciously performs a gesture that reflects the movement

of that object. On that basis, the material conditions of collective labour and the specific feature of the object – that is the fact that it is in motion – entail the rising of the developed indicative sign although the subject is not aware of it.

As a result, the developed indicative sign reflects the object in motion in a certain form even if the subject is merely aware of the moment of the object. Thus, the objective structure of the developed indicative sign does not still coincide with the subjective experience of its meaning. Thảo wrote that

the signified, or the tendential image thus projected [by the hand the follows the object in its motion], reflects the object no longer simply as a “this here” as such, but also in a motion of a certain form, as it appears in the material activity and the material relations of the prehomínids. On the plane of consciousness, however, we still gave only the original intentionality of sense certainty as immediate intention of the “this here”. (id., p. 57)

The subject has not originally at a disposal the conscious sophisticated meaning of both the developed indicative sign and its three moments. Thus, Thảo stated:

The moments of the motion and of the form still appear in the signified image only as *tendential moments* which are objectively communicated by the subjects to one another in social practice, but still do not imply any consciousness: consequently they appear only by virtue of the situation, so that the subject cannot avail himself of them in himself.

Interestingly, the context in which the sign is performed determines the specific features of both, the signifier and the signified. The developed indicative sign is originally meaningful because it follows the motion of an object within the actual perceptive field and during collective activities. The developed indicative sign is neither meaningful because it would be the expression of a pre-existing meaning in the head of the subject nor because it would be determined by the relation to other signs. The meaning of the developed indicative sign is eminently context-related.

From the point of view of the phylogeny, the cooperative collective hunting involves the unconscious birth of the developed indicative sign: “the prehomínid workers sent one another the same developed indication of the object according to a motion of form (F)” (id., p. 58). In this way, the individual is in the habit of using the developed indicative sign also when they are alone in front of an interesting

object. In other words, collective cooperative activities entail a sort of automatism that consists in the use of a sign whose meaning is only partially conscious. Firstly, this automatism appears sporadically. After that, the sign is no more addressed to the others and, thus, it becomes a sign addressed to oneself. So, Thảo wrote that “the sign automatically repeated necessarily returned to himself [the subject]” (id., p. 58).

As has been seen above, the subject becomes aware of the meaning of the sign by addressing the sign to the one’s own self: “the cognizance of the developed indicative sign is produced only when the *subject addresses it to himself*.” And the internalisation of the developed indicative sign is marked by the three stages of sporadic, collective, and individual cognizance. Then “once the various individuals have occasionally experienced this relation to the self, [...] the new structure [of consciousness] becomes generalized in a collective cognizance” (id., p. 58-59). The collective cognizance is supported by the reciprocal exchange of developed indicative signs. Therefore, the developed indicative sign “becomes available to the group itself, independently of any immediate task” (id., p. 59). Eventually, the sign “is *reactivated*” by the subject in the flow of inner language. Remarkably, Thảo highlighted that the subject reactivates the sign “as soon as an object elicits, in the dynamic field of perception, a tendential figure which re-enters one of the possible variations of the meaning already acquired.” On that basis, the perceptive field still plays the most relevant role to determine the meaning of the developed indicative sign.

From the point of view of ontogeny, Thảo insisted that the play must be regarded as the first example of the developed indicative sign in the child. In the case of the play, the child displays some movements and utters some vocalizations that he/she addresses to him/herself. As we have shown above, the vocalization gets its meaning from the movement of the arm. This one does not have to be an indicative gesture in a strict sense. What it is needed is a movement of the arm that produces the corresponding motion of the toy. As this discussion implies, the movement of the arm determines the signification of the verbal moment. In effect, Thảo stated that “play is a signifier [*signifiant*, signifying act] which realizes its own signified [*signifié*, significance]” (id., p. 58).

The fact that the child employs the same gestural and vocal ensemble by playing which several different toys, shows the way the sign is “an available acquisition” and the child extends “its field of application by continuing to focus only upon the general form of motion (F)” (id., p. 59). Thus, the play – i.e. a sequence of manipulations of the toy within the perceptive field – fulfils the role of developed indicative gesture that makes meaningful the vocalizations that accompanies it.

3.2. The Dialectic of the Developed Indicative Sign

Thảo ([1973] 1984: 136) had suggested that the indicative sign “is integrated in the very functioning of our sense organs.” That is to say, the indicative gesture marks the transition from animal to human perception (see above Chapter 4 and 5). In effect, indicative gestural-verbal signs show things as “external reality independent of the subject” and constitute “a first image of matter in motion” (see above Chapter 5). According to Thảo ([1973] 1984: 136), the six forms of developed indicative gesture reflect some configurations of the motion the matter itself involves: “at the very beginning of knowledge, the developed indicative sign gives a confused but effective image of objective reality in its most fundamental structure, as *matter in motion* or *motion of matter*.”

So Thảo explained the peculiar way each transformation of the developed indicative signs reflects the dialectical motion of matter:

- (1) “TMF presents matter in a motion of a certain form”;
- (2) “TFM presents it [the matter] in that very form as objectified into ‘a property at rest’ where previous motion is temporarily stabilized into a determinate configuration ‘in the form of being’ [Thảo invoked here a sentence of Marx’s *Capital*]”;
- (3) “MFT presents the motion of matter in its transmission from the subject of the action to its object”;
- (4) “MTF presents it [the motion of matter in its transmission from the subject of the action to its object] as accomplished in the object itself”;
- (5) “FTM presents the objective form of the object as objectified form of the

motion implied in it”;

(6) “FMT presents the form of motion in relation to the object”.

From the point of view of knowledge, the six forms of developed indicative sign convey several different meanings that must be understood to be “the ideal reproduction of the dialectic of things.” Tháo suggested that the six forms of developed indicative sign slowly arose during the phylogeny and every one of them represented in a more sophisticated way the motion of things:

the original semiological [*semiological* in the English translation, *sémiologique* in the French version] structure is enriched each time with new *linguistic gestures* modelled on the material activity and the material relations of the workers, which, with the support of verbal symbolism, project a more and more encompassing and precise image of the external world.

The interactions with the social and physical environment are the main reasons for the slow emergence of new forms of signs. Every sign reveals some inadequacies, and, for this reason, it could be transcended by a more sophisticated one. Tháo called those inadequacies *contradictions* (contradictions).

For instance, the first four forms of the developed indicative sign show a contradiction between the moment of the object and the moment of motion. Since our ancestors began to develop a more sophisticated form of collective hunting they needed a sign that represents an absent thing. In effect, the motion of the thing “ends up by making it disappear” (id. p. 137). In this way, the moment of the object contradicts the moment of motion because the motion implies the absence of the object. In short, the developed indicative sign represents neither the object as absent nor the motion that makes the object disappear. Thus, the developed indicative sign had been transcended by *the sign of representation of the absent object* (see below paragraph 6).

3.3. The Co-Evolution of Language, Mind, and Material Activities

To Tháo, the emergence of new signs depends upon the intrinsic contradictions of available signs which are no longer appropriate to new material activities. So,

the evolution of language has been deeply influenced by the development of collective cooperative activities. In a certain way, one could say that language adapted to both, new social relations and new interactions with the physical environment. But we cannot deny the fact that language of real life was part of those objective material activities and thus it cannot be regarded as a consequence of events that take place outside and before it. In any case, however, the subjective experience of language had the role to merely record the new representations of the world conveyed by language and allowed by new social relations.

The language of real life evolved through contradictions that it contained and that had to be transcended by more sophisticated forms of language. In this vein, the evolution of language does not differ from the development of other social material activities. The evolution of social life is indeed a dialectic process that constantly transcends the inadequacy of every stage under the pressure of biological and social needs. One could then observe a kind of immanent development of social attitudes – among them, language takes place too – that occurs outside consciousness and independently of it.

But Thảo did not dismiss the idea that “the cognizance of the developed indication obviously makes for considerable progress in the organization of labour” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 59). In this instance, one could talk about a kind of co-evolution between material activity and cognizance. And, consequently, the language of real life plays the most relevant role. It is the condition for having sophisticated conscious cognitive skills. For instance, “once the signs become conscious, it enables the subject to explicate *for himself* the content of his perceptive field.” And “this sign thereby awakens individual initiative at the same time that it appears as a means available to the individual to mobilize and orient collective labour.” This is what Thảo called *the practical role of consciousness*.

Thus, Thảo did not suggest a deterministic approach to cognition. To him, in fact, material activity is the starting point for having human-specific cognition. The internalisation of language of real life allows the emergence of that specific cognition. On the one side, consequently, consciousness depends upon objective language. But once language is consciously internalised, consciousness could influence material activities and improve working strategies. And language is the

intermediary that allows the bi-directional interactions between mind and material activities.

We cannot deny, however, the fact that cognition could entail a kind of progress that deeply differed from the progress involved in the material activity. The improvements of praxis – which is made possible by the consciousness of signs – must be considered to be a “quantitative progress”. Instead, the development of material behaviour involves a “qualitative leap”, i.e., the development of productive forces. To explain, Thảo invoked here the theory of dialectical leap suggested by the Marxist tradition. Some years later, in an article devoted to Marx’s *Capital*, Thảo (1984: 80-81) described the dialectical relation between *measure* and *disproportion*. It was a classical issue which had already been discussed by Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. The progressive accumulation of quantitative changes entails a dialectical shift (disproportion), namely the inversion of quantity in a new qualitative stage. Each qualitative stage can stand a certain degree of little quantitative changes (measure) which do not modify its nature. Let think about water evaporation: water withstands a quantitative warming before changing its nature and becoming vapour.

In other words, there is a co-evolution between consciousness and material activities by way of the language of real life. However, the development of productive forces stimulates the transition from a less sophisticated stage of cognition, language, and material activity to a more sophisticated one. The development of material activities defines the limits in which cognition could influence that development through quantitative innovations.

4.1. The Sign of Representation. The Material Conditions

From the point of view of phylogeny, the analysis of Kafuan lithic industry (2.6 ma), Thảo stated, suggests that our pre-human ancestors (*Australanthropus*) organized collective hunting. As we have already mentioned earlier (see above Chapter 7), according to Thảo, the qualitative leap that marks the emergence of the sign of representation from the simple indication depends upon the ability to transcend the limits of present perception. Such an ability arose when the group

broadened its field of action by dividing itself into different sub-groups. Two subgroups followed the same game at different distances and used the simple indicative sign (the pointing to the thing itself) to attract the attention of the others to the chased game. But at a certain point, the simple indication is not enough anymore. Our ancestor began to employ the sign of representation which alluded to the game even in the absence of the game within the perceptive field of one or another subgroup. On that basis, the sign of representation is the peculiar way our ancestors assured the coordination of their task given the absence of the game. In this regard, the social activity of labour is already objectively gone beyond the field of presence of present perception before the full emergence of the sign of representation. In short, material conditions of collective labour are the preconditions for having the emergence of the sign of representation.

To Thảo, “we can place the level of this behaviour at about 16-17 months, or nearly in the middle of the *prehominid age* (14-20 months), which does indeed correspond to the time when the transition from the first to the second phase of prehominid development in prehistory begins” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 68). Thus, once again, Thảo tried to apply some observations of Piaget and Gouin-Décarie to his description of the origins of the sign of representation from the material collective activities of our prehominid ancestors.

It matters now to understand how the simple indicative sign became a simple sign of representation after having described the main differences between these two kinds of signs. After that, the developed sign of representation – which is composed of the simple indication and the developed indicative sign – will be taken into account.

4.2. The Sign of Representation. The Perceptive Field

As has been seen, to Thảo, the simple indicative sign points to things which are present within the perceptive field. In the most sophisticated case, the simple indicative gesture could also indicate an object that is recently disappeared: “the sensorimotor image of the object is maintained in the form of an *enduring image* which, through the mediation of the indicator, continues more or less to be part of

present perception” (id., p. 60).

Instead, the *representation* (représentation) is the “imaginary presentation of an absent object.” Thus, the representation involves “something more than a simple enduring sensory-image of the object associated with the perception.” In effect, the thing is re-presented. The subject “‘presents it [the thing] again’ to himself outside of the field of presence of present perception” (id., p. 61). The representation is thus an *active image* (image active) produced by the subject that “marks the beginning of *thought* [i.e. the ability to manipulate representation of absent, possible, or impossible things].”

Regarding this dynamic, Thảo wrote:

Thus, the modelling of signifier [*le modelage du signifiant, the modeling of reciprocal signification* in the English text], in its reciprocal movement, on the basis of the material conditions of collective labour ends this time no longer in a simple variation inside the same structure [the six variations of the structure of the developed indicative sign], but in an altogether new structure, the indicative sign now functioning as the *sign of representation* or *representative indication*. As opposed to this, the indication within the limits of the field of presence of present perception may be called the *sign of presentation* or *presentative indication*. (id., p. 66)

The sign of representation radically changes the structure of perception. According to Thảo:

perception from now on is fitted into a new structure where it is broadened by the moment of *representation* which constantly projects *beyond the limits of the field of presence of present perception* the more or less indeterminate image of a distant space, but which must be made progressively more precise in terms of the real situation and activity. (id., p. 67)

Thus, the sign of representation enriches the perceptive field by way of active images which broadened it and adds new absent elements. In other words, the sign of representation enables a relevant progress in the power of the embodied perceptive thought of our ancestors.

4.3. The Sign of Representation. The Signifier

The sign of representation is composed of a simple indication and a developed

indicative sign. According to Thảo, the need to exchange signs between the two subgroups during sophisticated collective hunting led our ancestors to use both, the simple and developed indicative sign in a new way. Interestingly, the simplest form of the sign of representation shows the same signifier of the simple indicative sign: “the direction of the pointed finger, in other words, the external form of the signifier [*signifiant, signifying* in the English translation], does not seem to have changed, but the signified [*signifié, the thing signified* in the English translation] has become altogether different” (id., p. 63). On that basis, the same gesture conveys a new signified.

The cooperative collective activity enables to determine both the attentional frame of the group and then the field of reference (the game) – even if the thing is absent within the perceptive field. So the material social activity is the condition to determine the new (representative) meaning of the developed indicative sign. The representation of the absent thing and the sign that conveys that representation are communicable and meaningful just because they depend upon a given common attentional frame and a common field of reference. To Thảo, the sign of representation is eminently context-related, and the occasional material social activities are essential to determine the field of reference of the sign of representation.

There is a problem because of homonymy of the simple indication. When the simple indication is displayed as a sign of representation, it requires the support of other gestures and vocalizations in order better to determine the field of reference. As a matter of fact, the subject has at a disposal the simple indication as well as the developed indicative sign. For this reason, the simple indication that accompanied the representation of the absent object is matched with the developed indicative sign that adds more information about the absent thing. In this way, the sign of representation could be described as composed of two signs: the simple indication and the second variation of the developed indicative sign (2) TFM. In effect, Thảo suggested that the sign (2) TFM becomes part a sign of representation because it could stress on the moment of the object and the moment of the form (see Thảo [1973] 1984: 69-70):

We may believe that owing to the exigencies of the new situation, it [the developed indicative sign] is now integrated into the structure of representation so that from now on it has two components, one indicating the “this here absent” [the simple indication] and the other representing it in the aspect under which it is usually presented in the practice of collective work, in other words, as a “this here in the form (F) as it appears in its (presumed) motion.”

In this case, too, however, the developed indicative sign involved in the sign of representation could be meaningful just because it is based on group past experience. This fact marks the most relevant limit of the sign of representation.

4.4. The Sign of Representation. Some Cognitive Consequences

The sign of representation allows making predictions and suggesting hypotheses about absent things and possible situations. After that, the real situation and activity confirm the likelihood of representations. From the point of view of the phylogeny, our ancestors began to produce instruments by way of raw materials that they found at a certain distance from the object of the biological need. They necessarily needed to manipulate representations of absent situations: “as the Australanthropi hunters tended to increase the distance from their biological object in order to find the material necessary for the preparation of instruments, there had to be a more detailed indication associated with simple gesture of the hand aiming at the biological object” (id., p. 69).

In other words, the sign of representation allows the most elementary form of abstract thought. For this reason, Thảo wrote that “the appearance of the sign of representation at about the middle of the prehomimid stage or transition stage between ape and man, [must be considered] as a *true freeing of the brain*” (id., p. 68). Indeed, the sign of representation is the condition to transcend the narrow limits of the present situation – “where animal psychism is imprisoned” – and then both, language and consciousness, could reach their superior function.

From the point of view of the experience of the subject, the first cases of the transition from the simple *indicative* sign to the simple *representative* sign require what Thảo called *reflection* (*réflexion*). The reflection is a cognitive event that after a few seconds conditions the transition from the image of the “this here still

present” to the image of the “this here absent”. During that period, the body continues to perform the simple indicative sign. And the enduring image of the object involved in the simple indicative sign is still at work. A representation of the absent object is thus produced, and the signification of the simple indicative sign essentially changes.

Interestingly, Thảo defined the reflection as “the continuation, for a while, of the experienced return of the sign to oneself” (id., p. 67). Indeed, the main feature of the sign of representation is the fact that “it immediately implies, by its objective form, the moment of subjectivity” (id., p. 66). Simply put, the sign of representation is a sign that the subject eminently addresses to his/herself. As a matter of fact, the reflection is a subjective conscious cognitive event. “We can thus say that the representative indicative sign appears from the beginning as *conscious*.” But this subjective conscious experience of the sign of representation does not imply that it could arise outside social dimension, of course. At the same time, however, that conscious experience is the reason why the sign of representation must be context-related before becoming a meaningful expression addressed to the others.

5.1. The Formulas of The Sign of Representation

As has been seen above (Chapter 5), among Australanthropi, hunters tended to increase the distance from the biological object in order to find the raw material which was necessary for the preparation of instruments. This fact entailed the production of the representative indicative sign. But this sign needs the support of other signs because the signifier is not enough to determine the meaning of that sign. According to Thảo, new collective cooperative activities involved “the modelling of signifier [*le modelage du signifiant, the modelling of reciprocal signification* in the English text], in its reciprocal movement, on the basis of the material conditions of collective labour” (id., p. 66). Specifically, they associated the simple sign of representation – whose structure coincides with the simple indication – with the developed indicative sign.

To Thảo the simple indication that evokes the enduring image of the object that

is absent within the perceptive field is a “*provisional sign of the representation of the absent object*” (id., p. 72). The simple indication with the function of representation “very much depends on the enduring image of the missing object, and as nothing learned about it, except that it really exists outside of the perceptive field.” Since the developed indicative sign accompanied the provisional sign of the representation of the absent object, the representation becomes firmer and more precise. The developed indicative sign, as a matter of fact, “adds the indication of a motion and a form concerning this object” (ibid.).

Thảo stated that the most elementary semiotic base of the association of the provisional sign of the representation of the absent object with the developed indicative sign had been observed by Piaget (1945: 230-231). A little girl at about 13 months associates the simple indicative sign with the developed indicative sign to indicate an object within the framework of present perception. Thảo called that sign *sign of composite indication* (signe de l’indication composée). Thus, unlike the developed sign of representation, the sign of composite indication still requires the present perception.

The general formula of *the sign of composite indication* is:

(7) T.TMF: this here as a this here in a motion in the form (F).

One must remark that “the developed indicative sign which constitutes the second element of the composite indicative sign, can be presented according to any of its possible formulas” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 71).

To Thảo, it is not necessary that the two signs are effectively realized: one of them could also be only sketched-out. In this case, the voice fulfils a specific function. Voice evokes the whole meaning of the sketched-out movement which is usually associated with that vocalization.

The efficacy of the sign of representation exactly depends upon the assimilation and refunctionalization of the sign of composite indication. Our ancestors and our children have at a disposal the sign of composite indication to support the representation of the absent object. The signifier of the sign of representation remains the same of the sign of composite indication. But the meaning changes.

For this reason, Thảo introduced a particular diacritical sign ($\overline{\quad}$) since he described *the general formula of the sign of representation of the absent object*:

(8) \overline{T} .TMF: this here (absent) represented as a this here in a motion in the form (F).

The sign of representation of the absent object is composed of the simple indication and the developed indicative sign. In this case, too, the moment of the developed indicative sign could be replaced by whatever variants of the general formula (1) TMF. The line over the general formula (8) \overline{T} .TMF marks that the object is absent and then it is represented. This fact is the main difference with the sign of composite indication (7) T.TMF.

There are three variations of the general formula of the sign of representation of the absent object (8) \overline{T} .TMF. In both cases, “the line drawn above the letters designating the representative structure [...] could very well affect only one of them.” In other words, the representation could affect both the simple indication and the developed indicative sign. This is the case of the general formula (8). But the representation could also affect only one of the two components. In this way, Thảo described two possibilities:

The sign of the syncretic representation of the instrumental form: (9) $\overline{T.TFM}$ or (10) $\overline{T.TFM}$. (see the transcription of the errata-corrige: figures 15 and 21)

(11) The sign of deferred imitation: $\overline{T.MTF}$. (see the transcription of the errata-corrige: figures 15 and 21)

In the case of the formula (9) the representative structure affects the second component “TFM” alone. In effect, the sign of the syncretic representation of the instrumental form starts from the simple indication of something that exists within the perceptive field and involves the representations of both, its movement

and form of motion. The sign (10) is the sign of representation that emphasises the gestural component of the sign more than the vocal one. In this way, it differs from the first one (9). In the next paragraphs, the semantic formula of each one of those signs will be analysed in great detail. We leave aside for a moment the explanation of the formula (11).

5.2. Material Preconditions and Cognitive Consequences

The two formulas of what Thảo called the sign of representation of the syncretic form are:

(9) $\overline{T. TFM}$: this here represented as a this here in the form (F) as it appears in its (presumed) motion;

(10) $\underline{T. TFM}$: this here represented with insistence as a this here in the form (F) as it appears in its (presumed) motion.

(9) and (10) are composed of two elements: the simple indication (T) that points to the present object and the developed indicative gesture (TFM) that evokes the representation – for this reason, there is the line drawn above the letters ($\overline{\quad}$). The developed indicative sign could more or less emphasise the gestural moment. In this way, the formula (9) refers to the developed indicative sign that simply evokes the representation by way of a vocalization and a sketched-out movement. Instead, the formula (10) refers to the developed indicative sign which stresses more than the other one on the gesture. The line under the letters ($\underline{\quad}$) exactly shows the emphasis on the moment of the gesture.

According to Thảo, the sign of representation (9) $\overline{T. TFM}$ supports the emergence of the syncretic representation of the instrumental form. Our ancestors pointed to the raw material and uttered some vocalizations that evoked the form the instrument in which the material must be transformed. This kind of representation was necessary “for the preparation of the instrument far from the

object of biological need and for the transition to the work of elaboration” (id., p. 72). This fact depends upon some material conditions and involves some cognitive consequences.

