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The Role of Language in the Theory of Communication of Nicolas Malebranche

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Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) is perhaps the most important French philosopher between Descartes and the Revolution of 1789. His synthesis of Cartesian elements and Augustinianism in the last quarter of the seventeenth century had great influence on several generations of thinkers before the rationalism he represented was replaced by the new Lockian sensualism. There has been a European revival of interest in Malebranche in the last twenty years, centering around the first critical edition of his complete works, a task headed by the Belgian historian of philosophy André Robinet, and there are signs that American interest is growing as well with the recent publication of translations of two of his works (Malebranche 1980a, 1980b), and another monograph on his philosophy (Radner 1978).

Malebranche has not received much attention from historians of linguistics, although his only extended comments on language, dealing with how meaning is attached to words, have been treated in some detail in Robinet's 1978 excellent survey of language theory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Literary critics, on the other hand, often refer to his attack against rhetoric but seldom analyze it at length (France 1972, Tocanne 1978). My own interest in Malebranche began from just such references to his ideas on communication. As I looked into them further I realized that the literary historians had emphasized such psychological elements as the imagination and emotions in his theory of rhetoric at the expense of language as language; conversely, his ideas on language took on broader interest when situated in the larger perspective of his views on various forms of communication.

Still, it must be admitted that language was not one of his central preoccupations, but then, as a reviewer of Robinet's book remarks, philosophers in the seventeenth century did

not share the obsession with language of their twentieth-century successors (Hottois 1979: 586). Rather Malebranche is best known today for two doctrines, occasionalism and vision in God. Occasionalism holds that the interactions in the world around us which we take to be examples of one thing causing another to happen are in fact deceiving. The causality that we observe is only apparent, for God reserves to himself all true power and efficacy. We have only observed an occasional cause.

Vision in God applies this theory to human knowledge, and at the same time solves the problem in Cartesian philosophy of the mind's interaction with the body. Descartes had posited that the mind and body are two radically different substances. His explanation of how these two distinct substances are joined in humans, and of how the mind and body interact did not satisfy even his disciples. Malebranche's solution was to maintain that the mind is united, not only to the body but also to God. Since his doctrine of occasionalism makes God the only true cause, it became all the easier for him to locate the ultimate source of all essential knowledge in God himself rather than in the body or the mind. He will see that Malebranche's ideas on communication depend greatly on this scheme.

It becomes clear why language is not at the heart of his concerns if we examine his philosophic project, reflected best in the title of his first and most famous book, *La recherche de la vérité*. This quest for truth is only satisfied in pure thought, in a realm where the thinker leaves behind all traces of the material world. In the Augustinian tradition, thought is independent of language: "La substance purement spirituelle de l'âme humain participe au Verbe sans intermédiaire, dans une immédiation de pure lumière . . . La pensée donne la réplique exacte et muette de la vision du savoir dans la participation sans écart au Verbe" (Robinet 1978: 18–19).

If Malebranche's only concern had been to discover truth for himself, language would have been of little importance. Yet he was equally dedicated to communicating his method and findings to others, and in the tradition of Saint Augustine, it is precisely here that language intervenes (Hottois 1979: 575). Remarks on language are, in fact, found scattered all through his works, especially where ever he reflects on communication. Thus, language, which at first seemed somewhat incidental to his central pursuit, becomes in the end rather significant.

This paper examines the role of language in two opposing paradigms of communication. The first is found in his famous indictment of "la communication contagieuse des imaginations fortes" in *La Recherche* (I: 320). It is exemplified by the appeals to the imagination and emotions of the eloquence of Seneca, Tertullian, and Montaigne. The second form is best illustrated by his own dialogues; it is patterned on his recommendations for the discovery of truth which give priority to the mind's ability to focus its attention on the Divine Reason.

Examining one example of his strictures against what he considers false eloquence will give us a fair idea of the rationale behind his condemnation: "Il faut bien distinguer la force et la beauté des paroles, de la force et l'evidence des raisons. Il y a sans doute beaucoup de force, et quelque beauté dans les paroles de Senèque, mais il y a très peu de force et d'évidence dans ces raisons. Il donne par la force de son imagination un certain tour à ses paroles, qui touche, qui agite, et qui persuade par impression; mais il ne leur donne pas cette

netteté, et cette lumière pure, qui éclaire et qui persuade par évidence" (I: 345). Malebranche's complaint is that such discourse is addressed to the imagination and emotions rather than the head. Reason is sidestepped by a variety of strategies. In some passages he mentions verbal devices like the cadence of prose, figures of speech, or literary ornaments. Other times, when stressing oral delivery, he adds tone of voice, gestures, and the general air and manner of the speaker. Any and all of these tricks of style or delivery are capable of distracting the listener from reasoned argument.

Implicit behind this view is Malebranche's adaptation of a good deal of Cartesian psychophysiology and epistemology. Indeed, it was upon reading Descartes' treatise on the subject, *De l'homme*, that Malebranche was converted to the new philosophy. Descartes maintained that there is a radical separation between the extended world of matter and the spiritual world of thought. Humans are particularly susceptible to error because of their make-up as a union of these two dissimilar substances. All important truth—God's existence, moral laws, and the essence of things—are known by the mind as clear and distinct ideas. However, the body is constantly feeding the mind information which lacks these two qualities. This information, which comes from the senses, must be distrusted because of its incomplete and hazy nature; it lacks the clarity and distinction which is the criterion of truth. But this is not to say that sense information is worthless; rather it is true only in regard to the relation of the objects of the senses to our bodies. Sense data tell us nothing about the essence of things in themselves because the senses have been given us by God chiefly for self-preservation, to warn us about impending dangers to the body. The discovery of any ultimate truth is the task of the mental faculty called the "pure" understanding. The misfortune is that sense impressions have a stronger appeal for us than the more abstract, clear, and distinct ideas of the understanding. These "pure" ideas remain on the surface of the mind, while sense data penetrate it deeply. The result is that those who would dedicate themselves to the pursuit of truth must be on guard not to be waylaid by sense knowledge.