The ancient anthropoid was able to manipulate objects within the perceptive field. The presence of an interesting object, as a matter of fact, entailed the sensorimotor image of the instrumental function which the object could have. That image was “an image of the characteristic motion of the instrument to be prepared” and then it predetermined and guided the manipulation of the object. The image is evoked by the object itself by way of acquired cognitive associations of perceptions and movements. The ancient anthropoid “immediately applied” that image of the desired form the object must have “to the perceptive image of the present object of biological need.” This kind of activity took place within the perceptive field and the object of biological need was still present.

The prehomimid, instead, used the sign of indication during cooperative collective activities. Tháo said that they indicated to one another “the raw material to be used by stretching their hands toward it” (id., p. 73). This exchange of signs “was enough to bring agreement as to the choice of material.” The subject had at a disposal “the functional [sensorimotor] image of the instrument into which the material has to be transformed.” But unlike the ancient anthropoid, Tháo continued, that sensorimotor image was more stable in so far as it was the signification of the sign exchanged during collective cooperative activities. Simultaneously, more sophisticated activities required the sign of developed indication in order better to determine the form of the instrument into which the material had to be transformed.

Interestingly, the developed indicative sign fulfilled two functions: it was employed as a simple indication that evokes the sensorimotor image of the instrument and it also reproduced the motion of the preparation of the instrument. For instance

it is a question of a cutting instrument, the fundamental meaning being “this here in a motion in the form of cutting (C) or TMC,” we will obtain in the present case, in the imperative mood, according to formula (3): MCT, “the motion in the form of cutting concerning this here.” There occurs here a transposition, altogether normal at the syncretic level, from the useful motion characteristic of the instrument, to the

motion characteristic of its preparation for the manipulation of material, in other words, a confusion between the motion of manipulation which must allow the stone to cut, and the very motion of cutting with that stone. Consequently, the image projected here by the sign-as-meaning [à titre de signification] is confused in practice in its content with the functional image which had already guided the preparation of the instrument, namely the generalized sensorimotor image of the instrumental function, or of the motion of cutting. (id., p. 73)

According to Thảo, collective cooperative activities radically changed since the “preparation of the instrument is done at a distance from the object of biological need”. In this case, our ancestors looked for raw materials that could be transformed into a useful instrument. On that basis, they had to choose the most appropriate raw material and addressed to one another simple indications which directed the attention of the group towards interesting raw materials. But the functional image of the instrument into which the raw material had to be transformed did not find a stable point of application within the perceptive field. As a matter of fact, the sensorimotor functional image of the instrument to be prepared became “too vague” (id., p. 74) because the choice of the raw material had still to be made. The simple indication “was no longer enough to bring them [our ancestors] to agreement on a satisfactory choice” (id., p. 73).

Thus, the simple indicative sign “had to be completed with a developed indicative sign” (id., p. 74). The developed indicative sign, indeed, designated “the instrument in question by the usual movements belonging to it, that is, the movement of its use” (ibid.). But since the instrument does not yet exist and our ancestors were in front of confused raw material, the developed indicative signs had necessarily to refer to an absent object (the instrument into which the raw material will be transformed). Thus, the developed indicative sign accompanied by the simple indication in front of possible raw material involved the representation of the absent instrument.

In this case, the developed indicative sign bears emphasis on the moment of the form, i.e. the function the instrument must have. The representation of the form and function of the instrument is overlaid on the perceptive image of the raw material the simple indication refers to. In other words, the image of the function is confused with the sensory-image of the motion of its preparation.

Before concluding, it is interesting to remark that Thảo invoked the

observations of the American psychologist and paediatrician Arnold Gesell (1880-1961) who described the emergence of drawing skills in the child at about 16-17 months (see Gesell & Ilg [1943] 1949: 131). To Thảo ([1973] 1984: 75), the child who draws shows the ability to associate a simple indication with a developed indicative sign that evokes a representation:

we notice that he begins with a motion of his hand that consists of leaning the pencil on the paper, which is a way of insisting on the movement of the hand stretched toward the object in the indicative sign: “this here!” The gesture is followed by a movement which more or less approximates the straight line. [...] thus the whole gesture consists essentially in an association of a simple indication of the “this here,” viz. the paper, with a developed indication aiming at a straight line which, in the beginning, does not yet exist. In other words, in this second component of the gesture, we are dealing with a developed representative indication [...].

Thảo gave the example of the drawing skills of the child to describe the structure of the developed representative indication (9) $T. \overline{TFM}$. But the behaviour of the child is absolutely not communicative. So Thảo suggested a very audacious analogy between the child and our ancestors. And, at the same time, he implicitly assumed that the ability to produce representations of absent entities transcends the limit of language in a wide sense and it may also be observed in conducts of another kind.

5.3. The Sign of the Syncretic Representation of the Instrumental Form (9)

Thảo introduced the general formula of the sign of the syncretic representation of the instrumental form (or *developed representative sign*): (9) $T. \overline{TFM}$. The first component of the sign is the simple indication of the present object and the second one is the developed indicative sign that conveys the representation of the instrumental form. This one is the motion of the instrument, viz. the function of the instrument.

That sign of representation conveyed a representation in front of a possible object (the raw material) and referred to the absent object (the instrument). It could represent the absent object just because, usually, it was already employed in

front of the present object. That is to say, the developed indicative gesture TFM was already employed by the group of prehomínids to reproduce the form and function of the present instrument in front or beside it. Thus, it could be also employed since the object is absent from the perceptive field in so far as all the members of the group can recognize and understand the sign.

For the same reason, the gestural moment of the developed indicative sign is only sketched-out. In the case of (9) T. $\overline{\text{TFM}}$, Thảo stated, the developed indicative sign probably had “the form of a syncretic word” and the corresponding gesture was “reduced to a simple internal outline.” The gestural component developed indicative was merely sketched-out and the vocalization fulfils the most important function. Thus, Thảo summarised:

We have seen that the sign which appeared in phylogeny was very probably formed by the association of the gesture of the hand stretched toward possible raw material with the syncretic word representing the instrument to be prepared. The gesture of the developed representative indication which gives this word its meaning, reduces itself to a simple internal outline, as is the normal case for an already established word [*mot*]. (id., p. 76)

The vocalization then could convey the representation of the “this here” in the usual form of the instrument. We can say that the vocalization played the role of a word because the developed indicative sign was already established. Thus, according to Thảo, the developed representative sign (9) T. $\overline{\text{TFM}}$ depends on past experience in two ways. Firstly, it evokes a representation in so far as it is already and usually employed by the community. Secondly, the developed indicative sign could be reduced to the vocalization alone because all the members of the community were able to understand it and thus it was unessential to perform the whole sign.

As this discussion implies, Thảo implicitly introduced a new condition that explained the mutual understanding among the members of the group. The motivated link between signifier and signified was not enough anymore. And the perceptive field only partially determines the reference of the sign. The sign of the representation of the instrumental form could be understood if, and only if all the members of the group shared the same semiotic code. In other words, the sign of

representation of the function of the instrument depended upon past collective experience of the group. In effect, the developed indicative sign became so much a stable habit that it was meaningful even when the object was absent, and the vocalization alone may convey the corresponding representation.

5.4. The Sign of the Syncretic Representation of the Instrumental Form (10)

According to Thảo, the sign of syncretic representation of the instrumental form (9) $T. \overline{TFM}$ does not perform the gestural moment which is, instead, simply outlined at the level of the nervous system of the subject. Sometimes, the pressure of the exigencies of the situation may involve the emergence of a developed representative sign which emphasised the gestural aspect more than the previous one (9). This structure of this sign shows the following semantic form: (10) $T. \underline{TFM}$. Notably, the line under the letters ($\underline{\quad}$) exactly shows the emphasis on the moment of the gesture.

Thảo called *insistence* (insistance) the emphasis on the gestural aspect of that sign. The insistence on the gestural moment begins with the simple indication and is continued in the second component. The whole sign is accomplished in a particularly insistent manner. As has been said, the need to stress on the gestural aspect of the sign, depended upon some practical exigencies. Thảo wrote that

If we now return once again to phylogeny, at the time of the transition from the first to the second phase of prehomimid development, we may believe that this insistent form of the sign had to appear in the course of the preparation of the instrument, at the time when the situation required a clear representation of the instrumental form. In fact, in the group busy with this operation, an individual can find himself in a perplexing situation, if, for example, while preparing the cutting stone by crushing, he only succeeds in chipping one of the two stones without achieving a useful result. The others then come to his aid. And as already possess the sign of syncretic representation of the instrumental form, formed at the moment the raw material was chosen, they repeat it, but this time in a more distinct manner, by *emphasising the gestural aspect*. (id., p. 76)

On that basis, in the case of (10), the developed indicative sign that conveys the representation must be regarded as a more or less approximately pantomime or mimic representation of the instrumental form.

It is not necessary here to describe how the awareness of that sign arose as sporadic, collective, and individual over the time. What must be stressed, however, is the fact that the exchange of the representative sign (10) involves the awareness of the representative sign as such. The group addresses the sign to a subject who, in turn, does not perform the sign to communicate with the others. The subject addresses it to the ones's own self: "the stumped tool-maker has nothing to say to his companion, since it is precisely up to him to shape the cutting stone that has been indicated to him, the sign which he automatically sends back to the other, *return upon himself*" (id., p. 77). This awareness of the developed representative sign corresponds to the awareness of the instrumental form which constitutes the representative content of that sign. Thus, by way of the representative sign, the subject becomes aware of the form the instrument must have.

We can now return to a description of the more general trends of lithic industry among our ancestors. The Kafuan culture had produced stone tools that show the ability to have representations of the form of the instrument at a distance of the biological object. This one is the main stone (the raw material, the object of labour, *objet de travail*) that must be transformed. Our ancestors used the second stone as an instrument to transform the first one. The sign of representation allows the awareness of the form into which the first stone must be transformed. The representation of the form our ancestors became progressively aware of the real nature of labour which is the activity that implies the distinction between means and object of labour.

In this regard, Tháo explained the reason why the pointing finger is the finger that points: "as the hand that makes this sign already holds the second stone, it is obviously the second finger which can most easily straighten out in order to be placed on the first stone. It is thus this finger which will be progressively specialised as the *index* finger" (id., p. 78). Implicitly, then, Tháo admitted that a simple contingent behaviour – which arises under the pressure of given exigencies – becomes a stable acquisition of the species. But he was not clear to describe whether that habit is genetically or cultural inherited. In any case, it is a habit that originally arose from collective cooperative activities.

5.5. The Differed Imitation (11)

The differed imitation is the delayed repetition of a given behaviour (cf. Piaget 1945: 64). For example, the child at about 16 months is able to imitate the movements of the playmate, even when he/she is not present. In this way, the imitation refers to an absent object (the absent playmate) and involves the representation of the absent object. At the same time, the performance of the movements (the imitation in a strict sense) determines the referent by imitating some aspects of the referent (the movements of the absent playmate).

In certain cases, to Thảo, the differed imitation may fulfil the function of a sign during communicative exchanges. The imitation of the movements of the absent object could be useful, for instance, during the collective hunt. During those activities, the need to quickly imitate the movements of the game transformed the sign of representation (9) \overline{T} . \overline{TFM} – i.e. the sign that entails the representation of the absent object by way of vocalizations. “In the excitement of the impending hunt, the word became reinforced by externalising the developed indicative gesture whose internal outline it already implied” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 80). Because of that excitement, the developed indicative sign (TMF) was performed insistently.

The behaviour of imitation of the absent object would be then *the sign of insistent syncretic representation of the movement of the absent object*. This sign is composed of the inner outline of the simple indication (T) and the performance of the developed indicative sign that stresses on the moment of motion (MTF). Since the object is absent the simple indication is only outlined while the developed indicative gesture is performed insistently. Thus, Thảo suggested the formula:

(11) \overline{T} $\overline{.MTF}$: “*this here (absent) representing with insistence in the motion of this here in the form (F).*”

The signifier completely produces the signification, of course: the imitative gestures involve the signified as the image of movements of the absent object. The main peculiarity of this sign is the fact that the body of the subject who performs

the sign manifests the movements of the absent object (*in the motion of this here in the form*). For this reason, Thảo wrote that

as this meaning is effectively realized in the subject's own body, there occurs a syncretic transfer of the indicative meaning which now indicates the motion in question in the subject himself considered as object: this time it is no longer question of a representative indication but rather a presentative one.

On that basis, the developed indicative sign must be regarded in this case as a sign of presentation – i.e. a sign that refers to a present object – rather being a sign of representation. Indeed, the body of the subject becomes the support of the meaning: “the motion of this here (the subject's own body) in the form (F), presented in an insistent way, or MTF.” In other words, the body presents the absent object and by way of the imitation of the movements of the absent object involves the representation of the absent object as the referent of the communicative act. Thus, the representation of the absent object (T) is syncretically matched with the perceptive image of the subject's own body. Another way of saying this is that the perceptive image of the subject's own body evokes the representation of the absent object and determining the reference. Thus, the previous knowledge of both the referent and its movements is necessarily required so that the observer understands the meaning of the sign.

6. The Contradictions of the Sign of Representation

As has been seen above, the contradictions involved in the developed indicative sign cause the emergence of the sign of representation. And new social activities (the production of the instrument at a distance from the object of biological need) involve the integration of the developed indicative gesture into the sign of representation. But the developed indicative signs included in the sign of representation involved more and more misunderstandings.

The developed indicative sign could stress on the moment of the object or on the moment of motion. Slowly the developed indicative sign that stresses more on the moment of the object became a sign that represents the object alone (TMF). And the developed indicative sign that stresses more on the moment of the motion

became a sign that represents the motion alone (MTF). The simple indication (T) – which could be more or less performed – comes to the aid of the developed sign. But, as we have shown in the previous paragraphs, the problem of the reference still remains present. The context, the previous knowledge, the traditions, etc., becomes the fundamental factors to determine the reference of the sign of representation.

In support of his position, Thảo stated, “the word used by the speaker to indicate the motion of a certain object is understood by the hearer as representing the same motion of another object” (id., p. 137-138) or “the word used to indicate an object in a certain motion is understood by the hearer as representing it in another motion” (id., p. 138). In other words, the sign of representation was not useful to simultaneously stress on both moments, the moment of motion and that of the object. And then Thảo reasoned that the contradictions implied by the developed indicative sign between the moment of the motion and the moment of the object had been transcended by *the elementary functional sentence*. Let us move to the next Chapter which largely described the development of the functional sentence.

Chapter Eleven

The Development of Iconic Syntax

Il est probable que le progrès apporté dans le travail collectif
par l'invention de l'instrument élaboré a amené un nouveau
développement dans la répartition des tâches, [...].
Le cadre de la communication s'en trouvé considérablement élargi,
ce qui entraînait à son tour un nouveau progrès
dans la structure du langage.
C'est là, vraisemblablement, qu'il convient de chercher
l'origine de la phrase fonctionnelle [...].
(T.D. Thảo)

1. Preliminary Remarks. - 2. The Functional Sentence. - 3.1. The Elementary Functional Sentence. - 3.2. The Gestural Connection. - 3.3. The Functional Sentence in the Phylogeny. - 4.1. The Developed Functional Sentence. - 4.2. Type I: Enumeration. - 4.3. Type II: Correlation. - 5.1. The Functional Name. - 5.2. The Typical Name. - 5.3. The Questioning. - 6.1. The Functional Verb. - 6.2. The Typical Verb. - 6.3. The Sentence in Strict Sense. - 7. Concluding Remarks.

1. Preliminary Remarks

In his ILC, Thảo's aim was also to explain the transition from the connection of two (or more) syncretic words to fully-developed sentences. To him, the function of real sentences is to express the connections of things by means of the connection between words which refer to those things: "expressing by means of sign relations, the relation between things" (Thảo [1973] 1984: 82). Thus, one could affirm that Thảo suggested a conception of iconic nature of syntax. To some today's scholars (Haiman 1985; Givón 1989; Burling 1999), the syntax shows a certain degree of iconicity in so far as it establishes the relation between the order of words and morphemes within a sentence with the order of facts that the sentence describes. That relation is *diagrammatic*, i.e. the relation between parts of the linguistic structure reflects the relation between things or concepts which those

parts codify (see for instance Matthews 1991: 12). As this discussion implies, the syntax does not follow arbitrary rules which are independent of the state of affairs a sentence refers to. By contrast, the syntax makes possible an iconic order of words by which the things in the world are represented. The syntax is not independent of the semantic and pragmatic nature of linguistic expressions: both the meaning and reference of words play a relevant role in the construction of sentences. The syntax is indeed part of communicative social interactions and, for this reason, the use of particular grammatical forms is strongly linked, even deterministically linked, to the presence of particular semantic or pragmatic functions in discourse (Van Valin 1991; Tomlin 1990). The syntax does not depend upon hierarchical structures but rather upon both, the meaning of words considered alone and the iconic value of their connection. Unfortunately, matters are not quite that simple. Suffice it to say that syntactical order of words within a sentence depends on multiple factors which cannot be reduced to iconicity.

Thảo refused to call the association of syncretic words “pseudo-sentence” because “this denomination [...] does not seem to us to be a very good one, in so far as it suggests that these associations have nothing in common with real sentences except that words are juxtaposed to one another” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 81). He did not accept the assumption that first sentences uttered by the child would be a simple juxtaposition of syncretic words: “we can no longer understand how, under these conditions, the transition from the one [the association of words] to the other [the real sentence with a definite grammatical structure] could be made.” As a consequence, Thảo insisted that the connection between syncretic words “must already contain some embryonic connections which will be fully formed in the true sentence.” The sentence of the child, indeed, somehow shows a connection between words that refers to the connection between things. The sentence of the child does not still evidently show syntactical connections among words, but it already reveals a semantic connection that transcends the simple juxtaposition of vocalizations.

One could pose some questions: Did Thảo really explain the transition from the isolated words to real sentences, all things considered? Could he really explain the origins of predication? Did he instead presuppose the predication since he

emphasised the predicative function of functional sentences? How can the juxtaposition of two vocalizations involve the connection of two meanings and then the emergence of a complex whole image which represents the real connections between things? Could the syntactical structures be reduced to a simple improvement of verbal abilities? Should the syntactical connection (*liaison syntaxique*) be simply considered to be a more sophisticated way to express an intended semantic connection (*liaison sémantique*) and nothing more?

2. The Functional Sentence

Thảo ([1973] 1984: 80-82) introduced the notion of “functional sentence” (*phrase fonctionnelle*) to explain the transition from the isolated words to fully-developed sentences. In this way, he faced the question of the emergence of predication: How can the simple juxtaposition of words slowly become a syntactical connection? How does the grammatical structure of fully-developed sentences arise? What is the main feature of the syntactical structures?

The functional sentence marks the transition from the use of isolated syncretic words to the first real sentence. According to Thảo, the functional sentence is the association of isolated pre-existing meaningful vocalizations (syncretic words). But, though the signifier of a functional sentence shows the simple juxtaposition of vocalizations, the meaning conveyed by that association reproduces the connection between the things of the state of affairs the functional sentence refers to. In other words, the functional sentence appears as a juxtaposition of signs but simultaneously fulfils the function of predication in so far as its meaning successfully involves the reproduction of connections between external entities.

The functional sentence is nothing other than the association of two signs that pre-exist to their juxtaposition. Indeed, the connection between two signs is not the constitutive factor that determines the meaning of the two signs considered alone. In effect, the meaning of those signs depends upon pre-existing cognitive and symbolic operations. And the functional sentence fulfils the purpose of connecting those pre-existing meanings. But we wonder whether this connection gives rise to something more than the mere addition of two meanings.

The functional sentence is the association of two (or more) syncretic words. The syncretic word, as has been seen above, is nothing other than a vocalization whose signified depends upon the corresponding developed indicative gesture – which may be more or less outlined: “the syncretic word gets its entire meaning from the developed indicative gesture which subtends it, whether in an externalised or simply an internal outlined form” (id., p. 82). Thus, the functional sentence associates two vocalizations which implicitly depend upon the corresponding developed indicative gestures. The meaning resulting from that connection is nonetheless something more than the simple juxtaposition or association of two meanings. The two more or less outlined gestures produced two images which melt together and entails a new complex tendential image (for the notion of “image” see above Chapter 6, § 6.2). “The semantic connection [liaison sémantique] is explained by the real connection between the two subjacent gestures, which as they rapidly succeeded each other, connect themselves thereby in the same dynamic whole [ensemble dynamique]” (id., p. 82).

Thảo suggested that the real sentence is the result of the quantitative development of the previous connection between vocalizations. As this discussion implies, he reduced the peculiarities of the real sentence to two properties: i) the connection is explicitly uttered and then ii) it is more understandable. The function of real fully-developed sentences is to express the connections between things by means of the connection between words which refer to those things. On that basis, the connection is the most relevant element of syntactical structures. It is the operation that links two pre-existing elements by way of some syntactical elements such as verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, etc. In short, the real sentence shows the syntactical connection between subject, verb, and complement while the functional sentence fulfils the function of connection by way of the juxtaposition of two syncretic words.

As we have shown, the functional sentence shows the structure of the fully-developed sentence in an “embryonic” form merely. The real sentence expresses the same semantic connection between the functional sentences by way of a more sophisticated syntactical connection. But, for the same reason, the functional sentence fulfils the function of the real sentence even if it does not show the same

form. “The associations of syncretic words [...] do not yet imply the *form* [la forme] of a sentence, defined by the syntactical connection [liaison syntaxique], they nevertheless perform the fundamental *function* [la fonction] of the sentence, which consists in expressing, by means of sign relations, the relation between things” (id., p. 82).

The main difference between real and functional sentences merely concerns the *form* of the sentence. In the case of real sentences, indeed, the connection between signs is made explicit by means of the verb. In the case of the functional sentence, on the other hand, the connection is simply evoked because the predication still lacks: “the relation between the two words is evidently not formulated” (id., p. 81) but “the relation between things” could nonetheless be expressed “by means of sign relation” (id., p. 82). In effect, the connection between two syncretic words conveys a “complex image” (id., p. 81) which is nothing other than the reproduction of the real connection between things, even if that connection is not explicitly uttered by vocalizations. In the same way, the real sentence differs from the functional one also because the vocalizations become more stable: the functional sentence is a “temporary connection, spontaneously formed on the gestural plane, which will be stabilised later on the verbal plane in the sentence with subject, verb and object” (id., p. 82).

The most relevant step between the use of isolated words and the predication is fulfilled by the functional sentence which already implies a complex meaning that makes a qualitative difference in the meaning conveyed by isolated words. But both, the functional and real sentences, presuppose the previous use of syncretic words. And, in turn, syncretic words require the support of developed indicative gestures to be meaningful. Thus, the signification of the developed indicative sign must be understood to be the fundamental key to explaining the signification of more sophisticated expressions. For this reason, Thảo insisted that the systems of arbitrary signs ultimately depend upon the systems of non-wholly arbitrary signs (see above Chapter 3).

3.1. The Elementary Functional Sentence

To Thảo the functional sentence appears in the child at about 17-20 months. The functional sentence follows the use of isolated syncretic words (14-17 months) and precedes the emergence of real sentences (21 months). That transitional phase corresponds to the second stage of prehuman evolution (Kafuan: see fig. 16).

As has been seen, the most elementary structure of the functional sentence is the connection between two syncretic words. The functional sentence implies three formal possible elementary cases. The first case is the connection between two syncretic words which mean the movement (i). The second one is the connection between two syncretic words which mean the object (ii). The third case is the connection between a syncretic word which means the movement with a syncretic word which means the object (iii).

(i) Thảo considered the first possible form as too problematic: “we must exclude the case where they [the syncretic words] would both be taken in their actions sense, for their connection would then have to express a relation between two motions which would be too complex a content for the child at this level” (Thảo ([1973] 1984: 82).

(ii) The first syncretic word means the object in motion or at rest and the second one the object at rest (cf. id., p. 90-91 and formulas 15-16 and 15₁-16₁). Thus, Thảo described two tables with two possible formulas of the connection in the case of (ii). This kind of the functional sentence “provides an altogether new semantic content, since it expresses a relation between two objects, either through the mediation of a motion which concerns them both, or directly, both objects being at rest” (id., p. 92). The connection between the two meanings of the two syncretic words may be regarded as the form of *adjunction* (cf. id., p. 88) as well as the form of *position* or spatial contiguity (cf. id., p. 89). In any case, the ability to mean the common property of two objects (that property could be the movement or the being at rest) must be seen as the ability to pointing at a third element that mediates the passage from the first object to the second one, from the more known object to the less known one.

(iii) The first syncretic word may refer to an action and be connected with

another syncretic word which refers to an object, and vice versa (cf. id., p. 90-91, formulas 12-14 and 12₁-14₁). So Thảo described the four possible formulas of the connection of a syncretic word that means a movement (desired or observed) with a syncretic word that means the object at rest. This kind of the functional sentence is more elementary than the case (ii). It “expresses the relation of a motion to an object” (id., p. 91). As Thảo insisted, the relation of a motion to an object was already illustrated by the syncretic word alone (see Chapter 6). In the case of the functional sentence (iii) the second syncretic word makes more precise the meaning of the first syncretic word. The connection between the two syncretic words, then, is a *relation of attribution* (id., p. 84). For this reason, Thảo wrote that “we can distinguish a *principal word* [mot principal], or the word taken in the sense of action, which already expresses the essence of the total meaning, and an *adjunct word* [mot ajoint], or the word taken in the sense of object whose role is only to make more precise the moment of the ‘this here’ in the meaning of the first” (id., p. 91-92).

3.2. The Gestural Connection

The functional sentence (ii) and (iii) are presented as connections of two uttered vocalizations which subtend two developed indicative gestures. The two subtended gestures give the vocalizations (the two syncretic words) their meaning. This is what Thảo called “the *fundamental parallelism of the gesture and of the word* [le parallélisme fondamental du geste et de la parole].” Thus, in so far as the specific meaning of the functional sentence depends upon the connection between the two syncretic words, then the connection occurs with the two gestures. Thảo called that connection gestural connection (*liaison gestuelle*): it is the inner gestural connection between the two developed indicative signs. In this way, the gestural connection establishes the meaningful connection between the two syncretic words.

But that gestural connection is not a third sign that is added to the other two. In effect, to Thảo, the gestural connection depends upon the rapid succession of the two outlined gestures: “the semantic connection which emerges here in the

association of two words, is explained by the real connection between the two subjacent gestures, which as they rapidly succeed each other, connect themselves thereby in the same dynamic whole” (id., p. 82). The rapid succession of the subjacent gestures involves the emergence of the connection between two tendential images. These two images could refer to the same object – as in the case of the functional sentence (iii) – as well as they may refer to two different objects – as in the case of the functional sentence (ii).

We must add that “the actual meaning can only be determined depending on the situation” (id., p. 84). This means that the same sequence of vocalizations may refer to several different connections and several different objects: “the same external form of verbal association, however, may internally comprise an altogether different gestural connection” (id., p. 85). Once again, we are dealing with the polysemy of the language of the child (see above Chapter 7). Indeed, the understanding of the meaning and the reference of the functional sentence depends upon a shared attentional frame.

As we have shown above, the core of the functional sentence is the relation that must be established between two syncretic words. This connection could take the shape of the attribution, the adjunction, the position, etc. On that basis, the functional sentence evokes the real connection between two given objects. But the functional sentence in-itself does not make explicit that connection by way of a verb or by way of other elements which make clear the connection. In other words, there are no verbal isolated elements which allow us to individuate the function of connection. But the function of connection could be indeed fulfilling by other means, namely the gestural connection and the juxtaposition of vocalizations.

With *predication*, one must mean the connection between a subject and an element (the predicate; comment) that conveys some information about the subject (topic). It is not easy to state that predication is already at work in the functional sentence because the functional sentence connects two syncretic words which cannot be reduced to the role of subject and predicate. In fact, the meaning of the two elements of the functional sentence must be considered to be the syncretic image of the object in a certain motion in a certain form. And the two meanings are deeply interdependent, and it is not easy to clearly differentiate

them.

One cannot dismiss, however, that Thảo set out that the connection between two syncretic words shows the ability to define one of the two words by way the other in a better way. In the case of attribution, the meaning of the second word allows determining the topic of the functional sentence (the *this here*) in a better way. More suitable would be the choice to introduce here the distinction between *thème/propos*, topic/comment: the topic is what is being talked about and the comment is what is being said about the topic. In the case of the attribution, the topic is simply repeated two times so as to define the topic of the comment contained in the first word in a better way.

In the case of adjunction, the juxtaposition of two syncretic words evokes the relation between two different objects. This juxtaposition could evoke several different forms of relation (spatial, temporal, intentional, etc.). In any case, the motion of the first object concerns in some way the second object. From a syntactical standpoint, the first word fulfils the role of both the subject and the verb while the second one could be reckoned to be the complement (from the Latin *complementum*, from *complēre*, to *fill*, to *complete*). Thảo talked about adjunction exactly because the second word completes the scene evoked by the first word by adding some elements. In this case, the complement does not help to complete the meaning of a predicate (as the so-called *argument*). It neither serves to assign a property to a subject or object (as the predication does). What the adjunction does is to evoke a certain physical or psychical relation between two objects and nothing more. As a matter of fact, it is a mere juxtaposition of signs that offer a complete representation of a given state of affairs.

3.3. The Functional Sentence in the Phylogeny

Thảo insisted that the functional sentence appeared at the end of the second phase of prehomimid evolution (Kafuan). From the point of view of the ontogeny, this phase corresponds to the development of the child at about 17-20 months. More interesting is Thảo's description of the emergence of the functional sentence as a response to some practical needs. We have already had occasion to explain

how, according to Thảo, the development of material activities determines the qualitative shift in language and cognition (see above Chapter 10). In short, under the pressure of new practical needs, the old forms of language are modified. Thảo stated that some contradictions arose between new social relations and the older means of communication during the Kafuan era. Those contradictions appeared as a misunderstanding, “a *quid pro quo*, in which is reflected the objective contradiction between the new relations appearing in collective work, because of the development of the instrumental forces and the form of language previously acquired” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 95; see above Chapter 7).

In the case of functional sentences, new needs arose during collective hunting – and especially the fact that our ancestors were divided into several subgroups. These new needs had been the condition for having the emergence of a new form of linguistic skills. Thus, Thảo stated that

the progress brought about in collective work because of the invention of the elaborated instrument led to a new development in the division of tasks, and from this came the reinforcement of the vanguard’s role and undoubtedly, on occasion, the more or less temporary appearance of particular teams in the group at work. The framework of communication was therefore considerably broadened and this entailed, in its turn, new progress in the structure of language. (id., p. 92)

In effect, according to Thảo, “the syncretic word used in isolation is comprehensible only as a function of the immediate situation” (id., p. 93). The same applies to developed indicative sign. In these two cases, “communication takes place between the subjects who work *more or less at the same place*, so their perceptive fields approximately coincide.” By contrast, the sign of representation better satisfied the needs of “the prehominid group as particular teams were formed that could function apart from each other” (ibid.). The new material activities entail a “more extensive field of action of the group” and “more complex” coordination of collective efforts. For this reason, older signs, “the ancient forms of language necessarily modelled themselves on the new conditions of collective work, and there resulted the creation of new forms more adapted to the total situation” (ibid.).

Thảo recognized, of course, that before the development of functional

sentences, the developed representative sign or the corresponding syncretic word were employed to evoke the representation of the absent thing (see Chapter 10) but he emphasised that the simple sign of representation became *equivocal*. “In fact, the various teams no longer faced the same immediate situation, even when they were close enough to one another to communicate by gesture and voice” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 93). Crucially, the subject was forced to *repeat* the communication *in another form*: the first sign refers to the movement and the second one to the object. From the point of view of the speaker [le locuteur], “*the meaning* [of the two signs] *was the same*.” But “a repetition was needed to make things more precise” (ibid.) because “for the neighbouring team, the situation appears altogether different” (id. 94). It follows, that “for the receiver,” the two signs had “two different meanings.” That is was the most elementary form of the functional sentence, namely the juxtaposition of two signs which make the utterance more precise.

Thảo seems to be convinced that, from the point of view of the addresser, the juxtaposition of two signs was seen as a *redundancy* [redondance] while the addressee understood the two signs “not as a redundancy but as an association.” The juxtaposition/association of a developed representative signs underlined the identity of the relation between the two “things” which the two signs that composed that association/juxtaposition refer to: MTF-TFM. In other words, the association/juxtaposition involves two images that refer to the same object. The redundancy is thus required to make the meaning more precise and compensate for the absence of the object within the perceptive field.

The semiotic structure of the functional sentence could also show different sequences: for instance, a developed indicative sign and a developed representative sign, or vice versa, or two developed indicative signs, etc. (cf. id, p. 90-91). In this connection, we should make special points of the fact that at least one of the signs employed in the functional sentence must be vocalised. According to Thảo’s written conventions, in this case, the sign should be written in brackets: for instance, “(MTF)”. It means that at least one of the signs which compose the functional sentence must be a syncretic word, i.e. a vocalization. We will have to talk about that again.

Thảo insisted that the role of the addressee is the most important condition for

having the emergence of the functional sentence. As we have shown above in Chapter 5, the addressee had already been invoked by Thảo to explain the development of consciousness: the addressee had to merely record the use of signs and employ them in the flow of inner language. In the case of the functional sentence, instead, the addressee plays an active role since she is the inventor of that kind of signs.

Let imagine that our ancestors split into two teams. According to Thảo, “*the functional sentence could thus not originate in the first team, which did not have to go beyond the horizon of the present perception*” (id., p. 97). Instead, “it became necessary only for the second team which, not having observed the event with its own eyes, is obliged to ‘keep itself informed of the situation’, which is possible only by the *explicit representation* of a relation clearly posited between a motion and an object or between two objects” (ibid.). Thus, the members of the second team indicated “to one another and each to himself the objective relation in question” (id., p. 98) while they had “nothing to communicate to the hunters who have preceded them” (ibid.).

In this way, the second team is the inventor of the functional sentence:

the hunters of the second team construct the functional sentence, by indicating to one another and each to himself the objective relation in question, which defines the very structure of cognizance. We are still dealing here, of course, with just a sporadic consciousness. But as the new form of social labour develops, the use of the functional sentence is generalized, so that it ends by being integrated with enduring image of the group that each keeps within himself. And *individual cognizance* results from this and becomes constantly available to each and every subject. (ibid.)

We cannot deny the fact that – although Thảo did not highlight this point – the subgroups already share a common frame of reference without which the communication still remains equivocal or even fails. And the shared frame of reference is nothing but the collective activity and previous collective habits.

To Thảo, the functional sentence entails two different kinds of experience on the basis of the social role of both interlocutors. If one follows Thảo’s hypothesis, one could be able to highlight some interesting consequences of his assumptions. We have already had occasion to describe the way the functional sentence was perceived by the addresser as a redundant repetition of the same meaning. On the

other hand, the addressee understood the juxtaposition of two signs “not as a redundancy but as an association.” In the case of the addresser, the situation the functional sentence refers to is clear and the reference is still present within the perceptive field. By contrast, the addressee did not observe the event with his/her own eyes and “is obliged to ‘keep itself informed of the situation’” (id, p. 97). For this reason, the functional sentence must fulfil the function of making explicit the representation of the relation between a movement and an object or between two objects.

Before the emergence of the association/juxtaposition of two signs of representation, Thảo wrote, the most elementary form of the functional sentence must be regarded as an association/juxtaposition of a developed indicative sign and a developed representative vocal sign. The sign of representation is the indispensable core of the functional sentence since it is addressed by the first subgroup to another team “which finds, or found, itself, far from the field of action of the first” (ibid.). In other words, “from the beginning the functional sentence implied the representative form: it enabled the teams who find or found themselves distant from the field of present action, to represent to themselves the objective relation which escapes the field of presence of their sense perceptions” (id., p. 98).

The sign of representation was accompanied by the developed indicative sign from the outset. In effect, the developed indicative sign was meant to reinforce the efficacy of the sign of representation by way of the indicative gesture of the hand. In this vein, the sign of representation refers to something absent and the developed indicative sign fulfils the function of presentative indication. The addresser could communicate the addressee the relation between an absent object and a present one in so far as the addressee did not perceive that relationship because he/she was at a distance from the perceptive field of the addresser. The developed indicative sign fulfils the function of real *gestural connection* which “projects a relation of location between the two signified images and represents thereby the real spatial relation between the two objects aimed at” (id., p. 97).

At the same time, both, the sign of representation and the developed indicative sign, were accompanied by vocalizations. To illustrate, the addressee sees and

hears the addresser who utters two syncretic words and performs an indicative gesture which connects the meaning of the two syncretic words. In such a context, the addressee has nothing to communicate to the addresser which has not transcended the limit of actual perception yet. Instead, the addressee has to ask for confirmation and to inform the other members of the second team. In this way, the addressee “repeats both words as he has just heard them, and he himself stretches his hand in the same direction as that of the speaker” (id., p. 97). Again, we can observe that in Thảo’s view the origin of the functional sentence may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse.

Faced with this issue, Thảo claimed that “the *functional sentence* [...] constitutes a *decisive step* in the progress of knowledge” (id., p. 95). As a matter of fact, the gestures are limited to the immediate perceptive field. Instead, the vocalization conditions the transition to abstract thinking because it is more independent of the actual perceptive field than the indicative gesture. Thảo said that the primacy of vocalizations cannot be reduced to a simple change in the signifier, but they also involve a change of meaning and cognition.

Vocalizations also mark the transition towards verbal language: “the verbal synthesis will play an ever increasing role” (ibid.). Not for nothing reinforces the vocalization the gestural moment in communication. Slowly the verbal moment takes the place of the gestural one to establish the relation between language and reality. As a consequence, the voice becomes the support of inner language, i.e. the linguistic activity that indicates the external world to the self. To minimise confusion, the only point we need to note for now is that Thảo argued that the voice fulfils the function of mediation. In his words: “it is only by its constant mediation [of the voice] that the subject is able to extend and indefinitely complicate his gesture, in order to *indicate* the external world to *himself* in a more varied and precise projected image” (ibid.).

Unfortunately, Thảo did not explicitly say how the vocalization takes precedence over gestures. He simply described a slow process that leads from the developed indicative sign through the sign of representation to the functional sentence: “As soon as it is a matter of connecting two developed indications, the gesture can operate only by being supported by a verbal association or the

functional sentence.” But Thảo insisted, on several occasions, that the gestural moment is still at work to determine the meaning of the functional sentence, even if it is only outlined or sketched-out.

4.1. The Developed Functional Sentence

Let us move on to more sophisticated forms of the functional sentence. As we have also made clear, the functional sentence allows the representation of the “objective relation” between two events (things, movements, etc.) “which escapes the field of presence” of the sense perceptions (cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 98). Now we can go so far as to say that functional sentence cannot satisfy all the needs of our ancestors. In point the fact, the functional sentence does not allow representing the entire absent situation: “the information obtained in this way, however, still concerns only an invisible relation, in other words an invisible aspect of the present situation.” By contrast, the representation of the totally absent situation arose by virtue of *the developed functional sentence* (phrase fonctionnelle développée). Given that Homo habilis was able to produce an instrument because of the representation of the totally absent biological situation, Thảo reasoned that Homo habilis already employed developed functional sentences. In the same way, the developed functional sentence appears in the child at about 19-21 months.

The most elementary form of the developed functional sentence is the *enumeration* (énumération): “an enumeration by accumulation of associations” (id., p. 99). In this case, the ellipsis could play a very relevant role. A more sophisticated form is the *correlation* (corrélation): it “is able to express an absent situation since it contains two extremes designating two objects, one of which functions as the subject of the situation and the other as its object and a middle term indicating the reciprocal dynamic, relation between them” (id., p. 103). In the next two paragraphs, the two types of the developed functional sentence will be described in great detail.

4.2. Type I: Enumeration

The enumeration is a sequence of vocalizations. It corresponds to the structure of the functional sentence, but it repeats that structure indefinitely. A distinction between the two kinds of vocalization is now required. The first vocalization means an action, while the others mean the objects. The word taken in the sense of action could be repeated before or after each other word of the sequence. Thảo made the following example: a child says *Lena proua* (to walk), *Tossa proua*, *kiska* (the cat) *proua* (cf. Thảo [1973] 1984: 99; the examples are illustrated by Gvosdev in his *Problèmes dans l'études du langage chez l'enfant / Voprosy izucheniia detskoï rechi / Problems in the Study of Child Language*, Moscow, 1961). The enumeration could also assume a more sophisticated form: the word taken in the sense of action might come “in the first place, and afterwards is in general only implicitly repeated” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 101). The example illustrated by Thảo is *Look mummy, daddy, grandma, uncle G., etc.* (we can read the same example in Piaget 1945: 236-237).

The second form of the enumeration is more interesting because Thảo introduced the notion of *ellipsis*, i.e. the omission of words that are nevertheless understood in the context of the remaining elements. The word taken in the sense of action “is uttered only once” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 100). What is more, the word taken in the sense of action “functions as just one syncretic word [...] but it is obviously implied” every time other words are uttered. Symptomatically, it may happen that “the word taken in the sense of action is completely implied from the beginning” (id., p. 101). The ellipsis involves a relevant fact: the meaning of the utterance depends upon some absent elements and thus the signifier is not enough to determine the signified.

Thảo took the mechanism of ellipsis for granted and he did not explain the cognitive and linguistic conditions of that phenomenon. In effect, the ellipsis presupposes the fact that the linguistic utterance lacks some elements. So the utterance has a standard form whose elements could be omitted. And this omission does not preclude the possibility of understanding. Thảo assumed that the subject has already at a disposal the (more or less implicit) practical knowledge of the structure of the utterance and then the subject could simplify the utterance and

omits some elements of it. These elements are absent even if they continue to be implicitly at work to determine the meaning of the utterance. So the addresser and the addressee have to complete the utterance by way of their knowledge of the standard and complete structure of the utterance. That knowledge could be better regarded as the knowledge of the procedure that ties two elements to produce a simple functional sentence. That procedure could also be repeated to produce a sequence of functional sentences. In this way, the repetitive use of the same procedure entails the production of the enumerative functional sentence.

One can then highlight three points. First, the repetition of the same procedure involves the emergence of a new linguistic structure. Second, the enumerative sentence is a sequence of parts which have been produced by way of the same procedure. The fact that the same procedure is used to produce each part of the sequence could involve the omission of some elements without compromising the meaning. Lastly, it should be stressed that Thảo's theory of enumerative sentence did not define the sequence as *recursion*, namely a sequence whose elements are related to the previous elements in a straightforward way. More exactly, the enumerative sentence is a list of functional sentences and thus it is the result of the *iteration* of the same procedure. In contradistinction to the recursion, the iteration is the act of repeating a process which is not based on the result of previous operations.

4.3. Type II: Correlation

The correlation provides a clearer representation of the absent situation than the enumeration. Given a sequence of signs, the correlation is the juxtaposition of two small sentences which have a middle term in common: $(T_1F_1M)-MT_1F + MT_2F-(T_2F_2M)$. The middle term indicates the reciprocal dynamic relationship between the two objects meant by the small sentences. But caution must be paid because the middle term should not be understood to be a precursor of a verb. In any case, the formula of correlation is the result of a synthesis allowed by the middle term. To illustrate:

$$(T_1F_1M)-MT_1F + MT_2F-(T_2F_2M) \rightarrow (T_1F_1M)-MT_{1:2}F-(T_2F_2M).$$

The resulting formula shows two extremes which are two signs that means two different objects (T_1F_1 and T_2F_2). And the middle term means an action (M) that is common to both of those objects ($T_{1:2}$): the middle term is the place where the two simple sentences merge. In this way, the middle term establishes a relationship or connection between two sentences and thus between two things in motion.

We repeat: Attention must be paid to the fact that the middle term is not a verb. It is rather a sign that represents a motion which concerns both, the subject and the object. There is no matter of predication but rather the middle term connects two sentences to produce a compound sentence. The middle term is thus a logical connective that fulfils the function of *coordinating conjunction* which links together two or more elements. In this way, the correlative sentence could represent a situation by evoking the objective relation between two independent objects in motion. Thảo made the following example:

“the object-grasshopper ($\overline{T_1GM}$) in relation to the motion *which concerns it and which concerns* the object-boy (T_2BM) in the form of jumping” which we can more or less transcribe as follows: “the grasshopper it jumps, the boy he catches it.” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 103)

Interestingly, the correlative sentence seems also to transcend the mechanism of *parataxis* (when phrases and clauses are placed one after another independently). From the point of view of meaning at least, the correlative sentence might recall the *subordinating conjunction with sequences* (and, then, while, after, before, etc.): the conjunction joins an independent clause and a dependent clause. In detail, the correlative sentence could evoke a temporal and spatial relationship between two objects by way of the conjunction with sequences. Thus, the middle term of correlative sentence may fulfil, more or less, both functions, the coordinating and subordinating ones. Unfortunately, Thảo did not describe in great detail the value of the middle term.

To Thảo, the correlation arose in the form pantomime during the phylogeny: “prehominids began to imitate not just the motions of the game but also those of

the hunters” (id., p. 104). The pantomime is, in this case, the sequence of two simple imitations – the first represents the escaping game and the second one the hunting hunters – which involves the staging of a hunting scene. The pantomime is “gestural representation of the characteristic *situation* of the most important moment of the hunt” (ibid.). From the point of language, the pantomime is the juxtaposition of two functional sentences which involves “the creation of the developed functional sentence of the correlative type.” Slowly, the vocal moment became autonomous: “the gesture is reinforced by speech, and there results by juxtaposition and synthesis of two elementary sentences, the correlative functional sentence” (ibid.).

Thảo described in great detail the emergence of pantomimes and the way this behaviour began to transcend the narrow limits of the biological need so that our ancestors began to imitate also when the biological needs were satisfied (for instance during play). In this way, the pantomime depends no more upon “the objective conditions of the preparation for hunting expeditions” (id., p. 105) and thus “the group ends up by availing itself of it [the correlative functional sentence] independently of the condition just mentioned, namely the biological need.” Then Thảo described the emergence of a sporadic consciousness of the correlative functional sentence and its transition towards the collective and individual cognizance.

5.1. The Functional Name

Thảo suggested that the name – i.e. the word used to denote any object of thought not considered in a purely individual character – arose from the ability to have a distinct representation of the form of motion (F). And Thảo described the emergence of the name during both, the phylogeny and ontogeny, as a process composed of two stages: the phase of the functional name and that of the typical name. The transition between the first stage and the second one is mediated by the formation of the questioning.

The first example of that ability is given by the developed representative sign (19) T. \overline{FTM} (see the transcription of the errata-corrige: figures 15 and 21.) In this

case, the developed indicative gesture (5) FTM – which stresses on the moments of the form of motion and the object in motion – supports the emergence of the developed representative sign (19) $\overline{T.FTM}$ – “where the insistence in the first place bears on the moment of the form” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 107). But the developed representative sign (19) still depends upon the simple indication that precedes it. Thus, Thảo stated, the sign (19) does not yet make possible to have a distinct representation of the form of motion of the object as such and regardless of the perceptive image of the object. In other words,

The moment of the form here is not yet completely abstracted, since the developed representative indicative sign which projects it to the first place of the formula, is still closely associated with the simple indication of the raw material. The abstraction of the form is completed when the sign in question functions independently, when it is able to enter into new associations. (id., p. 109)

Instead, the functional sentence is eminently a verbal expression. So it offers a more abstract support for the emergence of the name. Specifically, the developed correlative functional sentence is the starting point suggested by Thảo to explain the emergence of the name. The correlative sentence is the association of two developed indicative verbal signs through a middle term. For instance:

$$(21) (T_1F_1M)-FT_1M + FT_2M-(T_2F_2M) \rightarrow (T_1F_1M)-FT_{1:2}M-(T_2F_2M).$$

The resulting formula shows two extremes which are two signs that means two different objects (T_1F_1 and T_2F_2). And the middle term means the form of motion (F) that is common to both of those objects ($T_{1:2}$): the middle term establishes the connection between two objects and is the place where the two simple sentences merge.

According to Thảo, the name arose from the ability to draw an analogy between the forms of two objects through the association of two sentences. That analogy does not concern two objects in their entirety, but rather it is based on the common property of both of them. And more in detail, the analogy concerns the form, thus the correlation between the two objects is not dynamic as in the case of the enumerative sentence but rather a formal one (*formelle*): “the relation between

the two extreme terms is mediated by a form and not by a motion [...] we can speak here of a *formal correlation* [corrélation]” (id., p. 111). Tháo wrote that this analogical relation is a *comparison* (comparaison): “we can immediately see that a comparison results from it: the two indicated objects are in fact compared to each other by the mediation of their common [...] form” (ibid.).

To Tháo, the middle term of the formula (21) tends to be “absorbed by one of the two extremes” (id., p. 112). On that basis, Tháo introduced the following formula:

(22) $(T_1F_1M. \overline{FT_{1-2}M}) - (T_2F_2M)$: “this structure contains two, not three terms, the mediation performed in formula (21) by the middle term which has been internalized in the first, which has thereby been enriched with a new meaning” (id., p. 113).

In this way, the property to have a certain form is represented as essentially connected with an object. For the same reason, the form is represented “in its particular realization in the indicated object T_1 ” (id., p. 114). The new term – which is the syncretic representation of an object with a certain property – represents the model (the ‘this here in general’ or ‘ T_x ’) for all the objects that show the same property.

Tháo called this sign functional name (*nom fonctionnel*): a syncretic word that is employed to mean a general property and to establish comparisons between objects which show that property. But the functional name cannot convey the same meaning of a real name in so far as it involves an image that Tháo described as the syncretic image of both the particular object that possesses the given property and the typical image of that property: “we do not as yet have a conceptual image of it [of the form] but simply a *typical* image [image typique], since the typical is the general in so far as it is realized in the particular” (ibid.). And “we are dealing here with the representation of a determinate form as common to an indefinite number of possible objects [...] resulting from previous comparisons.” In other words, the functional name still merges the image of the particular object with the image of the general property and, for this reason, it fulfils the function of the name without conveying the meaning of the real name, namely the general concept.

5.2. The Typical Name

When the functional name is employed alone, it must be considered to be a *typical name* (*nom typique*). The typical name is the name of an object with certain properties. It could be useful to remember that the typical name has the structure of the juxtaposition of a developed indicative sign and a developed representative sign:

$$(24) T_1F_1M. \overline{FT_xM} .$$

The typical name could be employed alone without the support of other signs of the analogical chain. And when it is employed alone, the new sign loses the richness and diversity of the aspects of the objects it means. Specifically, the new term shows a specific phenomenon: “the semantic structure of the name is transformed in such a manner that its syncretic content T_1M gradually becomes recessive, while its determinate content FT_xM becomes progressively dominant” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 115-116). Another way of saying this is that the form of motion of the particular object meant by the developed indicative sign (T_1FM) that constitutes the first part of the typical name ($T_1F_1M. \overline{FT_xM}$) loses relevance and is pushed into the background.

Of course, the emergence of the typical name previously required the ability to establish analogies and generalization. But Thảo was not clear on this subject and merely tried to illustrate some examples already mentioned by Piaget (1950: 258-259). Thảo described the formation of the typical name in accordance with a synthetic process. First, the typical image arises from both, the associations of terms and comparison of some objects. Then a term absorbs the typical image and slowly loses its peculiarities to become the support of the typical image.

Interestingly, the typical image remains connected with the image of the particular object in so far as the recessive image “though recessive, still remains” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 116). The typical image “does not yet appear in itself as an abstract character defining a class of objects, but only in so far as it is realized

concretely in the indicated object.” The typical name is “the indication of the object as exemplary type” (id., p. 117). But, for the same reason, the typical name begins to designate the object-in-itself with its property without implicitly referring to an indefinite plurality of possible objects possessing that property.

For this reason, one could affirm that Thảo’s theory of the typical name seems to describe something similar to the notion of “prototype”. The prototype is a member of a category that represents more than the others the fact of possessing the property that determines the class. This notion was already suggested by the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico (1688-1774) to explain the origins of language and thought and today is extensively employed by psychologists, linguists, philosophers, etc. (for instance Rosch 1973, 1975; Lakoff 1987; Langacker 1987). The notion of prototype recalls the pair *type/token*. This pair was introduced in semiotics by Peirce and is used today by linguists, philosophers, and scientists (see Wetzel 2014). The type is the model while tokens are concrete particulars. The typical name represents objects that embody or exemplify types, and, for this reason, it could be regarded as a token. But the fact that the general concept and the general name are not available yet implies that the typical name conveys a meaning that is the token of a type which does not exist yet.

5.3. The Questioning

The transition from the functional name to the typical name is marked by the emergence of the questioning. The child at about 20 months begins to pose questions of that kind: “What is it?”. According to Thảo, what the child asks is a name that represents the determined form as common to several objects. Unfortunately, Thảo did not spend enough time to explain the emergence of the questioning. He simply affirmed, by way of a negative argument, that the questioning

cannot, of course, bear on the first component T_1F_1M since this deals only with the meaning of a developed indication for which an ordinary syncretic word would suffice. From the very beginning of the stage under investigation, the child himself invents words of this kind: he does not have to ask for them. The questioning which appears at about 20 months can thus only aim at the second component of the

meaning in question FT_xM. (Thảo [1973] 1984: 114)

In this vein, the question is a word which means the name of the typical form of something. The structure of the question shows a gestural moment through which the child points to the object, a verbal moment, and an eye-contact with the interlocutor. The question could be perceived as a question because the child “turns his eyes toward the observer with a look which tends to move alternatively from the observer to the indicated object, and expresses in this way his expectation of that object’s name” (id., p. 114).

The eye-movement and the vocalizations produce a new semantic structure: “in this alternating movement of the look accompanied by the repetition of the names, a new meaning is constituted” (id., p. 123). The question permits to focus the attention of the partners to the typical form of the object and to utter the name of that form. In this way, the typical form of the object begins to be distinguished from the particular form of the present object. And the functional name, along with its confused typical image (*image typique confuse*), becomes a typical name that conveys a distinct typical image (*forme typique distincte*).

Thảo stated that the child needs to be part of a linguistic community before posing the question. The name the child asks is, in fact, a fixed name. This name is usually employed to name the object, but the child interprets it as a typical name which is still merged with the image of the particular object. So Thảo wrote that “the fixity of the name can be obtained only by a social agreement since it corresponds to the experience of a multiplicity of objects” (id., p. 115). By contrast, our ancestors employed already existing syncretic words as typical names. Thảo added that the awareness of the typical distinct form of the object – in the case of our ancestors, it is the form that the instrument must have – would explain the standardization of the lithic production of the Kafuan. Thảo’s description of the emergence of the typical name during the phylogeny is quite imaginative and, for this reason, it has not been analysed in greater detail. What must be remarked is the fact that, in the typical name, as Thảo set out, our ancestors fixed “the accumulated experience of hundreds of thousands of years of adaptive labour” (id., p. 127). The typical name, indeed, allows fixing the practical knowledge of the

production of the instrument as available experience for a social group as a whole. In this way, the cognitive and practical skills of our ancestors increasingly developed.

6.1 The Functional Verb

To Thảo “the sentence as sentence [la phrase comme phrase proprement dite]” is “based on the differentiated word” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 127). The differentiated word is a word that means a thing, an action, or a completion. Thus, “the cognizance of the typical name” inaugurated the differentiation of a vocalization *qua substantive (substantif)* with a determined meaning³⁷. The second transition towards the true sentence is the emergence of the syntactical connection by way of a *functional verb* which allows producing a syntactical connection. Then the emergence of the *true verb* must be considered to be the condition for having the syntactical connection as a grammatical form.

The *functional verb (verbe fonctionnel)* appears in the child at about 21 months and is a syncretic word which indicates the action: “the linguistic heritage of the prehomimid stage comprises only the substantive as differentiated word, as typical name, so that the word which indicates action remains syncretic” (id., p. 129). The semantic structure of the functional verb is based on the structure of the developed indicative sign (6): FMT. In effect, the developed indicative sign (6) stresses on both, the moment of the form of motion and the moment of motion. In this way, the developed indicative sign (6) could accompany a typical name and

³⁷ The source of the following lines is the website of the French Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales: <http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/substantif>. The French term *substantif* has been borrowed from Latin *substantivus* adj. “Substantial” (attested from Tertullian [ca 150 - ca 230]; see Gaffiot 2001; cf. von Wartburg 12: 357a). It has been borrowed from medieval Latin *nomen substantivum*: “unity of the lexicon which can be combined with various morphemes expressing modalities and which corresponds semantically to a substance (beings or classes of beings, things, notions)” (attested since the 13th century, cf. Städtler 1988: 245). In the *Port-Royal Grammar* (1660), the substantive is opposed to the adjective: the substantive means the substance, the thing by itself while the adjective means the way the thing is (cf. Colombat, Fournier, Puech 2015: 81). To Thảo, a substantive is a lexical unit (usually a word) that designates a thing or a notion by itself. In other words, it is a word that holds a name function in the sentence.

then indicates the action (i.e. the form of motion and motion) that concerns the object the typical name refers to.

In detail, the functional verb is employed to indicate the form of the motion the real subject wants to give to the object. Thảo made the following example:

at about 20-21 months we can observe a new behaviour in the child which consists of pushing a train of four blocks with the finger, imitating the observer, or himself laying out a train of two or three blocks in a line by pushing them. The regulation of such behaviour presupposes that the subject indicates to himself the form of alignment as the form, as of whole, of the motion to be imparted to the blocks, since any impulse from outside that form would only disperse them. (id., p. 129)

Once again, the behaviour of the child is regarded as expression of some cognitive symbolic skills. From the point of view of the phylogeny

we may believe that a sign of this kind had to be constituted for the task of aligning stones for the construction of walls for shelters. In Lower Bed I of the Olduvai gorge, a circle of roughly piled stones was discovered which was probably used as a shelter by *Homo habilis* whose remains were discovered at the site MKI less than a mile away, at the same geological level. (id., p. 130)

The functional verb indicates the form of the action which must be imparted to the object. Slowly our ancestors began to be aware of that sign: “cognizance of this sign, which operates according to the dialectic of the three moments: sporadic, collective and individual [...] implies from now on its own *level* within itself as *consciousness of the form of the motion to be imparted to the object*” (id., p. 133). In any case, it seems that Thảo asserted that the main function of the verb is to mean an action. Interestingly, even if in the Vietnamese language the verb remains invariable and is readily associated with the movement (Động từ, “motion word”). But Thảo probably found this definition of the verb in Western tradition directly. He agreed with the traditional definition of verb suggested by Plato in his *Sophist* (262a): “that which denotes action we call a verb [ῥῆμα, rhêma]” (English trans. by Benjamin Jowett).

6.2. The Typical Verb

In the transition from Homo habilis to Homo faber (sapiens), the production of tools led Tháo to hypothesise the emergence of the sentence as a syntagmatic sequence of differentiated words (typical names and typical verbs). The typical verb (*verbe typique*) is the vocalization which means the action, the form of motion as such. He did not describe the typical verb as a means to determine the time (as Aristotle's definition of the verb in his *Poetics* 57a). Neither he described it as a form of predication (as in *Port-Royal Grammar* where the verb is nothing other than a word whose main use is to signify affirmation). The typical verb is also non-modifiable vocalization – thus it does not evolve determinations such as diathesis, number, person, mood, etc. And, at first, this is no question here of sequences of typical names and typical verbs. The typical verb, in other words, was used alone and it was a name employed to name the action.

From the point of view the individual's consciousness, the subject became aware of the own productive labour by recognising him/herself in the product of labour: "the form realized as *property of the produced object* is none other than the very form of the motion of productive labour, *in so far as this motion has been stabilized in that object*" (id., p. 134). Tháo seems to implicitly invoke Hegel's famous passage of his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* devoted to the *master-slave dialectic* (or Lordship and Bondage, Herrschaft und Knechtschaft). The slave is the character that represents the worker. He creates products and sees himself reflected in the products he created. The slave realises that the world around him was created by his own hands. And in this way, he achieves self-consciousness to be the author of the products of his/her own labour.

Homo habilis began to be aware of labour as the technical activity that presupposes the conscious representation of both the goal and the means. But the transition to the real labour of production began only with *Homo sapiens*. With H. sapiens, the dialectic of language and reality seems to be achieved. As a matter of fact, the typical verb allows becoming conscious of the product of labour as such. And, Tháo stated, the human labour is nothing other than the conscious reproduction of the dialectic of nature as matter in motion. In effect, Tháo wrote:

In reality this relation [between the motion and the object] appears in the most general manner in nature itself, since all human productive labour is only a *conscious reproduction* of the spontaneous process by which phenomena are *themselves produced*.

[...] in the social practice of productive labour, where man *reproduces* in his own way things of nature by consciously repeating this fundamental process, where the motion concerning the object objectifies itself, in a more or less transitory way, by being stabilized in a configuration which is maintained for a while. (id., p. 134)

The source of Thảo's insight is the following quote of Marx (1877: 114-116; MEW XXIII: 192-195):

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. We are not now dealing with those primitive instinctive forms of labour that remind us of the mere animal. An immeasurable interval of time separates the state of things in which a man brings his labour-power to market for sale as a commodity, from that state in which human labour was still in its first instinctive stage. We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman's will be steadily in consonance with his purpose. This means close attention. The less he is attracted by the nature of the work, and the mode in which it is carried on, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as something which gives play to his bodily and mental powers, the closer his attention is forced to be. [...] In the labour-process, therefore, man's activity, with the help of the instruments of labour, effects an alteration, designed from the commencement, in the material worked upon. The process disappears in the product, the latter is a use-value, Nature's material adapted by a change of form to the wants of man. Labour has incorporated itself with its subject: the former is materialised, the latter transformed. That which in the labourer appeared as movement, now appears in the product as a fixed quality without motion. The blacksmith forges and the product is a forging.

According to Thảo, Homo sapiens is able to represent "to himself in advance a

rather long series of well-determined movements” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 141). This would be clear when on analysed the Chellean industry:

While the production of the Olduvian chopper only requires from 5 to 8 cutting strokes on both sides of the edge, the Chellean biface requires several dozen well-ordered strokes, and for each stroke the exact striking place, the direction and the force of the motion to be accomplished must be determined. (ibid.)

To Thảo, it means that “the subject must have in his mind a rather complex plan of action” and “would be to indicate to himself a series of operations of a determine typical form which presupposes the differentiation of the verb as typical verb [verb typique].” In the transition from *H. habilis* to *H. faber (sapiens)*, the production of tools leads to assume the emergence of the sentence as a syntagmatic sequence of differentiated words (typical names and typical verbs). Unfortunately, Thảo stopped here his description of the formation of syntax³⁸. But, interestingly, Thảo finished his description of the origins of language with the verb – which means an action – exactly at the same point where his description of the formation of human language among humans in PDM begins (see above Chapter 2).

6.3. The Sentence in Strict Sense

According to Thảo “*the sentence in strict sense* [phrase proprement dite]” must be regarded as “the relations of subject to verb, and of verb to complement” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 128). And he added that “the complement” is “indistinctly direct or circumstantial.” To Thảo, the true sentence is distinguished from functional sentence only in regard to the syntactical form. In fact, to him, the functional sentence fulfils the same function of the real sentence. The real sentence is nothing other than an improvement of the functional sentence: the functional sentence does not imply the grammatical and explicit form of the real sentence, but it nevertheless performs the same function. The grammatical form, which the true sentence shows, is the syntactical connection. This is composed of three terms at

38 But it could be possible – even if Thảo has not been too clear about it – to suggest that the sequence typical verb-typical name sketched out the first form of syntactical predication: the typical verb allows determining the relation of movement to the object and thus the object with a certain objectified property.

least: subject, verb, and complements.

In this regard, a brief remark concerning the handbooks of French grammar could be useful to highlight the way Tháo applied to the human language in general some categories employed to describe the French language. Let's take a look at the history of the notion of *phrase*.

The notion of phrase appeared in French grammatical handbooks in the first half of the 19th century. The phrase became the cornerstone of grammar until the mid-20th century. At the beginning, it was confused with *proposition* (Chevrel 2006: 233). Until the 18th century, the proposition was the linguistic expression of a logical judgement and was composed of three elements: the subject (substantive), the attribute, and the connection (the verb *to be*). Thus, the proposition was considered to be the linguistic expression of thought just like the *Port-Royal Grammar* (originally *Grammaire générale et raisonnée*, 1660) had set out. Slowly, the proposition began to be analysed on the basis of the grammatical functions of its parts (for instance by the abbé Girard (1677-1748): cf. Chevrel 2006: 244). In this way, the logical analysis of proposition (subject, verb, and attribute) paralleled and was aligned with the grammatical analysis of the parts of the proposition (Chevrel 2006: 247-252; see for instance Urbain Domergue (1745-1810): cf. Chevrel 2006: 227). And, at the end of the 18th century, the notion of phrase, thus, coincided with the proposition analysed from the grammatical point of view. But the phrase transcended the narrow limit of logic and became a grammatical notion.

In the second half of the 19th century, the notion of phrase became a synonym of the group of words between two points composed of a simple proposition, at least (Chevrel 1977: 208). At this juncture, we don't care about the fact that there was a certain confusion between phrase and proposition (Marchello-Nizia 1979: 38-39). A proposition is composed of a subject, a verb, and complements. The notion of *complement* (complément) was invented by César C. Dumarsais (1676-1756) and improved by Nicolas Beauzée (1717-1789; cf. Chevrel 2006: 231; see also Chevalier 2006). As has been seen, Tháo's invoked the direct complement and circumstantial one. The stabilization of the *complément circonstanciel* in French grammars took place during the 1850s while the stabilization of the *complément d'objet direct* in the 1920s (cf. Chevrel 1977: 184).

The French 19th- and 20th-century grammars described the phrase as released from any kind of logical implication and independent of any theories of knowledge. Instead, to Thảo, the syntax of true sentence extensively depends upon semantic. All the true sentence and the syntactical connection do is nothing but to illustrate the semantic connection between concepts or between things in a better way. So the function of the parts of the true sentence is not reduced to grammatical appropriateness but it also implies the relation with extra-linguistic factors.

After having described the outlines of Thảo's theory of the formation of syntax, we are now able to recapitulate the main topics of the present chapter in order to understand the real underlying reasons for Thảo's approach to language evolution.

7. Concluding Remarks

It should be noted that the title of the third chapters of the first part of ILC devoted to the sentence formation was entitled *The alveolus of the dialectic of knowledge*. And it could be useful to remember that the central claim of Thảo's hypothesis is the description of the emergence of the most abstract contents of consciousness. The description of language origins allows Thảo to describe the forms through which consciousness and abstract thinking arises from the simplest kind of knowledge to the more sophisticated ones. As a matter of fact, as we have already noticed in the previous chapter, the language of real life is a social behaviour and evolved to represent mind-independent things in a better way. In connection with this, the formation of syntax marks a relevant stage in the formation of human knowledge.

To Thảo "knowledge of the object consists only in the knowledge of its motion" (id., p. 135). Natural phenomena are the results of the dialectic of nature which must be regarded as the spontaneous process by which every object is constituted by a "multitude of particles in motion" (id., p. 134). Knowing the object means knowing its form of "equilibrium as *motion provisionally stationary*" at the present instant, i.e. their transitory configuration. Spontaneous natural processes must then be regarded as the dialectic by which "the motion concerning the object objectifies itself, in a more or less transitory way, by being stabilized in a

configuration which is maintained for a while” (ibid.).

We must add that, for Thảo, the praxis is the criterion of knowledge. To explain, we can read in Marx’s first thesis on Feuerbach that “the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively” (MEW III: 5; Eng. trans. by W. Lough from Marx & Engels 1969: I, 13). After Marx, Lenin’s second chapter of the third part of his *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* was devoted to the criterion of practice. To him, knowing must be considered to be the ability to consciously reproduce natural spontaneous phenomena. It is the only way we can confirm our hypotheses on the laws of natural phenomena.

In a similar way, to Thảo, human production consciously reproduces “the spontaneous process by which natural phenomena are themselves produced” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 134). Nature is nothing other than matter in motion – as we have already seen above in Chapters 5 and 6. Producing objects involves the fact that humans must reproduce the natural process in their praxis. At the level of human production of objects, the produced object shows properties that are stabilized forms of motion. Those properties have been applied to the object by the worker. Thus, in front of the produced object whose useful form “is nothing but the very form of the act of labour which is *objectified* in it” (ibid.), the worker could become aware of the transitory stabilized configuration of the motion applied to the object which must be seen as the property of the object as such. As a consequence, the worker becomes aware the product of his/her own labour. And thus productive labour allows the first form of knowledge of the dialectic of reality. As we have seen, typical verb better satisfies that purpose. In effect, the condition of being aware of the produced object has to be found in the language of real life. We repeat, the language of real life rises from the real conditions of existence and fulfils the role of mediation between the unconscious experience of reality and conscious lived experience.

As we have already noticed, Thảo’s aim was to show how “the development of social practice” creates

step by step new forms of language and consciousness, where the original semiological structure is enriched each time with new *linguistic gestures* modelled on the material activity and the material relations of the workers, which, with the support of verbal symbolism, project a more and more encompassing and precise image of the external world. (ibid.)

As a consequence, “the transition from the production of the instrument to the production of the tool involves the constitution of the sentence, which will be realized with the original dialectic of the productive forces and the realisations of production in the development of *Homo habilis* and his transition to *Homo faber*” (id., p. 141). At this juncture, Thảo claimed that the act of production, as a technical act, involves the fact that “consciousness does not limit itself to the representation of the purpose itself, but that it also specifies the *mode of activity* implied by it” (id., p. 133). The formation of the sentence is thus the key to explaining the sophisticated forms of human knowledge of and action on reality because it enables us to produce the representation of a rather long series of well-determined movements.

Interestingly Thảo described the formation of both the name and the verb as two independent processes which, at some point, come together into a fully-developed sentence. But we must repeat that, unfortunately, Thảo did not add more details in connection with this point. And it seems quite clear that the chapter devoted to syntax formation is one of the weaker sections of the book. However, we should also add that the subtitle of the chapter devoted to syntax is *Introduction to sentence formation*. What Thảo suggested, then, are “some brief remarks.” As a matter of fact, he was aware that “the formation of the sentences as sentence, in the strict sense, [...] raises an entirely new set of problems which demand to be treated within the framework of another analysis” (Thảo [1973] 1984: 127). But this treatment of the formation of the sentence as sentence within the framework of another analysis lacks in Thảo’s available published and unpublished writings. Maybe the reason for this is the fact that Thảo had already introduced two of the main elements of the sentence in a strict sense (the name and the verb) which allowed him to describe the emergence of the consciousness of the object as the product of human labour. That is the precondition for every theory of alienation and class struggle in modern societies. At the same time, the formation of both, verb and name, represents a kind of introduction to a theory of both

human knowledge and ideology. We have already yet had occasion to analyse in depth these two points in Chapter 6.

Chapter Twelve

Towards a Philosophical Anthropology

Il existe incontestablement une théorie de l'aliénation chez Marx,
et il ne s'agit que l'interpréter et de la développer.
Le problème de l'aliénation du langage est
sans doute une des voies fécondes pour ce développement.
(T.D. Thảo)

1. Introduction. – 2. Noiré's Theory and the Debate on Language Origins in the 19th Century. – 3. The Noiré Tradition. – 4. Thảo's Theory in the History of the Debate on Language Origins. – 5. Overcoming Physiological Determinism. – 6. The Pointing. – 7. Thảo's Anthropology. – 8. Concluding Remarks on the Language of the Real Life and the Cultural Niche.

1. Introduction

After having analysed Thảo's theory of language origins in detail in the previous chapters, we would now formulate a comprehensive view of the profound meaning of philosophical efforts Thảo was engaged in. What we will seek to explore is the theoretical choices made by Thảo in the formulation of his theory of the origins of language and consciousness. To proceed far into the building of that framework, first, we must take into consideration the question of language origins from the standpoint of the long-term history of the issue and analyse different solutions proposed to solve that puzzle. In the course of our study, we have repeatedly compared Thảo's theory with other hypotheses on the origin of language and consciousness for the purpose of highlighting its distinctiveness. In the present chapter, we will try to study Thảo's theory from the wider point of view of the history of the question about the origin of language. For this purpose, we will put in relation Thảo's theory with a particular theoretical tradition that we will call "Noiré Tradition". The German philosopher Ludwig Noiré is obviously not the only

significant scholar of this tradition but surely, he is the one who has long been considered a reference point by many authors. We will also highlight how Thảo's first theory proposed in PMD is particularly indebted to that tradition. After that, we will show how much the theory proposed by Thảo in his ILC goes away from that tradition. We will thus be able to appreciate the change of point of view put in place by Thảo during the 1960s. At the same time, our efforts will enable us to propose a synthesis of the path taken during the course of our present work.

As we are interested in considering Thảo's philosophical anthropology, we must wonder what are the criteria under which he regarded human nature. After studying the development of Thảo's theory of language, then, the following chapter will show the reader what we think is the culmination of Thảo's efforts. As we have seen, for Thảo the theory of the origins of language fits into a more general theory of consciousness. What kind of philosophical project seem to play a role in Thảo's theory of consciousness? In short, Thảo wanted to describe two kinds of transition: the transition from animality to humanity and the transition from perception to ideality. Another way to say what we have already shown in Chapter 1 is that, since the period of PDM, Thảo has reversed the Husserlian system and has replaced the phenomenological idealism with a materialist dialectical ontology and a new understanding of human being. The profound meaning of Thảo's theory of consciousness and its genesis seems, therefore, to be a general anthropology. Did the same goal also orient Thảo's theory set out in his ILC?

But the question is not that simple. First, obviously, a theory of human nature has a teleological and speculative character. Second, Thảo wants to highlight the link between humans and nature, but he must also admit that there are simultaneously continuity and discontinuity between them. If there is only continuity, we support a mechanistic materialism. If there is only discontinuity, we support a spiritualism or an existentialism. The basic implication of Thảo's line of thinking was that humans are natural beings and matter is all that exists. The matter at the human level takes a particular form: the form of praxis (labour). And Thảo's assumption revolves around the notion of praxis as the actual root of human consciousness. That to say, Thảo started from concrete existence and praxis to describe consciousness and thought. In a phrase, as consciousness is the

awareness of what exists and what is done, consciousness is embedded in praxis. Third, we have a paradox: we are discussing the general outline of Thảo's anthropology, even if he just dealt with the dynamics preceding the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. In other words, Thảo's genetic anthropology described the pre-history of *Homo sapiens* in order to show the core of what we define *human being*. Assuming a fixed human nature or essence does not mean to support a kind of biological reductionism. As a matter of fact, transhistorical attributes of human beings are in turn the result of human history. For the same reason, Thảo's anthropology avoids the culture-historical relativism.

For our purposes in this study, it is worth noting that it seems that Thảo would suggest a general anthropology which serves him to demystify philosophical idealism (existentialism, structuralism, and phenomenology) and to identify the roots of alienation in past and modern societies. In this way, alienation seems to be the result of the failure to recognize two bonds: i) the unity of the individual and society; ii) the link between the individual and the creative power accumulated during both pre-human and human history. Convinced that in capitalist society – as well as in phenomenology – the life of the individual and the life of society, the life of the individual and its biological origin, are opposed, Thảo wanted to highlight the natural and social origins of each person. Consciousness is a particular type of activity directed toward the ideal appropriation of reality, while labour is the real activity of the actual appropriation of reality. Every time when someone interdicts the free appropriation of reality through labour and social relations, or philosophy neglects the primacy of real life, individuals deviate from the fulfilment of their aspirations.

At this point, we would like to shift attention to the fact that, as language is the expression of historically specific forms of production and social relations, the contradictions of everyday life are expressed in language. For this reason, language must be seen as the arena of ideological and political struggles. To what extent we can find in Thảo's theory of language a sketched theory of ideology will be discussed in the following lines.

2. Noiré's Theory and the Debate on Language Origins in the 19th Century

In the first part of PMD, Thảo sharply criticised Husserl and came to the conclusions that there was a growing need to tackle the problem of empirical, natural and historical development of consciousness. On that basis, Thảo regarded tool-making and other collective activities as the condition for having the human-specific form of consciousness. More narrowly, human language may be better understood as a result of the specific cooperation involved in tool-making. Specifically, the structure of Thảo's theory depends upon five assumptions: i) language arose from collective goal-oriented activities; ii) those activities were targeted at tool-making; iii) vocalizations accompanied and coordinated collective efforts; iv) those vocalizations were understandable by all of the primitive workers exactly because they shared the same practical goals; v) the first function of language was not the communication of thoughts.

As we have already pointed out in Chapter 2, Thảo's theory should be read against the background of the Noiré Tradition. According to Noiré (1877: 333), the necessary skills for creating language did not depend on rationality but rather on peculiar human sociability. This one has implied an unprecedented form of cooperation already at work in an early stage of human development. To Noiré, before speaking our ancestors already cooperated for achieving common ends (*id.*, p. 331). Noiré consequently suggested that in the context of cooperative tasks, language arose. The corporeal efforts made in the context of those tasks involuntary produced vocal emissions. Slowly, these involuntary vocalizations became shared and recognisable by every member of the group (*id.*, p. 332). Interestingly, sounds were performed during the same given actions: given sounds constantly corresponded to the same given action (*id.*, p. 341) and they originally mean some aspects of that action.

Noiré's theory has had a wide influence in the debate on language origins for nearly a century (see D'Alonzo 2017a). But Noiré's theory must be first studied in the context of the debates in which it arose. On the one side, the debate on language origins in the 19th century was mostly a reaction against the theory of the divine origin of language suggested by the French intellectual Louis-Gabriel-

Ambroise de Bonald (1754–1840) in his *Mélanges littéraires, politiques et philosophiques* (Literary, Political and Philosophical Mixture, 1819). The French philologist Ernest Renan (1823–1892) and the German linguist Jakob Grimm (1785–1863) took promptly a position and thus revitalised a debate that has already inflamed the previous century (for an overview cf. Haßler & Neis 2009: 25-48). Most scholars agreed with the assumption that it is not necessary to invoke a transcendental principle for explaining language origins (for France see Auroux 1984 and Desmet 1996; for England see Aarsleff 1983; for Germany see Knobloch 1988). Furthermore, Noiré's theory fitted into the post-Darwinian debate on language origins. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Charles Darwin had suggested that human language progressively appeared in pre-human multimodal communication systems constituted by gestures and vocal imitation. Thus, the first traces of language must not be seen only in the history of genus *Homo* but even before.

Within this general picture, various options have been suggested during the 19th century. In the case that language slowly arose from some cries or gestures, Jespersen (1922) listed four alternative theories at least:

The so-called *bow-wow theory*: onomatopoeias or other imitative behaviours as original words. First words imitated external objects. Another form of imitation could be the pantomime: imitation through gestures and other body movements of the source that they mean.

The so-called *pooh-pooh theory* suggests that first words were interjections which express the subjective state of mind. This was the option chosen by Geiger (1868 and 1872). Before him, in the fifth book of his *De Rerum Natura* (The Nature of Things, 1028-1090), the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (99 BC–c. 55 BC) suggested a typical interjection theory. His main source was the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC), who wrote that language was a vocal expression of the perceptive and corporeal experience of the world. Similarly, Lucretius suggested that the nature and the need were the reasons why the primitive humans put in relation sounds to things. See also Heymann or Hermann Steinthal's (1823–1899) *Der Ursprung der Sprache* (1851, 1858, 1877, and 1888).

The so-called *ding-dong theory*: language derived from instinctive expressions of a state of mind produced by an outer thing. See the *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1860) by the English theologian Frederic W. Farrar (1831–1903) and *Dictionary of English Etymology* (1859) by the English linguist and cousin of Darwin Hensleigh Wedgwood (1803–1891). That hypothesis was already formulated by Leibniz in the third book of *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* (New Essays on Human Understanding, 1765) and mentioned by de Brosses in his *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues* (Essay on the mechanical development of languages, 1765). This solution is the *sound symbolism* (phonesthesia, phonosemantics): vocal sounds carry meaning in themselves and could be used for meaning certain features of the things (see also Wallis 1653 and Humboldt 1836). Nowadays, sound symbolism is called *phenomimes*. One calls *psychomimes* sounds describing psychological states rather than external phenomena (Hasada 1998).

The so-called *yo-he-do theory*: language arose from vocal expressions which follow some physical efforts. Noiré's theory exactly supported this hypothesis.

According to Noiré, humans alone have the ability for creating language. And human language is a new stage in the history of animal communication systems. Against Darwin, Noiré did not accept the essential relation between human language and pre-human communication systems. Interestingly, the Austrian philosopher Ernst Mach in his *Die Principien der Wärmelehre* (Principles of the Theory of Heat, 1896) reproached the way in which Noiré had argued for the essential and deep difference between humankind and other animals. In his letter to Mach (Grunewald, 14 February 1902) the Austrian philosopher Fritz Mauthner (1849–1923) – who took into account the impasse reached by the debate on language origin at the time in the second volume of his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (Mauthner 1912²) and then explained the reason by criticising the most influential theories of the epoch (see Bredeck 1989 for more elaborate treatment) – reckoned that Noiré had suggested a too deep split between humans and other animals. And the same criticism was also addressed to a Noiré's close friend, the

German philologist Max Müller (1823–1900) and his *Das Denken im Lichte der Sprache* (The Thought in the Light of Language, 1888). Paradoxically, after nearly half a century, the Hungarian psychologist Géza Révész (1878–1955) regarded Noiré's theory as an example of a biological perspective. It would contrast with anthropological theories that consider language without assuming any kind of link with animal communication. Surely, Noiré refused the divine origin of language and argued for gradual origin. But he did not reduce human language to animal or pre-human communication systems.

3. The Noiré Tradition

For our purposes, it is important to note that Noiré's theory played a relevant role in at least two traditions. Firstly, Noiré's theory was largely employed by Marxist scholars. One need only look at the proposals of Plexanov in his *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (1908), Bogdanov in his *Philosophy of Living Experience: Popular Essays* (1913) and Buxarin in *Historical Materialism. System of Sociology* (1921). We can also mention the case of Vološinov (1930: 52) and Marr (1928: 1) (for more details, see Thomas 1957: 113; Velmezova 2005, 2007; Smith 1998: 87). The resemblance between Tháo's theory set out his PDM and the opinions of those Soviet scholars concerning language origins is striking and remarkable. But it is still difficult to determine to what extent Tháo really known Russian literature on language origins (in this regard see Bertrand 2002, Brandist & Chown 2011; Tchougounnikov 2005; Sériot 2005). The French audience could have at disposal some information about Soviet linguistics. In addition to the testimonies of Marr's linguistics (see Marcellesi 1978) and the impact of Marxism on linguistic sciences in the USSR as well as in France (see Alpatov 2003, Bert 2016), it is quite interesting to mention the French translations of Plexanov (1927, 1948) and Buxarin (1927). A good report of certain Soviet views concerning language origins – including Bogdanov's theory – could also be found in the French translation of Reznikov (1949). It is however unlikely that Tháo's knew the writings we have just mentioned.

Nonetheless, it might be possible to establish a comparison between Tháo and

some Soviet scholars. They, indeed, shared the same theoretical horizon (Marxism) and especially they dealt with language origins in association with a more general investigation into the material origins of consciousness. They had to answer the question: How did language arise from social dimension of labour? The Soviet scholars had also to suggest a theory of language origins independently of Engels' *Dialektik der Natur* (*Dialectics of Nature*, written between 1872 and 1882, according to Haldane 1940, and first published in 1925, see MEW XX: 305-670) and in particular the chapter devoted to *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man* (firstly published in 1895) because a wider circulation of Engels' text follows the Russian edition of *Dialectics of Nature* in 1925. In a similar way, Thảo did not follow Engels' theory of language origins. Specifically, as we already noted in Chapter 2, Thảo did not agree with Engel's theory of the primacy of communication function in language. Although they had different reasons, the Soviet scholars and Thảo adopted Noiré's perspective on language origins. Indeed, Noiré's theory shared some assumptions of Marxism and especially the role played by labour in language development. Notably, Noiré's *Das Werkzeug und seine Bedeutung für die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Menschheit* (*The Tool and its Meaning for the History of Human Evolution*) was translated into Russian in 1925 (see Nuare [1880] 1925).

However, there are several dissimilar assumptions between Noiré and Engels. To sum up, Engels believed that the first stage of linguistic development took place among our pre-human ancestors ("a particular highly-developed race of anthropoid apes"; MEW XX: 444, trans. in Engels 1934). On the contrary, Noiré seems to prefer isolating humankind and its linguistic skills from animal communication systems deeper than Engels. Derived from Engels' approach was the assumption that the difference between human and animal communication systems is a difference of degree. What we must highlight now is the fact that Soviet scholars tried to conciliate Noiré's theory with the theory set out by Bücher's *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (see Chapter 2 for more elaborate treatment). Singing, collective labour, and corporeal movements are intimately linked among primitive peoples and their aim was to rhythmically coordinate collective efforts. The German philologist Karl Borinski (1861–1922) was one of the first philologists who linked Noiré's theory with Bücher's insight (cf. Borinski 1911: 15-16). The Danish

linguist Otto Jespersen (1860–1943) became the main supporter of that solution (cf. Jespersen 1922: 419–426). Later, Thảo implicitly would follow the same tradition.

A second tradition in which Noiré's theory played a relevant role and that Thảo more likely knew is the French psychology and psycholinguistics. In this case, Jespersen's account has been adopted by the French psychologist Henri Delacroix (1873–1937). According to Delacroix (1924: 113–120), musical language (singing) arose during collective tasks and goal-oriented activities. Jespersen and Delacroix explicitly invoked Noiré's and Bücher's theories. Other linguists of the epoch, on the contrary, preferred only to mention Bücher. For instance, in his general introduction to linguistics *Le langage: introduction linguistique à l'histoire* (The Language: a linguistic introduction to history, writing in 1914 but published in 1921), the French linguist and pupil of Antoine Meillet (1866–1936) Joseph Vendryes (1875–1960) admitted that primitive language probably took the shape of singing whose function was to set a tempo during collective tasks such as working or walking (cf. Vendryes 1921: 16–17).

Other examples can be mentioned here. The French philosopher Maurice Pradines (1874–1958) supports Jespersen's insight in his handbook in general psychology (cf. Pradines 1946: 508–511). Before him, the French psychologist André Ombredane (1898–1958) supported the view that rhythmical expressions were tools to coordinate collective efforts (cf. Ombredane 1933: 366). In the same years, the French psychologist Pierre Janet (1859–1947) – one of the most popular psychologist of the epoch – explicitly mentioned and followed Noiré's theory. Janet (1936) affirms that language arose from involuntary cries (*verbal gestures*) performed under the pressure of efforts. Janet made the example of a woodcutter that shouts something like “han” during his work. Involuntary cries assumed a social function and became *signals* once they began to be employed during collective tasks. More specifically, their function was the coordination of collective efforts.

Janet's theory deeply influenced the French Jesuit Paul Foulquié (1893–1983) who explicitly invoked Janet in his exposition of language origins in his *Précis de Philosophie* (1936: 228; 1945: 227; 1950: 228). Now, it could be useful to remember that Foulquié's handbook was the most common philosophical handbook adopted

by private French high schools in 1930s and 1940s. Remarkably, Foulquié described the way in which a group of workers that must do a collective and simultaneous efforts shout something like “ho hisse!” (but this example was not mentioned by Foulquié 1936). Thảo did the same example. That cry is simultaneously expression of the effort and a tool for coordinating actions. Before concluding, it could be relevant to note the fact that Piaget ([1924] 2002: 206) attributed that theory to Janet. Thus, we can admit that Thảo was more likely influenced by French psychological theories to follow Noiré-Bücher’s theory than by Marxist tradition.

To sum up, as the Noiré tradition, in PDM, Thảo supported the idea that language arose from involuntary working interjections. As Bücher, he suggested that primitive vocalizations originally have a pragmatic function. They help our ancestors to coordinate their collective efforts. Interestingly, they were involuntary exactly because labour itself required them. Against Engels, Thảo admitted that the intention would come only later, and it would merely concern communication of ideas. Lastly, we must stress on the fact that, against Engels, in PMD, Thảo suggested that language did not arise before the emergence of our species, even if the symbolic function is largely shared by other mammals.

4. Thảo’s Theory in the History of the Debate on Language Origins

After having dealt with the Noiré tradition, it would be interesting to shed light on the theoretical value of Thảo’s theory. What are the alternative options Thảo’s theory was in contrast to? What kinds of assumptions did Thảo implicitly or explicitly argue for? To answer these questions, it could be useful to analyse the theoretical choices made by Thảo in his PDM against the background of the age-old debate on language origins. Before proceeding far into the building of the framework, attention must be paid to the fact that this paragraph serves the description of Thảo’s theory. Consequently, its aim is eminently explicative of Thảo’s theory, and it cannot be used indifferently to describe whatever hypothesis on language origins. In this case, Auroux (1989) gives a good description of some possible ways to tackle the issue from a more general point of view (for more detail see Gessinger & von Rahden 1989 and Borst 1957-1963). The history of the debate

on language origins is indeed full of examples of scholars whose theories are incompatible with the dichotomies we are suggesting in this paragraph.

Language could have human or divine origins. One of the points of departure of the theory of the divine origins of language(s) is the Bible (see Albertz 1989). However, the storyteller of the Old Testament does not explicitly address the issue and merely said that after the creation of the first man God talks with him (Gen. 2, 16-17). For centuries, commentators had disagreed about the language used by God to talk with Adam. The same problem occurs in the passage when Adam names things (Gen 2, 19-23). Is it the same language of God's? What does it remain of the first language ever spoken? Does that language reveal the real nature of things? The Old Testament also described two different and incompatible linguistic events concerning that language. On the one side, after the deluge, the descendant of Noah spoke their own languages (Gen 10, 5, 20, 31). On the other side, the storyteller tells that different languages arose only after the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11, 1). In any case, the question concerns language faculty as well as human languages. For instance, Dante (1265–1321) suggested that God gave Adam language faculty (cf. *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I, IV, 4) but languages are human products (cf. *Divine Comedy, Paradise* XXVI, 124-138). Many centuries later, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) would argue that God taught Adam how naming things; after that, Adam goes ahead on his own (cf. Hobbes 1651: I, 4).

After Johann Peter Süßmilch (1707–1767), the followers of the theory of the divine origins of language usually offered a more rational explanation to support their theory (see Süßmilch 1756). They affirmed that it is impossible that primitive humans made a pact regarding words-meaning because they needed to already have a shared language. On the other hand, so as to have a language, it is necessary to already have the rational ability to produce it. On that basis, reasoning presupposes language and language presupposes reason. As we have seen in Chapters 3-6, in ILC, Tháo dealt with the same conundrum and admitted the primacy of language over consciousness. In PDM, he had suggested that higher mental functions largely depend upon the internalisation of the meaning of practical activities by way of sounds and the inhibition of actions. Thus, Tháo's investigation of consciousness sought to provide insights into the nature of

language, given the primacy of social life. In a similar way, Noiré (1877: 333) admitted that the required feature for creating language did not depend on rationality but rather on the peculiar human sociability. This one has implied an unprecedented form of cooperation already at a primitive stage of human development. Before speaking, our ancestors already cooperated for achieving shared goals (id., p. 331).

The main point of the conundrum we have just mentioned regards the opportunity to admit a stage in human history which precedes the emergence of language. For instance, Renan (1848), Humboldt (1820) and Müller (1861) sharply reproached the theory of language origins but simultaneously disagreed with the possibility that language arose gradually. In their mind, in fact, humankind and language faculty are inseparable. If humankind is a rational species and language is the instrument of reasoning, it is possible to admit neither that language preceded rational thought nor that rational thought preceded language. Against that, from an evolutionary point of view, human language is regarded as rooted in animal communication systems. To mention the most significant example, Darwin (1871) suggests the continuity between animal communication systems and human language. In a similar way, in PDM, Thảo suggested that the symbolic function is largely shared by other mammals than humans. But language did not arise before the emergence of our species. His opinion radically changed in ILC when he admitted that our pre-human ancestors already had at their disposal a kind of language of real life.

One of the most important problems that arise in the debate on the origins of language concerns the human predisposition to language. As we have seen, in PDM, Thảo suggested that cooperation is the main factor that determines the emergence of human language. In ILC, however, he argued that some bodily predispositions, and especially bipedalism, along with the cooperation, of course, facilitated the emergence of language. In any case, Thảo did not suppose the existence of the human soul – as a metaphysical entity which is ontologically different from the body – for explaining human language. Against that, René Descartes (1596–1650) believed that humans are not only made up of matter (*res extensa*). They also have a mind (*res cogitans*) that enables them to think and speak (see Descartes 1637). Not

only the rationalist tradition but also empiricism and sensualism suggested a form of dualism. Although John Locke (1632–1704) assumed that our knowledge arises from the corporeal experience, he did not dismiss the role of the mind as the active faculty which is ontologically different from the body and enables us to associate experiences (one cannot forget that the circulation of Locke’s philosophy outside Great Britain was marked by the materialistic interpretation of Coste; see Poggi 2007 and Thomson 2007). Even if he admitted a certain similarity between humans and animals (cf. Condillac 1798: § 107), Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–1780) – probably for just a formal religious adherence to the official doctrine – admits the existence of human soul (cf. id., § 6, p. 21 and § 8, p. 23). Tháo’s materialist anthropology set out in his ILC seems to be closer to Johann Gottfried Herder’s (1744–1803) materialistic account. That is, Herder (1772, 1778, 1786, and 1799) esteemed that language arose from some peculiar anatomical and physiological features of humankind (see Tani 2000 and D’Alonzo 2015).

One of the main puzzles a theory of language origins must resolve concerns how fundamental signs could be shared by a given linguistic group. How can fundamental signs be understandable for everybody if the speakers have never spoken before? To this question, one may reply in two ways. On the one hand, our ancestors shared some cognitive or bodily predispositions before sharing fundamental signs. Those predispositions could be inborn or acquired. For instance, Epicurus wrote that climatic conditions influence how a given ethnic group perceives and has emotions. Consequently, every given ethnic group performed sounds in a peculiar way. At the same time, he admitted the existence of some corporeal predispositions that everybody necessarily shares with the others (Letter to Herodotus, Diogenes Laërtius. *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, X, 75). More radically, Herder (1786, 269) acknowledged two principles: i) a universal inborn instinct to imitate that humans share with other animals, ii) and the human-specific *com-passion* (Mitgefühl). Based on human anatomy, *com-passion* and imitation are two non-language-specific abilities that enable us to understand the others. Similarly, Condillac (1798: 262–263) admitted the existence of a mimetic and empathic mechanism that supported the emergence of some fundamental signs. Noiret (1877: 333) introduced the notion of *Gemeingefühl* (a common and pre-

linguistic sentiment of shared goals and intentions). *Gemeingefühl* should pave the way for understanding the intentions of the others. Consequently, Noiré highlighted how *Gemeingefühl* is a specific biological feature of *Homo sapiens*. Generally, to Tháo the primacy of social activities seems to be the principle that explains the mutual understanding, along with the objective meaning of fundamental signs. But we cannot forget that in PDM he suggested that mutual understanding in its most fundamental form also depends upon the understanding of the own reactions as a response to the behaviour of the others (see Chapter 2). In any case, he seems not to assume the existence of an inborn ability.

Sometimes natural prerequisites are not enough to explain the mutual understanding of fundamental signs. Thus, some scholars introduced the role of the context as the key condition for describing that phenomenon. For instance, Lucretius wrote that the needs arising in contingent situations led our ancestors to name things and to understand each other (cf. *De rerum natura*, V, 1028-1029). As we have already seen, Noiré argued for the priority of *Collectivwesen* (social being) respect to individuals (cf. 1877: 334). And no wonder, then, if Noiré (1877: 323) mentioned Feuerbach's *Philosophie der Zukunft* (cf. Feuerbach 1843: 152). For this reason, he suggested that social relationships are the essential condition for having language. Along this line, according to Engels, explained the origin of language from and in the process of labour. In this way, labour and social life brought out the necessity to communicate with others. Quite different in the form but along the same line, Bücher (1899) affirmed that, among primitive communities, rhythmical corporeal movements, singing, and other vocalizations are performed to coordinate collective activities. Tháo too acknowledged the role played by labour in the evolution of human language. However, according to PDM, the initial roots of words were sounds that spontaneously burst out, connected with human activities and automatically resulted from activities that were carried out together, collectively. No communicative intention precedes the emergence of language. However, practical needs pave the way for the emergence of language and the social milieu must be regarded as the necessary environment in which language arose.

The last remark concerning Tháo's theory is about polygenism: human

languages cannot stem from a common mother tongue. As a matter of fact, in PDM, Thảo did not merely consider original linguistic material as a natural product that could be the same for all. Vocalizations changes in time and space. Remarkably, in ILC, he radically changed his own views and suggested the existence of some fundamental signs which are naturally shared by humans because they are rooted in human evolution and history, and in our corporeal predispositions as well.

5. Overcoming Physiological Determinism

In the previous paragraph, we have briefly mentioned the question of the interactions between the organism and environment against the background of language evolution. And we have seen that for Thảo the interactions between organism and environment in the human world are mediated by social relations. This has consequences on the way Thảo thought of human language and the human condition. In this regard, some remarks concerning Thảo's theory set out in his PDM are needed.

Thảo's theory of consciousness must be regarded against the background of a large debate involving some French Marxist scholars of the time (see for instance Prenant 1935: Ch. 12). In that context, Pierre Naville played a relevant role in that, he argued for an objective psychology largely based on John B. Watson's behaviourism. For him, behaviourism considers that the real domain of psychology consists only of observable movements (cf. Naville [1942] 1963: 23). As a consequence, for Naville, the behaviour – that is, the structure of what the body does and says, its reaction patterns interpreted at all levels of activity and in all the relationships of the organism to its environment – can explain everything that we are accustomed to relating to the so-called “psyche” (cf. Naville [1946] 1948: 254).

The main element in the approach Naville suggested to the problem of consciousness is the fact that he denied the existence of consciousness and conceived of human behaviour as the result of physiological mechanisms of action and reaction (cf. Naville [1946] 1948: 254). “Man is a biological machine, placed under certain conditions [L'homme est une machine biologique, placée dans des conditions déterminées.]” (Naville [1942] 1963: 316). Naville's psychology was a

kind of physicalism largely affected by the mechanicism of the 18th century. To put it another way, Naville seems to suggest a kind of non-dialectic materialism.

Against that, Thảo tried to suggest a synthesis between the phenomenological approach to consciousness and natural sciences through the dialectical materialism. In detail, he suggested a dialectic of behaviour in order to explain the formation of consciousness in animals. So conceived, Thảo consequently explained, the main aim of PDM was “to provide Marxism with an analytical instrument to investigate the interiority of lived-experience [le vécu]” (Thảo [1974: 37] 2009: 297). For this reason, he had to overcome the Naville’s behaviouristic mechanicism. On that basis, he introduced the notion of inhibition. That notion enabled him to translate the Hegelian notion of “negation” in a more suitable concept to be accepted by scientists. This option was a kind of naturalisation of Hegelian dialectic. But we can wonder whether he achieved his aim.

In PDM, consciousness arises from the physiological mechanism of inhibition. But inhibition is still a physiological mechanism. For this reason, Thảo admitted that animals have a form of consciousness. As humans share certain aspects of their existence with the animal condition, the physiological mechanism of inhibition still plays an important role in the formation of human consciousness. For example, the symbolic function still shares a physical and physiological origin with the animal dimension. Animal consciousness and signification are the results of the inhibition of an action; they are the products of the suspension of an actual relationship with the world. We can thus wonder what then is peculiar to the human dimension.

About the origin of language, according to Thảo, language arises when the action is not carried out. We have seen that the signification arises from the collective action interrupted for some reason. As long as vocalizations (working interjections) function as pragmatic tools for coordinating collective actions, we are not dealing with language because those vocalizations are still meaningless. Of course, those vocalizations already had a social value. In this regard, it could be useful to distinguish working interactions from emotion interjections. Remarkably, some years before Thảo, Bogdanov (2015) already stressed on the deep difference between working interjections (social) and emotional interjections (natural).

The question we face at this juncture concerns the extent to which interjections are the result of the mechanical interactions between the language and the physical world (body included). Traditionally, Julien Offray de La Mettrie elucidated a rigorous mechanistic theory of language learning (see La Mettrie 1748). La Mettrie's deterministic and mechanic insight exercises an influence on philosophy of language during the 18th century, and especially on de Brosses (1765) who described the primitive language as the result of mechanical influence of the environment over the organism (Gossiaux 1981, Auroux 1981, Droixhe 1981, Nobile 2005; more sceptical are Porset 1980, Coulaud 1981, Dardano-Basso 1998).

What Jespersen (1922) called *pooh-pooh theory* suggested that fundamental signs were interjections: they instinctively express speaker's feelings, emotions, sensations. Corporeal alteration involved by an object or the surrounding environment produces some emotions (pain, joy, etc.) that could be accompanied by cries and involuntary vocal responses. In this regard, from Sanctius (1523–1601; cf. id., 1587: 110) to the English politician and grammarian James Harris (1709–1780; cf. id. 1794⁵: 289), interjections were regarded as universal natural signs. On the contrary, Condillac (1775: 356) affirmed that interjections (*accents*) are meaningless without the support other gestures and the context in which they are performed. Thảo, working interjections are not the expression of feelings and emotions, but rather the tool to coordinate collective efforts. Since the beginning, they have a social value.

However, those vocalizations were still meaningless. When they began to mean the action and then the product of that action, they cease to be tools for working and become instruments of knowledge and communication. “The human ancestor did not say what he thought because he thought it, but thought it because he said it, and he said it because he stopped doing it” (Thảo [1951] 1986: 169-170). Language is entirely the product of an interrupted action rather than being an essential part of it. In this passage, we can observe the distance that separates the theory proposed in PDM from Engels' theory. For Engels, language is above all an instrument of communication because it responds to practical needs.

In ILC, Thảo's theory dramatically changed. In ILC, the mechanism of inhibition is no longer at work. And therefore, consciousness is not its product. For this

reason, Thảo denied any form of consciousness to animals. Consciousness arises from the language of real life. Furthermore, signification is neither something that arises from the inhibition of the action nor the product of the separation of inner life from actions. In so far as the inhibition doesn't play any role in the genesis of consciousness, Thảo dismissed any dialectics of nature. The dialectics of inhibition cannot be seen as the inner structure of living beings anymore. Thảo adopted the point of view of historic materialism to describe the dialectical emergence of consciousness from language and labour among pre-human societies. Thảo confirmed, however, that consciousness always follows linguistic behaviour and must grasp significations arising independently of its will. But in ILC linguistic behaviour is fully formed already on a practical level. Signification is not the result of individual experience but already exists as a collective product outside the individual communicator. We have seen that consciousness arises from the internalization of the signification of the language of real life. And for this reason, the language of real life can be the mediation between the life of consciousness and social practice. For the same reasons, language is no longer the negation of the real relationship with the object. The gestural indication and its signification thus become the keystone that connects practical consciousness to the real world. On the contrary, working interactions referred only to actions and their products, but not to the object as it existed before and independently of the individual communicator. It follows the universal value of the pointing – while working interactions largely depend upon contingent habits.

6. The Pointing

We do not know exactly when Thảo began to study the gesture of indication. And we do not have access to the writings of Thảo that precede the publication of the first article published in *La Pensée* (1966) dedicated to the topic. Nevertheless, we have two testimonies. The first one is that of North Vietnamese poet and responsible for Vietnamese writers on behalf of the Communist Party Nguyen Dinh Thi (1924–2003). He dates Thảo's growing interest in the gesture of indication in the mid-1960s, along with the growing criticism towards psychoanalysis and

structuralism. What Nguyen Dinh Thi remembers of that time is the sound of sirens of alert in Hanoi. Nguyen Dinh Thi is probably referring to the first phase of the Operation Rolling Thunder. From 2 March 1965 until 2 November 1968, the U.S. 2nd Air Division conducted an aerial bombardment campaign against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Nguyen Dinh Thi's testimony is long but deserves to be reported here:

During the 1960s [...]. In our usual exchanges dealing with philosophical schools in vogue then in the West, he strongly opposed structuralism and companies aiming at inflating importance and radicalizing the Freudian theses. [...] And then one day, in the middle of the sirens of alert, he came to me and gave me a manuscript in French, proposing to me to meet again to exchange our ideas. I was reading these typescripts [...]. Thảo dedicated these pages to the gestures of indication in the child to arrive at the statement according to which when the child pointed the finger, he began to distinguish himself and the outside world [Durant les années soixante [...]. Dans nos échanges habituels, traitant des écoles philosophiques en vogue alors en Occident, il s'est fermement opposé au structuralisme et aux entreprises visant à gonfler d'importance et à radicaliser les thèses freudiennes. [...] Et puis un jour, au milieu des sirènes d'alerte, il vint me trouver pour me donner un manuscrit en français, me proposa de nous revoir pour échanger nos idées. Je lisais ces feuilles dactylographiées [...]. Thảo consacrait ces pages aux gestes d'indication de l'enfant pour arriver au constat selon lequel lorsque l'enfant montrait du doigt, il commençait à distinguer son moi et le monde extérieur.] (from Thao 2004: 167)

The second testimony is the one Thảo's himself we gave in 1975. In his words,

I was able to overcome that obstacle in the beginning of the sixties, thanks to Spirkin's analyses of this experiences with indicative gesturing in monkeys [he referred to *The origin of consciousness*, in Russian, Moscow 1960: 65-68]. This sign – the indicative gesture – is the simplest element of a basic semiotics, and thus marks the first step that opens the passage from mere sensory-motor skills to consciousness. (Thảo [1975: 25] 2009: 313)

By this, we can say that, as he confirmed, Thảo “developed the analysis of indicative movement as sign by using results of the critical study of Saussurian semiotic concepts” (ibid.) in the early 1960s. At the same time, he read Spirkin's writing and was interested in the language development in the child. As we have seen, the study of the language behaviour in the child served Thảo to better understand the formation of consciousness. And the gestural indication seems him to be “one and the same with the intentional orientation of the consciousness to the object” (ibid.). But he realized that there is a material movement that subtends

the pointing before every kind of conscious intentionality. Then, the notions of the language of real and fundamental significations enabled him to understand how the “material signifier [...] serves as the mediation between material social practice and the interior of consciousness” (Thảo [1975: 26] 2009: 315).

Thảo was not the first theorist to highlight the role of the indicative gesture in the phylogeny of language. About the “myth” of the deictic origin of language, Bühler wrote that

Nowadays a modern myth about the origin of language is occasionally encountered, one that is explicitly or implicitly based on Brugmann’s [cf. Brugmann 1904] and other’s way of thinking and which picks up and elaborates the topic of deictic words as if they were the *primal words* of human language. Mute deixis, indicating with the outstretched arm and index finger and similar indicating gestures with the head and eyes are said to have preceded them. It is claimed that *acoustic signs* that also serve to demonstrate were at first used only to underscore this pointing to objects and events in the realm of perception, which was done mutely or accompanied by shouts and calls (animals, too, shout and call, but do not yet point), but that later these acoustic signs increasingly served as elaborations and extensions of the gestures. (Bühler [1934] 1990: 100-101; see also Bühler 1933: 136 ff. and 180 ff.)

Thảo claimed something similar. Nonetheless, Bühler highlighted a problem that the theory of the deictic origin of language does not solve. How do we go from the deixis to the nomination? According to Bühler, in fact, the deictic terms that indicate the object and the denominative terms that mean properties must be distinguished. How does the symbolic function of sounds arise? We have seen that the theory that Thảo suggested in ILC argued that the symbolic function of sounds ultimately depends on an underlying and unconscious gestural system. As we saw in Chapter 10, the problem of the passage from presentation to representation, from the indication in context to the usable symbol in the absence of the object was not resolved yet.

What was highlighted by Bühler is an age-old philosophical problem. According to Agamben (2006: 16), “the problem of indication [...] constitutes the original theme of philosophy.” Accordingly, Aristotle had already separated the *first essence* (Gr. πρώτη οὐσία, Lat. *substantia prima*) from the *second essences* (Gr. δευτέραι οὐσῖαι, Lat. *substantiae secundae*). The first one corresponds to both proper names and demonstrative pronouns, while the second ones to common nouns (cf.

Aristotle, *Cat.* 2a, 11). According to Agamben (id., p. 19-20), however, the Stoics were the first to recognize the autonomy of the pronoun and linked it to the indication (Gr. ἄρθρα δεικτικά, Lat. *demonstratio*, indicative articulations). Then Apollonius Dyscolus (fl. 2nd century AD) and Priscian (fl. AD 500) connected the pronoun to the sphere of the first substance. As a result, the pronoun means the *substance without qualities* (*substantiam sine qualitate*), while the noun means the *substance with qualities* (*substantiam cum qualitate*). Both indication and pronoun thus refer to what language must suppose, the object in itself. Remarkably, for Agamben (id., p. 22) “the *substantia indeterminata* that it [the pronoun] signifies and that, as such, is not in itself signifiable or definable, becomes signifiable and determinable through an act of ‘indication’.” And he added that “that which is always already demonstrated in every act of speaking [...], that which is always already indicated in speech without being named, is, for philosophy, being” (id., p. 25). In other words, the act of indication enables the transition from perception to language and opens the dimension of the transcendence (i.e., the being, the mind-independent world).

As pointed out by Benveniste (1966: 252-253) and Jakobson (1971: 132), the deictic expressions and therefore also the gesture of indication are empty signs because they have a variable reference. In other words, they are meaningful signs only if performed in a specific context. However, the gesture of indication is different from the verbal deixis. In fact, pointing does not depend on the linguistic conventions but on its physical execution (as opposed to the deictic theory proposed by Kaplan, Stalnaker and Perry: see Bianchi 2003: 33). Peirce himself had admitted the existence of some signs whose material properties were “to suggest and point to the mind what the signs stand for” (cf. Peirce 1909: MS 637, p. 35; from Parmentier 2016: 44). In other words, the gesture of indication embodies the “directing intention” mentioned by Kaplan (1989), that is, the speaker’s intent to refer to something. However, for Thào, the gesture of indication is not a mere support external to the directional intention of the speaking subject since the same intention of the speaking subject would not exist in the absence of the gesture of indication. Furthermore, we are also dealing here with the same problem we had in Chapter 10. Does the gesture of indication presuppose or not presuppose an already

formed shared frame of reference? According to Thảo, pointing is already and from the beginning inscribed in a pragmatic context of collective actions aimed at a physical world.

7. Thảo's Anthropology

An aspect that the theories exposed in PDM and ILC have in common is the fact that Thảo based its observations on the hypothesis of the recapitulation. We should ask to what extent the recapitulation theory retains some elements of mechanicism. The problems related to the “biogenetic fundamental law” are widely known (Gould 1977): i) the theory of recapitulation presupposes the inheritance of acquired characters; ii) most of the evolutionary changes are added at the end of the ontogeny; iii) ontogeny remains unaltered and only the adult stage is exposed to the influence of the surrounding environment which stimulate the emergence of acquired characters. In addition, ontogeny would become remarkably long if each phase was a simple addition to the existing ones. Therefore, we need a phylogenetic process which enables the length of each phase to be progressively shortened, removing or accelerating some stages in their development. As a consequence, ontogeny is a sequence of stages under the control of phylogeny. On that basis, phylogeny is the mechanical cause of ontogenesis and ontogeny does not have an independent status.

Although the recapitulation already dominated the paleontological studies until the 1930s, the theory was already obsolete in the 1960s. However, there was still someone who was still fascinated. For example, Piaget, who had studied palaeontology during the highly successful period of Haeckel's theory, argued for parallelism between ontogeny and phylogeny. One of the most striking aspects in Thảo's theory is the biological determinism. Thảo's nativism can recall the model of the Leibnizian *monad*. The development of human language and cognition depends on the unfolding of an innate genetic program. Every member of the human species is identical regarding the faculty of language – it is therefore in the individual that language must be studied (cf. Lecerle 2006: 19, 21). And we can wonder what language has in common with life in society. We are dealing with the

embodiment of an ancient social linguistic relationship into an innate structure. Thus, we cannot exclude a certain form of fetishism as a social relationship is reduced to the state of a natural thing (in this case genetic and/or neuronal structure of the brain; cf. Lecerclé 2006: 31). But attention must be paid to the fact that Thảo did not argue for an abstract idea of human nature which implies that social relationships would be its actual manifestation. By contrast, in the inborn structure we find the fixation of the previous material behaviour.

Probably, biological determinism serves Thảo to defend the inevitability of some aspects of human behaviour. In this sense, Thảo defended and justified a general theory of human nature. We cannot rule out that such an anthropology could also have political consequences. To the extent that Thảo admits that the history of humanity is inherited by everybody, individuals carry within themselves the same human essence which cannot be entirely shaped by circumstances. Human essence must thus be developed and expressed freely in the course of ontogeny. Adulthood is instead free from biological conditioning and open to the influence of the social surrounding environment. When society hinders the normal development of the human essence, we are dealing with an authoritarian regime that makes the individual alienated. The individual will be alienated from his human nature, from the society of which they are a part – and which should not dominate them – and from the products of their work – which should not be a party or state property. Against that, the communist society will not be the one that re-educates the individual, but the one that conserves and develops the human essence in every individual. Communist society is that society in which the consciousness of the nature of the human species, of its history and its evolution, is realized both on the theoretical level and on the practical-existential level.

If we accept this point of view, the question of the recapitulation is linked with the one of the communist society, which was at the hearth of the Marxism-Leninism. Marx's *Third Thesis on Feuerbach* explicitly stated that

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only

as *revolutionary practice*. (MEW III: 553; trans. from Marx & Engels 1969: 13-15)

Against materialist mechanicism of the 18th century, Marx believed that the psychic dimension cannot be seen as the passive result of external circumstances.

This debate had already marked the Second International (1889–1916). Over the course of the period in question, Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), for instance, provided the basis for the idea that we must have confidence in the mass initiative and the democratic organization of the revolutionary process. After the WW1, Karl Korsch and György Lukács became the main representatives of the humanist Marxism. Against that, the Third International or Comintern (1919–1943) was dominated by Leninist views, along with the Stalinian policy. Lenin conceived the Communist party as the conscious vanguard of the proletariat. The Communist party must be directed by professionals of class-struggle. In France during the 1960s, anti-humanism takes the form of Althusser's structuralist Marxist philosophy. According to him, there is a shift between ideology and science, between the unconscious representation of reality and the conscious one. Thus, there is a shift between political theorists and leaders and the mass.

More interestingly, we cannot forget that the Leninist theory of conscious vanguard was the state ideology in Vietnam. In the 1960s, Ho Chi Minh's health declined, along with his leadership within the party. On that basis, the Party was dominated by the General Secretary of the Central Committee Le Duan (1907–1986). Le Duan's centralised and managerial policy was directed to improve the planned economy by way of the First-Five-Year Plan (1961–1965). In early 1965, US air strikes against North Vietnam began, along with interruptions of electric power, destruction of petroleum storage, manufacturing, and industrial facilities, disruptions of transportations routes, and so forth. As a result, North Vietnam was even more dependent on foreign donator countries, i.e. the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. These factors determined the strengthening of the Vietnamese political elite. We cannot forget that the Vietnamese regime adopted the system of administrative detention already employed in the People's Republic of China and called the *re-education through labour* (in China, the system was active from 1957 to 2013). Basically, this system was dominated by the idea that the

individual could be completely re-educated through a forced labour and self-critique under the control of the Party.

Since the 1950s, Thảo took position against the violence of Stalinism and Maoism. Suffice it to remember the charges against Thảo during the process of March–April 1958 (see Papin 2013 for more details). The historical premise is the fact that, in 1956, the report of the XX Congress of the Communist Party of Soviet Union recognizes the errors of Stalin. This enabled a wave of reformism in Communist countries. In the same year, two Vietnamese journals published a series of articles calling for freedom and democracy. Thảo published two articles in those reviews. He asserted that the real freedom is the freedom that people has to criticise leaders. He added that the true freedom is the freedom of the individual. The individual is submitted to the community, but the community is built by individuals. This idea of freedom is destroyed by authoritarianism, bureaucracy, dogmatism, and the cult of personality. The discipline of the organization and the leading role of the Party, the vanguard of the working class is thus called into question. As a result, Thảo was removed from his position at the University, he is interrogated by the police and subjected to public sessions of self-criticism. He was condemned in June 1958. In the 1970s, Thảo had not changed his mind. Neglecting and oppressing inborn human nature conduce to alienation. Only later, in the 1980s, Thảo resumed his political engagement against Stalinism, bureaucracy and authoritarianism – but this time, his engagement was merely theoretical (see Thao 2013 for more details).

Alienation could also influence other aspects of human existence. As the language of real life unconsciously reflects the contradictions of the real life, we can talk about *alienated language*. As a means of suggesting the value of Thảo's view on alienation, we should cite the following letter to Rossi-Landi:

I think that the attacks that have been directed in recent years against the problem of alienation, particularly by Althusser and his friends, are totally unfair. [...] I suppose that in your books – I am waiting for the translation of them, you give the reply to Althusser. [Je pense que les attaques qui ont été dirigées les dernières années contre le problème de l'aliénation, notamment par Althusser et ses amis, sont tout à fait injustes. [...] Je suppose que dans vos livres, dont j'attends la traduction, vous donnez la réplique à Althusser.]

I was also happy to read your pamphlet on alienated language. [...] There is definitely a theory of alienation in Marx, and it is only a question of interpreting it and developing it. The problem of alienation of language is without doubt one of the fertile paths for this development. [J'ai été également heureux de lire votre brochure sur le langage aliéné. [...] Il existe incontestablement une théorie de l'aliénation chez Marx, et il ne s'agit que l'interpréter et de la développer. Le problème de l'aliénation du langage est sans doute une des voies fécondes pour ce développement.] (Letter to Rossi-Landi, Hanoi, 25 June 1971; see fig. 22)

Exactly opposed to Thảo's theory, the philosophical anthropology of Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976) argued that the human being is a being to be disciplined. On that basis, at this point it may be convenient to focus on Gehlen's *Der Mensch seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (The Man, His Nature and Place in the World, 1940). In the first place, we need to consider the fact that Gehlen embarked on an extremely ambitious project to describe the human nature, along with the comparison of our species with other animal species. In this vein, we can admit that Gehlen addressed the question of what constitutes the human nature in a way that is too close to Thao's one, especially in PDM. In order to understand Gehlen's analysis, it is necessary first to see some of the assumptions on which it was based and then proceed to the comparison with Thảo's insight.

The comparison is possible because, even if there is no evidence that Thảo had ever read Gehlen, for both, the collective human life has played a fundamental role for the stabilization of the relationship with the environment. The artificially produced elements such as language, tools, technical knowledge, traditions, institutions, etc., are the tools human being employ to modify the conditions of existence for their own benefit. Like Thảo, to Gehlen, who cites the American philosopher and psychologist George Herbert Mead's (1863–1931) *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), the starting point of the experience we made of ourselves is the relationship with the other. That standpoint, which is shared by Thảo and Gehlen, depended upon the long tradition of the German thought. In tradition, Noire played a very relevant role, and it is not surprising that Gehlen largely mentioned the German philosopher, along with Herder. Interestingly, Gehlen also suggested a theory of language origins that explicitly recall some elements of Noire's one (see Marino 2008). As Thảo's PDM ten years after him, for Gehlen, the thinking is the particular human intentionality, that is, the intentionality that directs itself toward

the thing through sounds. Interestingly, if we compare Thảo's theory with Gehlen's one, we must admit that Thảo's one reduced the origin of language to a single root. For Gehlen, instead, along with i) the "sound gestures", that is, the working interactions of the Noire tradition, language also arises ii) from emitted and self-perceived vocal ejaculations, ii) from sounds used as symbols that the mind employs to recognize and group objects, iii) from the call and iv) from a kind of lallations. Nonetheless, as has been shown, the indicative gesture is a more powerful notion to explain the origin of human intentionality than any theory that establishes an association between sound and sensations (as was the case with Spirkin: see Chapter 7).

The main element in the approach Gehlen suggested to the problem of human nature is the thesis that the human being cannot be considered divided in terms of body and soul. For our purposes in this study, it worth noting that like Thảo, Gehlen had considered, in terms of feedback circuits, the relations between the various organic, linguistic and technical components of human behaviour. Gehlen connected the various components of the human being in such a way that one cannot isolate a component element (the mind, language, the hand, abstract thought, etc.) and place it as the individuating and constituting principle for the human being, thus creating an ontological hierarchy among the components. But while Thảo continued to consider the labour and conceptual thinking that is its consequence as a distinctive feature of the human being, Gehlen defined the human being as *an acting being* (ein handelndes Wesen): unlike other animals that are guided by the instinct, the human being does not have a species-specific behavior and lacks a *specific environment* (Umwelt). This postulate, Gehlen argued that the human being is properly a historical animal, as their worldly determinations appear dictated by its historically established activities. As the reader recall, Thảo made the same deduction. In a phrase, for both, culture is the second nature of the human being. But they did not share the same starting point.

According to Gehlen, the human is *an unfinished and deficient animal* (Mängelwesen), as they are indeterminate beings in relation to their environment. By this, Gehlen admitted that the human beings must drive their activity towards a not instinctually fixed and not genetically encoded end. As was pointed out by

Gehlen, almost every human behaviour is always learned and never immediately available at birth. By contrast, we have seen to what extent Thảo acknowledged the existence of genetically encoded behaviour in the language and cognitive development of the child. Gehlen traced a clear-cut transition from animals to humans based on the notion of *Mängelwesen* and thence he reasoned that human beings must necessarily direct their behaviour towards a stabilization of their environment. The passions and instincts of the human being have not a specific goal and therefore they must be guided. To avoid the risk of the destruction of any human society, the institutions are therefore necessary for the social life and the very survival of the human being. For this reason, Gehlen reasoned that the human being is a *being to be disciplined* (*Wesen der Zucht*). Unfortunately, an exhaustive account of the subject in all its ramifications is not possible. We have preferred to focus our attention on the fact that Gehlen's approach interfaces in multiple ways with Thao's one, especially in PDM. But the presupposition underlying Gehlen's insight of the human being as a *Wesen der Zucht* is dramatically different from Thao's emphasis on human dignity, as we have just seen in the previous paragraph.

7. Concluding Remarks on the Language of the Real Life and the Cultural Niche

Although the role of genetic inheritance is very important in Thảo's theory, one of the most interesting Thảo's theses on language origins concerned the emergence of language as a social fact. And even if human essence is the crystallization of past social relationships, biology is partly the result of society. Furthermore, not all language is genetically inherited. Only the fundamental layer of language is inherited by the child who develops it in the course of ontogeny. The language of real life remains a collective product. Thảo did not tell us that our ancestors had previously some specific linguistic skills at their disposal, except for vocalizations and gestures they shared with other animals. That means that our ancestors had no genetic predisposition to language. Additionally, language is first and foremost a cultural phenomenon. In other words, the genetic mutation does not precede the social invention of language. Rather, the social invention of

language behaviour exerts a selective pressure on individuals so that a given character is fixed in the genetic code.

The culturally-driven co-evolution of gene and culture seems to be the key to understand one of the most relevant hypotheses set out by Thảo in his ILC. Against the background of the mid-20-century climate of opinion, Thảo's view was not widely shared as it would be today (see Dor & Jablonka 2000, 2001, 2004, 2010). In the second half of the 20th century, the modern synthesis was the paradigm that dominated the theory of evolution. The label *synthetic theory* was given to that theory by Julian Huxley in 1942, but this theory is also called neo-Darwinian synthesis, the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution or simply neo-Darwinism to emphasize the fact that it constitutes an extension of the original theory of Darwin, who still did not know the mechanisms of heredity discovered by Mendel. According to the modern synthesis, the genetic variation of natural populations is randomly produced by mutations and recombinations. As we have already seen in Chapter 1, excluding the possibility of transmission of acquired characters, modern synthesis regarded Lamarckism, and its most recent form, Lysenkoism, as a real danger in scientific biology.

Of course, the picture is much more complex. Suffice it to say that, within the modern synthesis, for instance, Lloyd Morgan, James Mark Baldwin (1861–1934) and Fairfield Osborne (1887–1969) have suggested that many individuals in dealing with a new critical situation adapt themselves to learning. Adapting through learning allows members of the population to survive until the moment when new mutations enable the emergence of an innate response process. Such a process is called *Baldwin effect* by the name of the American researcher who proposed this theory in the late 19th century. An explanation of the inheritance of acquired learning responses was proposed by Conrad Waddington (1905–1975) in the United Kingdom, and by Ivan Schmalhausen (1884–1963) in the Soviet Union. Waddington and Schmalhausen proposed an evolutionary process as a Darwinian mechanism that allows certain acquired characters to become inheritable. But as we have said the picture is not that clear. In fact, Waddington's theories had been criticised by Ernst Mayr and Theodosius Dobzhansky, who accused him of Lamarckism. Instead, on 23 August 1948, Schmalhausen became a victim of the Order 1208, one of a series

signed by Minister of Higher Education in the USSR, which led to the mass dismissals of many university professors. Due to accusations of promoting Darwinian evolutionary theory, at the time when Lysenkoism played a major role in Stalin's policy, he was removed from the heading positions in Moscow institutions.

For many years, evolutionists have dismissed epigenetic mechanisms. Most Western biologists considered evolutionary phenomena in terms of random genetic variants that could produce useful effects and were therefore selected. The role of the environment was overlooked. Only recently the evo-devo approach has highlighted the link between ontogenesis and phylogeny (see West-Eberhard 2003). Nowadays, some scholars suggest that an initial phenotypic-behavioural adjustment, not generated by a casual mutation but by phenotypic plasticity, would spread a practice that would change the social and ecological niche by altering the selective pressure and generating a selective regime for those genetic variants that implement the transmission skills of the material culture (cf. Pievani & Suman 2016: 68-69). That would be the case of language. Such a practice would be a communicative form which has been functional to the transmission of survival-related behaviour. *Neodarwinian extended synthesis* sets out a model of biological causality (the so-called reciprocal causation: see Laland et al., 2010) which focuses on the plurality of causal factors and their multilevel interactions involved in a coevolutionary process. In this case, the genes would appear later when the modified selective pressures allow their diffusion and fixation within the biological population. In this regard, some scholars are introducing the notion of "inclusive inheritance" (see Danchin et al. 2011). It seems that Thảo's theory of human evolution and language development fits well in that framework.

To move forward, we should remind the reader what, for Thảo, the language of real life is not. It is not the observable language behaviour as it is in behaviourism. In this case, Thảo's theory would be limited to physiology. The language of real life is not the ordinary language of the philosophical school of Oxford. In this case, Thảo would ignore the link between social conditions and language behaviour. The language of real life is not the Saussure's *langue*. In this case, it would be a psychic entity – and, for the same reason, it is neither the Chomsky's competence nor the

performance. The language of real life is not a worldview of post-Humboldtian tradition because, in this case, there would not be bidirectional relationships between language and reality. And it is not a product of consciousness. Rather, the language of real life precedes consciousness and will. As Thảo put it, the language of real life emerges from a given specific goal-oriented need to communicate. This need is not a general one but depends upon a specific form of the organization of societies. For this reason, the study of the language of real life reveals the real social relations within a given society.

The language of real life reflects the production relations. Thus, it conveys contradictory meanings in so far as the society is marked by contradictions. And consciousness is seriously affected by social relations by way of the language of real life. By this, consciousness can be oriented by social conditions. Thảo did not explain to what extent the speaker passively adapts to the linguistic codes decided by the socio-economic system. The reason of this could be Thảo's caution in facing political issues, of course. Likely, for this reason, he deeply analysed the structure of those signs which are not ideologically-oriented. Specifically, those signs – such as the gestural indication – whose function is eminently epistemic. We can only add that, according to Thảo's standpoint, the ideology is nothing other than a rational discursive conscious organization of meanings conveyed by the language of real life.

Before concluding, we must pay special attention to Thảo's firm reaction against the Husserlian theory of consciousness (see above Ch. 4). Thảo questioned the validity of Husserl's theory of consciousness exactly because higher mental activities are activities of humans considered in their whole existence. We should not reduce our analysis of consciousness to the inner life of consciousness itself, neglecting the real relationships between the individual and both the social milieu and the surrounding environment. In a similar way, we should not dismiss the role of both language and body in the study of consciousness. For this reason, phenomenology is an abstraction, an idealisation that separates consciousness and concrete existence. In Thảo's view, it is important to emphasise that consciousness is anchored in collective activities. The lived experience is, indeed, the product of social relations among individuals during the process of production and

reproduction of their means of existence. Higher mental activities are the extension of real material behaviour. And the language of real life is at the heart of the internalisation of material behaviour. Assuming that the language of real life seriously affects all the aspects of our existence, then perception and theoretical and philosophical elaborations are more or less linked to social practice. The material behaviour (the language of real life, the social relations, and the modes of production) is the cultural niche that constitutes the environment of consciousness. In a phrase to sum up the meaning of Thảo's anthropological project, the dimension of rational thought must be reconciled with the real life.

Conclusions

At this point is useful to make a few brief points about Thảo's overall view of language evolution, and what aspects of it are relevant to the history of the puzzle of language origins. As we have seen, several thinkers and scientists throughout the philosophical and scientific tradition took up the relationship between cooperation, language, and social cognition. Among them, Thảo seems us to deserves a special mention. His account threw into sharp relief the social nature of both language and cognition, so that language evolution is linked inextricably to social relations. Such a view depended upon the assumption that labour is an exclusively human characteristic which sets humans apart from animals. And the genesis of language is in human labour. In this way of thinking, language develops among both our pre-human ancestors and present humans in response to problems posed by the material life. Bearing in mind that language arises from the social demands and needs of the material world, language is transformed itself as human society changes. Given the social roots of thought and language, consciousness evolves continuously over time.

In our research, we have tried to suggest and overview of Thảo's reflection on human language from the 1940s to 1975. In the following lines, we will sum up the main contents of our research. What will stand out is the fact that our efforts tended to place Thảo's theory (or theories) in its historical context and to study its inner development over the period in question. And we must also highlight the fact that our understanding of Thảo's theory largely depended on still unpublished texts.

In the first chapter, we saw how the phenomenological analysis of lived experience leads Thảo to radicalize the phenomenological reduction: since everything is the result of the movement of the constitution, consciousness must also be considered as the result of the constitution. But this time, the constitution is realized by the matter itself. More precisely, the consciousness described by

phenomenology must be considered as the result of biological evolution as well as of social history. For this reason, Thảo has argued that it is necessary to consider dialectical materialism as the only coherent solution to safeguard the positive results of phenomenology. A digression devoted to the history of the “dialectical materialism” served to better understand Thảo’s philosophical choice in the context of France at that time. In fact, that period was marked by the influence of the Stalinist dialectic. In this respect, it should be noted that Thao refused to think dialectical materialism as a political position. For him, dialectical materialism is the philosophical solution that can solve the main conundrum of phenomenology. In this way, we compared Thảo’s theory with the hypothesis of French existentialism (which implies a reduction of the world to the structures of subjectivity) and, among other things, with the approach of Merleau-Ponty who, in the same period, suggested a philosophical project very similar to Thảo’s one. But we added that, that on the one hand, we have a phenomenologization of naturalism with Merleau-Ponty, and on the other hand a naturalization of phenomenology with Thao. Thảo argued that dialectical materialism allowed him not to reduce consciousness to matter without neglecting the material origins of consciousness. It seems quite relevant that he emphasized the way in which matter is a philosophical concept that serves to describe reality as a dialectical movement that leads to increasingly sophisticated levels of organization. In this sense, Thao followed and developed Engels’ project of a dialectic of nature. Interestingly, for Thao the phenomenological analyses are valid only within the animal world. On that basis, we can observe a primordial form of consciousness already in the simplest organisms. Specifically, Thảo added that consciousness is only the result of the inhibition of a given behaviour and the symbolic function can be considered as an important step in the evolution of animal consciousness. In this case, the lived inner experience of the organism is no longer known in the interiority of consciousness, but rather is communicated to others through behaviour.

The main point of Chapter 2 was the analysis of Thảo’s hypothesis on the origins of human language in his PDM. Human language is the result of two conditions. First, it is the most sophisticated form of a symbolic function that already exists in animals, and especially among mammals. Second, human language deeply depends

on the specific way of organizing society among our ancestors. After briefly describing how the symbolic function derives from the mechanism of inhibition, we described the semiotic structure of symbols: the repressed sketched act becomes the expression of all uncompleted behaviour that has been inhibited at the level of the nervous system (meaning). Now, we must only mention that Thảo's theory is the apex of a long tradition that begins with the German philosopher Ludwig Noiré and arrives at Thảo through the works of philosophers, psychologists, linguists, and textbooks! According to this tradition, language arose among our ancestors during the collective work in the form of involuntary vocalizations produced as a result of the muscle efforts (ho ... hisse!) which later would become the first verbs. Thảo also believed that metaphorical processes are at work in the development of the symbolic function. At the end of the chapter, we wondered how to explain the passage, the mediation, between the practical life and the life of the consciousness. To point the fact, prelinguistic expressions are part of practical life but they are meaningless, while language only refers to mental content without being part of practical life. In a phrase, the manipulation of concepts substitutes the manipulation of objects. Thảo seems to support a form of linguistic theory for which the speaker is cut off from the subject of practical life. In other words, language is nothing other than the abstract moment and the negation of the real life.

In the 1960s, Thao changed his mind. Thao shared with other Marxists such as Lucien Sève and Henri Lefebvre the critique of (Saussurean) structural semiological model which was centred on language as a system composed of negative and differential elements. The autonomy of structures leads to think of structures as metaphysical entities and to confuse the ideal with the real, the products of science with actual reality. But Thao had a very different objective compared to other Marxists. They criticised the extension of the Saussurian semiological model to other human and social sciences, while Thảo had to outline the fundamental lines of a general semiology that would have allowed him to describe the phylogenetic development of language and consciousness. This was the subject of Chapter 3. There, we also suggested a comparison between Thảo and Italian semiologist Rossi-Landi. In the same years, they proposed two semiotic models based on the Marxian

philosophy. However, Rossi-Landi's aim was to develop his theory of the homology between the market and the language, largely accepting the notion of linguistic value and arbitrariness, while Thảo wanted to think of social conditions of language production by removing the primacy of arbitrary signs and the correlative notion of value.

In chapter 4, we approached the old philosophical question of realism. More precisely, we described how Thảo has tried to link consciousness and material reality. After a short presentation of the ontological and epistemological assumptions we can observe in Thảo's theory of consciousness, we briefly described the position of Engels and that of Lenin's in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* Thảo seems to refer to. In this way, Thảo's criticism of Husserlian phenomenology became more and more clear. Husserl's philosophy was for Thảo a kind of subjective idealism because phenomenology has simply described the lived experience of the subject and neglected the real relation between the subject and the external material reality. In fact, according to Thảo the semiotic act of the indication implies the most fundamental relationship between humans and the physical environment. It goes without saying that the gesture of indication (pointing) must be considered as the origin of the consciousness as well as the support of the actual and embodied intentionality because it implies not only the relation subject-object but also the belief in the outside world as such and independent of the subject. As such, pointing is the condition of possibility of the objective and shared world, because the thing becomes the underlying layer of several possible perspectives on it.

In chapter 5, we focused on that it is not by chance that Thảo's definition of consciousness as "inner language" in his ILC. To him, consciousness is the internalisation of the language of real life. The flow of the inner speech must not be considered as disembodied; it is rather supported by a sketched nerve stimulation. In a similar way, in the flow of the inner language, the subject is not alone but addresses the discourses proper to the inner image of the others. Then, a brief analysis of the Soviet debate on the nature of consciousness in the 1950s and 1960s would be conducted to better understand a possible context in which Thảo developed his own theory. Then, some remarks on the debate on the mind-body

problem taking place in the English-speaking world in the same period would show how, in the 1950s and 1960s, after the crisis Behaviourism, researchers largely dealt with the problem of consciousness and its relationship with the body on both sides of the Iron Curtain. As far as this debate is concerned, the peculiarity of Thảo's approach lies in the role he assigned to language and society in the formation of consciousness. The attempt to balance materialism and anti-reductionism lead Thảo towards a sort of emergentism. We cannot exclude, however, that Thao seems also to suggest a form of epiphenomenalism and one can, therefore, ask to what extent consciousness can influence the actual behaviour. One answer seems to be that consciousness is only a behaviour that the subject addresses to himself.

Chapter 6 examined the extent to which the language of real life is to be considered as the mediation between social practice and consciousness. To address this point, we began by sketching a comparison between the theory of Thảo consciousness and that of Vološinov/Baxtin. To summarize, we can enumerate the common hypothesis shared by our authors in the following list:

- a. Language is a human practice involved in social interactions;
- b. Conscious contents depend on the internalization of language;
- c. Language is not the translation of ideas that pre-exist in consciousness;
- d. Language is the internalisation of public dialogue;
- e. Subjectivity is the result of intersubjectivity;
- f. The social origin of language conditions the forms of thought;
- g. Consciousness cannot be reduced to physio-neurological mechanisms.

The similarities between the two authors depend both on dialectical materialism and the critique of abstract objectivism in linguistic thought, that is, on the tendency of language as a closed, abstract and stable system. Both argue that they wanted to return to a conception of the social production of signs. However, the difference is that Vološinov/Baxtin wanted to propose a philosophy of language as a philosophy of ideological signs, while Thảo wanted to show how the Marxist approach to language can solve problems related to the phylogenetic origin of language and consciousness. After this analysis, we highlighted the main

hypotheses of the sociogenesis of consciousness according to Thảo's theory. The main element of Thảo's approach to the question of consciousness is his theory of the internalization of the language of real life. The language of real life seems to be the key to explaining how conscious contents arise. To better explain this point, we compared Thảo's theory with Vygotsky's. They believed that consciousness seems to be an internalisation of the social behaviour. Nonetheless, while Thao paralleled Vygotsky in describing the phylogeny of language, he preferred to follow Piaget when he described the ontogenetic formation of linguistic behaviour. It should also be noted that for Thảo language and thought have the same origin, whereas for Vygotsky language and thought had two different sources.

Chapter 7 sketched out a survey of Thảo's hypothesis on the development of practical skills such as the use and production of instruments or tools. As we have largely seen, Thảo's hypothesis on the origins of language largely depended on Engels' theory of the role of labour in the development of language skills. In detail, Thảo tried to justify Engels' proposals with the most recent results in several academically distinct fields of research such as biology, archaeology, paleoanthropology, etc. According to Thảo, all the stages of technological development allow us to propose hypotheses about the social relations needed to produce certain types of tools and therefore the corresponding linguistic skills belonging to our ancestors. In order to identify what was and was not distinctive of Thảo's theory, we offered a systematic, exhaustive and comparative overview of the studies carried out in different fields such as archaeology, paleoanthropology, biology, etc., in the middle of the 20th century. In this way, we understood what criteria Thảo employed to date the most important advances in technology and lithic industry during the evolution of our ancestors (Chelllean, Olduwan, Acheulean and Musterian). After that, our analysis also showed to what extent he made special efforts to situate his work in a context of a wider international discussion of the problems related to the origin of our species. Thus, we examined to what extent the mastery of available knowledge has been an important factor in Thảo's theory of human evolution as well as human cultural development. In addition to this, Thảo had not only accepted the available hypotheses on human biological and cultural evolution. He was also caustic in his opposition to certain

ways of interpreting the empirical evidence. But we can not forget that Thảo also seems to be largely influenced by contemporary researchers whose thinking betrays certain elements of anthropocentrism and teleology.

In Chapter 8, we compared Thảo's theory of language with certain assumptions of the classics of dialectical materialism, the main trends of Soviet anthropology (Spirkin, Bunak) and Soviet linguistics (Abaeb) of the 1960s and 1970s. We also took into account the debates on language origins that took place in Western countries in the middle of the 20th century. We discussed the positions taken by scholars such as Jakobson, Mead, Oakley, Leroi-Gourhan, Bronowski, Kainz, Goodall, Reynolds, and many others. Given this scenario, Thảo seems to be one of the most radical researchers in that he has assigned gestures and multi-modality a key role in explaining the formation of language and thought. That point could explain the reason why he was largely interested in Birdwhistell's kinesics (see fig. 7a).

Chapter 9 was composed of six groups of paragraphs. In the first, we discussed the method used by Thảo. Archeology and psychology offered results that Thảo took as empirical starting points to suggest his hypothesis and to which he also returned to confirm his own hypothesis. In the second group of paragraphs, Thảo's approach to innate language abilities in children is analysed in detail. We illustrated how the hypothesis of the recapitulation of phylogeny by ontogenesis and the analogy between the development of language in children and the symbolic skills of our ancestors are necessarily based on the assumption of the innateness of some modern-human symbolic skills in the child. After that, we addressed some questions about the deductive method that seems to work in Thảo's reasoning. He established a finite set of formulas (six) that can generate all the infinite occurrences of signs that occur during phylogeny as well as ontogeny. In the third group of paragraphs, we tried to analyse Thảo's theory in the context of the debates between psycholinguists during the 1960s. Then, again on the subject of the language of the child, we evaluated whether Thảo's hypothesis lacked a solid base of experimental data or if Thảo's understanding of experimental data was inappropriate. At this point, remarks about Thảo's alleged scientism and its relation to the phenomenological method and the practice of phenomenological reduction were introduced. Finally, we tackled the issue of the representation of

the language that Thảo seemed us to accept. According to Thảo, the linguistic study of language as a closed system of arbitrary signs which depends on the differential relations between them is too reductive. The essence of language transcends the narrow limits of linguistics. The human language is essentially a substance, an empirical phenomenon. As an empirical fact, language must also be considered a biological fact. In this way, anatomy, biology, physiology and psychology offered clues to investigate the nature of language. But language is also a social fact. As such, language largely depends on the development of the forces of production. In this way, it also fulfils the function of a means of communication. But this does not mean that the subject freely decides to communicate his own pre-linguistic thoughts to others through language. As we saw, in fact, the language of real life is an objective social entity that determines the emergence of individual consciousness.

In Chapter 10, we focused on the way Thảo described the oldest forms of language – circular-arc movements and straight-line gestures – and analysed the development of the corresponding cognitive skills (as the language of real life is the key to explain the genesis of abstract thought). The emergence of new signs depends on the intrinsic contradictions of available signs that are no longer adapted to new material activities. Thus, the language of real life has evolved to better represent the things independent of the mind. In fact, each sign reveals inadequacies, and, for this reason, it must be overtaken by another more sophisticated sign. Specifically, the six forms of the developed sign of indication reflect in a more sophisticated way the material movement of things. For Thảo, the qualitative leap that conditions the emergence of the sign of representation from the simple indication depends on the ability to transcend the limits of the current perception. Representation is an active image produced by the subject that marks the beginning of thought, that is, the ability to manipulate the representation of things that are absent, possible, or impossible. Nevertheless, the representation of the absent thing and the sign that conveys this representation are communicable and meaningful simply because they depend on a shared field of reference. This conundrum shows the most relevant limit of the sign of representation.

Thảo's goal was also to explain the transition leading from the connection

between two (or more) syncretic words to fully formed sentences. For him, the function of fully formed and developed sentences is to express the links of things through the connection of words that refer to these things. Thus, in Chapter 11, we argued that Thảo had suggested a theory of the iconic nature of syntax. For some of today's scholars, the syntax shows some iconicity in that it establishes the relationship between the order of words and morphemes in a sentence with the order of the facts described by the sentence. This relationship is diagrammatic, that is, the relationship between the parts of the linguistic structure reflects the relationship between the things or concepts that these parts codify (see, for example, Haiman 1985, Givón 1989, Burling 1999; also cf. Matthews 1991: 12). In this way, the syntax does not correspond to arbitrary rules independent of the state of things. The use of particular grammatical forms is strongly linked, if not determined, by the presence of particular semantic or pragmatic functions in the discourse (see Van Valin 1991 and Tomlin 1990).

Our comments focused on the functional sentence. According to Thảo, the functional sentence is the association of isolated meaningful pre-existing vocalizations (syncretic words). It marks the dialectical transition from the use of isolated syncretic words to the first real sentence. But to get a clearer idea of what was and what was not distinctive of Thảo's iconic theory of syntax, we described his theory of the formation of both the name and the and verb in greater detail. In this regard, one asked some questions. Does Thảo's theory really explain the transition between isolated words and real sentences? Did Thảo's actually explain the origins of predication? Did he rather assume the existence of predication, since he emphasized the predicative function of functional sentences? How does the juxtaposition of two vocalizations imply the connection of two meanings, then the emergence of a complex whole image that represents the real links between things? Could syntactic structures be reduced to a simple improvement of verbal abilities? Should the syntactic connection simply be considered as a more sophisticated means of expressing a planned semantic connection and nothing more?

Chapter 14 tried to sum up the main lines of our study. In this way, we focused on what we consider the culmination of Thảo's philosophical project, i.e., a

philosophical theory of human nature. To gain a clearer understanding of Thảo's anthropology we had to begin with a comparison of his theory of language origins with the history of the topic. In this way, we showed how the main theoretical problem arisen in PDM was the relationship between the life of consciousness and the practical life. The notions of the language of real life and the gesture of indication introduced in ILC solved that problem. Consciousness evolves continuously over time because the transformation of language parallels the development of human society itself. It means that consciousness cannot be reduced to the corporeal activity but needs to be explained against the background of social relations and labour.

From a philosophical standpoint, Husserlian phenomenology had failed to recognize three essential links: i) the one between the life of consciousness and practical life; ii) the link between the life of the individual and the net of social relations; iii) the link between modern humans and the history of human lineage. We have already taken the link of the first two kinds into account. We may now focus on the last point. This may have stimulated Thảo to suggest that human ontogeny reactivates the previous stages of human evolution. But another way to say the same thing is that there is a universal human nature. Thảo's philosophical conception of human nature serves to judge current and future societies avoiding the reference to particular historical conditions of the formation of consciousness. Obviously, the theory of alienation and its overcoming has a teleological and speculative character. Nonetheless, Thảo's aim was to set out a theory which dismiss every kind of radical nurturism. As the comparison with Gehlen's anthropology showed very well, according to Thảo, humans do not need to be disciplined. By contrast, the fulfilment of human-specific aspirations depends upon the acknowledgement of the human nature in each person and the shared organization of the entire process of production and reproduction of the existence.

Our efforts, which have been devoted to a detailed analysis of the RLC and provided a historical perspective on how Thảo addressed the problems of language, could take the form of a commented edition of that book (ongoing project in collaboration with Andrea D'Urso). The researchers could finally have at their disposal an improved text thanks to the errata corrigé signed by the hand of Thảo

himself. As a result, a historical analysis devoted to the development of Thảo's theory and essentially based on the results of this study – which largely depends on unpublished manuscripts – will also enable scholars to appreciate the philosophical value of the ILC. This will be the most immediate and concrete result of this study. Since our research provides a better understanding of the relationship between Thảo's theories of language origins in his PDM and RLC, one will also examine the extent to which his theory changed in the 1980s. To achieve this aim, scholars have to previously study the unpublished and totally neglected *Anthropological Investigations* which reflect Thảo's point of view on the issue in the 1980s. In those investigations, he suggested several fascinating, unexpected and suggestive hypotheses that were profoundly and essentially different from what he had proposed in his previous writings. Once we have completed the reconstruction of Thảo's theory of the language origins at the end of the 1980s, we will be able to draw up a complete account of Thảo's research into language from the 1940s to the 1980s, along with a description of the internal evolution of Thảo's thought throughout his career.

What must also be emphasized is that Thảo's thought may still be useful in assessing and appreciating some assumptions about the origins of human language that have been proposed for recent decades. For instance, the study of language origins has tended towards the relationship between language and cooperation, as exemplified in the works of Tomasello et al. (2005: 690). How exactly are these relationships to be understood? Could Thảo's theory help us to better understand the commonly-held view of language origins? According to Tomasello, the evolution of language lies in the evolution of the ability for shared intentionality that enables us to develop a shared point of view as well as shared goals, plans, and intentions in cooperative activities within a joint attentional frame and a shared frame of reference. To Thảo, however, shared intentionality is the prerequisite of individual intentionality rather than being its development. Additionally, the evolution of that ability depends upon the need to cooperate rather than being the condition for having cooperation.

Thảo's emphasis on labour (collective hunting, tool-making, etc.) makes his theory close to those of many recent scholars such as Lieberman (1984), Burling

(1999), Arbib (2005), Stout (2008), and Bickerton (2009). According to Thảo, tool-making must fulfil a dual task. Archaeological evidence serves to deduce the cognitive skills of our ancestors and understand the evolution of social habits. On the one hand archaeological discoveries reveal the way the cognition of our ancestors worked, and, on the other hand, the evolution of practical skills involved in tool-making is the point of departure to suggest hypotheses on the evolution of language. In other words, Thảo argued that cooperative hunting, social learning, tool-making, and faculty of language share the same cognitive background. From this point of view, he suggested something similar to what has been set out by some recent scholars such as Gärdenfors (2003), Osvath and Gärdenfors (2005), and Spelke (1990 and 2000).

Thảo's theory may recall some assumptions of *externalism* (Parent 2013) and the token-reflexive approach (Reichenbach 1947). Language and other communicative acts, indeed, must be studied against the background of real communication and in relation to the pragmatic and physical frame of reference. To Thảo, cognitive and linguistic processes are rooted in physical interactions of the body with the physical and social environment. By contrast, recent theories of embodied cognition seem to neglect the role of social environment (see Borghi and Cimatti 2015 for more elaborate treatment).

Thảo's theory meets the need of an interdisciplinary approach in the field of the research on the evolution of language. So Thảo acknowledged that a research on that topic must be intimately related to the findings of biology, too, as today it is widely accepted by the scientific community (cf. Fitch, Hauser and Chomsky 2005: 180). Interestingly, he had, however, a peculiar idea of biology which was extensively informed by Lysenko's epigenetic model (see Levins and Lewontin 1985 for more details). On that basis, not only did Thảo suggest that the development of the brain could entail the evolution of language, he also set out that language, in turn, may change the brain and the corresponding cognitive skills. Nowadays, this dynamic is called co-evolution of both brain and language (cf. Deacon 1998: 113). But nobody should forget that to Thảo the social praxis mediates the mutual influence of language and brain.

Nowadays scholars are suggesting that cognitive processes are the result of the

interactions of the nervous system with the body (embodiment), through interaction with the surrounding environment (enactive cognition), and in association with the action (situated cognition). Someone is arguing that our ancestors have gone from instrument-assisted ecology to a tool-dependent one (see Bruner et al. 2016). Material culture was no longer an addition, but an ecological and evolutionary necessity. This is the case of Baldwin's effect: an external factor, such as material culture, affects a behavioural modification that subsequently orients genetic variations (see Chapter 12 for more elaborate treatment). In other words, cultural changes have shaped the human ecological niches, which then they have retroactive on our biology and our physiology (see Laland et al., 2010; Pievani & Suman 2016). From the point of view of our concerns, it could be useful to highlight that some cognitive abilities induced or allowed the behaviour but, at the same time, environmental-induced behaviour can induce a development of cognitive capacity. Scholars such as Morgan and colleagues (2015) have recently concluded that the diffusion of material culture (lithic industries) has been accompanied by a development of more sophisticated information transmission mechanisms: observation, imitation, teaching, and articulated language. In other words, the hypothesis is that there has been a long and gradual evolution of material culture and language, beginning at least from the onset of the Oldowan industry. This approach is surprisingly similar to Thảo's one even if he did not take care to develop this point in great detail.

The question facing Thảo in his ILC was how full-formed language evolved from what, nowadays, Bickerton (1998: 341) calls protolanguage. But, in contrast to many today's scholars, Thảo previously provided a general semiotic theory to support his hypothesis. This approach avoids the danger of the highly variable terminology. And in so far as Thảo refused to merely condemn the non-wholly arbitrary signs, he preserved the term *sign* so as to explicitly deprive it of all the privileges accorded it by scholars who regard full-formed language as a model of any semiotic system. Thảo, thus, seems to advocate a form of continuity approach (Pinker and Bloom 1990; Pinker and Jackendoff 2005). Accordingly, Thảo described the evolution of linguistic skills among all symbol-using species in the Homo lineage (cf. Deacon 1998: 340). Furthermore, Thảo's semiotics offers some tools to

assess some assumptions which are extensively employed by recent scholars. For instance, Clark and Brennan (1991) mean with “joint attentional frame” or “common ground” what gives a pointing gesture its meaning. Thảo would not have agreed with this definition. As Thảo put it, the joint attentional frame does not really work as something brought in from the outside. The pointing gestures are already meaningful. In fact, Thảo’s genetic semiotics is based on the reevaluation of motivated signs. And for this reason, motivated signs involve joint-attention rather than being determined by it.

Thảo’s emphasis on the peculiar semantic and syntactical features of gestural communication systems – which could be at best punctuated with grunts and other vocalizations – may recall Corballis’ theory (2003). To Thảo, the development of full-formed language follows a slow process that has led the original holistic communication system to the analytical structure of modern languages. Mithen (2005) has recently suggested something similar but he does not set out that holistic communication of our ancestors could be regarded as the only precursor of full-formed language. This fact reveals one of the main conundrums of Thảo’s theory: How the development of the linear analytical order of words could explain the recursive procedures of full-formed languages? Indeed, Thảo was interested in the interactions between semantic and syntax rather than the evolution of syntactical structures as such. For this reason, it seems that he suggested a theory of the iconic nature of syntax (Burling 1999), as we saw in Chapter 11. For the same reason, one may ask if the processes of internalisation and abstraction described by Thảo could explain the transition from motivated referential syncretic words to arbitrary signs. Thảo’s answer was that this process did not end in a prehistoric phase but rather continues in everyday life. Motivated signs constantly support the conventional construction of systems of arbitrary signs. To Thảo, the most elementary understanding of a given speech act is enabled by the motivated features of communication (gestures, mimic, syntax, intonation, etc.), the frame of reference, and shared practical purposes.

The previous briefly comparison between Thảo’s theory and the current research trends in the evolution of language should not be taken as an attempt to legitimate the Vietnamese philosopher. Against that, we should regard Thảo

neither as a naïve forerunner nor as a brilliant visionary. A given theory set out in the past must be seen as a historical phenomenon. But it does not mean that such a theory cannot offer valuable insights on how it is best to proceed with tackling current issues. The evolution of language is a field of research that cannot neglect the problematic nature and weakness of its methods, paradigms, and assumptions. Today, for instance, the main trend of that field of research is the interdisciplinarity. A cross-disciplinary research must suggest principles to connect data from different disciplines and those principles need to be discussed because they have not yet been established a common framework. Consequently, nobody can reject ancient theories in advance in so far as they may enable the debate to focus on the plausibility and potentialities of currently available assumptions.

Cited Works

In absence of support of either translation or publication into English, we suggest some translations from French, German, and Italian. Sometimes quotation has been modified for clarity and respect of spelling and punctuation. We tried to be as delicate as possible and we never changed the meaning of any direct quotation.

In any case of non British variants, for consistency, we replaced it with the British English spelling.

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La théorie des origines du langage de Trần Đức Thảo

Depuis des siècles, plusieurs penseurs et scientifiques ont abordé la relation entre la coopération, le langage et la cognition sociale. Parmi eux, Trần Đức Thảo (1917-1993) mérite une mention spéciale. Le but de la recherche qui suit est de présenter au lecteur la réflexion philosophique de Thảo sur le langage humain et son évolution. Nous essaierons de tracer les grandes lignes de la théorie de Thảo sur les origines du langage dans ses *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience* (1973) dans lesquelles il a essayé de trouver une synthèse entre philosophie, linguistique, psychologie et anthropologie physique. La découverte du marxisme-léninisme a conduit Thảo à proposer une approche matérialiste et dialectique au problème de la relation entre corps esprit. De cette façon, Thảo a proposé une sorte de tournant matérialiste et historique de la philosophie de la conscience de Husserl qui était au cœur de ses premiers intérêts philosophiques. La théorie de Thảo met en relief la nature sociale du langage et de la cognition, de sorte que l'évolution du langage est inextricablement liée aux relations sociales. Une telle conclusion reposait sur l'hypothèse que le travail est une caractéristique exclusivement humaine qui distingue les humains des animaux. Pour lui, la genèse du langage est dans le travail humain et donc le langage se développe parmi nos ancêtres pré-humains ainsi que chez les humains en réponse aux problèmes posés par la vie matérielle. En gardant à l'esprit que le langage découle des exigences sociales et des besoins du monde matériel, selon Thảo le langage se transforme lui-même au fur et à mesure que la société humaine change. Et compte tenu des racines sociales de la pensée et du langage, la conscience évolue continuellement avec le temps. Dans ce cadre, Thảo a voulu déterminer la nature du langage et son rôle dans les sociétés préhistoriques et son évolution à travers les relations sociales.

Mots clés : Tran-Duc-Thao, Evolution du langage, Cognition sociale, Marxisme-léninisme, Phénoménologie, Conscience

Trần Đức Thảo's Theory of Language Origins

Several thinkers and scientists throughout the philosophical and scientific tradition took up the relationship between cooperation, language, and social cognition. Among them, Trần Đức Thảo's (1917–1993) deserves a special mention. The purpose of the following research is to introduce the reader to Thảo's philosophical reflection on human language and its evolution. We shall attempt to map out the main lines of Thảo's theory of language origins set out in his *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience* (1973) that combines philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and anthropology. The discovery of Marxism-Leninism led Thảo to suggest a materialistic and dialectic approach to the mind-body problem. In this way, Thảo tried to suggest a materialist and historical turn of Husserl's philosophy of consciousness which was at the very heart of his own first philosophical interests. Thảo's account threw into sharp relief the social nature of both language and cognition, so that language evolution is linked inextricably to social relations. Such a view depended upon the assumption that labour is an exclusively human characteristic which sets humans apart from animals. And the genesis of language is in human labour. In this way of thinking, language develops among both our pre-human ancestors and present humans in response to problems posed by the material life. Bearing in mind that language arises from the social demands and needs of the material world, language is transformed itself as human society changes. And given the social roots of thought and language, consciousness evolves continuously over time. Within this framework, Thảo wanted to determine the nature of language and its role in pre-historical societies and its making through social relations.

Key Words: Tran-Duc-Thao, Language Evolution, Social Cognition, Marxism-Leninism, Phenomenology, Consciousness

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