The mind's weapon in this rear guard skirmish is its other chief faculty, the will. This faculty must maintain the judgment in a constant state of suspension until the understanding is satisfied that clear and distinct ideas have been attained. At the same time, the will should focus the attention on the problem at hand, examining it from every side, as it searches out truth. Thus the will has a double task. On the one hand, it fights against error by suspending the judgment; on the other hand, it has the positive duty of maintaining the attention necessary to arrive at clear and distinct ideas.

It is in this context that Malebranche's attack on the contagious communication of strong imaginations must be understood. If he objects to stylistic devices which make a speech more pleasing to the ear, it is because this is an appeal to the sense of hearing. If he objects to a speaker's reliance on gestures and facial expressions to persuade, it is because of the appeal to eyesight. If he attacks the use of the imagination, it is because the imagination is ultimately for him a form of sense perception—visualizing absent objects in the mind's eye. In every case, he is objecting to appeals to the body rather than the mind, to the senses rather than the understanding. Given the attractiveness of sense perception, it is not a difficult task for an orator with a particularly strong or vivid imagination of his own to communicate his vision to his listeners, making them forget the voice of reason.

Against this model of faulty communication, communication which does not succeed in reaching the truth, Malebranche opposes a second kind, which incorporates his concept of vision in God. In the first model, the mind never attains truth because it is weighed down by its union with the body. In the second, the mind's union with God is strengthened by the communication process. But communication is not quite the right word, if by it we mean that one person communicates directly with another. Rather the first is a *moniteur*, or assistant of the truth. In the measure that he succeeds in enlightening his fellows it is only by turning their attention toward God in whom all truth is seen. The first person is the occasional cause, or rather the attention he excites by means of his words is the occasional cause; the true dialogue is not so much at the human level as between the humans and the Divine Reason, for whom the first person is only an intermediary. Just how Malebranche links the dialogue between humans to his theory of vision in God is clear in this description of the dialogue process: "Les paroles que Theodore prononce à mes oreilles m'avertissent donc en consequence des loix de l'union de l'ame et du corps, d'être attentif aux véritez qu'il découvre dans la souveraine Raison. Cela me tourne l'esprit du même côté que lui. Je voi ce qu'il voit, parce que je regarde où il regarde. Et par les paroles que je rends aux siennes, quoique les unes et les autres soient vides de sens, je m'entretiens avec lui, et je jouïs avec lui d'un bien qui nous est commun à tous. Car nous sommes tous essentiellement unis avec la Raison: tellement unis, que sans elle nous ne pouvons lier société avec personne" (XII–XIII: 169).

Up to this point I have been examining Malebranche's ideas on communication in terms of his epistemology. While his concept of the operation of the mind remains an indispensable background to his views on how humans communicate, we can gain additional insights by examining them in terms of the role of language. For example, when Malebranche describes vision in God, the end-product of authentic communication between men, he uses the metaphor of speech. He speaks of attention as putting a series of questions to God (II: 194), and of the necessity of listening attentively to the voice of Divine Reason (XII–XIII: 69). But this is only a manner of speaking. His Augustinianism is too strong for this consultation of reason not to be wordless. As Robinet has put it, "Là, le rôle du langage est pour ainsi dire annulé" (1978: 165).

The contrast between the verbal communication of the two human participants in dialogue and the nonverbal relationship with God is clear in the following passage which highlights the key points of his analysis of language: "Car quelque justes que soient vos expressions, quand vous me parlez et que je consulte la Raison, il se fait en même tems un bruit confus de deux réponses différentes, l'une sensible, et l'autre intelligible. Et le moindre inconvenient qui en arrive, c'est que la réponse qui me frappe l'oreille partage la capacité de mon esprit, et en diminuë la vivacité et la penetration. Car il vous faut du tems pour prononcer vos paroles; mais toutes les réponses de la Raison sont éternelles et immuables. Elles ont toujours été dites, ou plutôt elle se disent toujours sans aucune succession de tems; et quoiqu'il nous faille quelques momens pour les entendre, il ne lui en faut point pour les faire, parce qu'effectivement elles ne sont point faites. Elles sont éternelles, immuables, nécessaires" (XII–XIII: 89). First, human language involves the senses, while divine communication is purely "intelligible," an affair of the understanding alone. Second, human language is time-bound since utterances begin and end, while divine truths

are eternal. Finally divine truth is immutable, while human language changes over time and varies from culture to culture. Human language is thus not even a pale imitation of the communication men have with Divine Reason through vision in God. It is of a different order, and Malebranche declares that there is reason to think that after death, when humans will be liberated from the domination of the body, that language will no longer be necessary (I: 416).

This last point shows how closely language is tied in Malebranche's eyes to the mind's union with the body: ". . . J'expérience nous apprenne, que nous ne pouvons pas immédiatement et par nous-mêmes déclarer nos pensées les uns aux autres, seulement par des paroles, ou par d'autres signes sensibles, auxquels nous avons attaché nos idées" (I: 415). Just as the body is joined to the mind, so words join a sensible sign with an idea. In its most legitimate role, language serves to "représenter les idées pures de l'esprit" (XI: 136; cf. XI: 95), the clear and distinct ideas which the pure understanding perceives in God. Unfortunately, language, along with mankind, has fallen on hard times as a consequence of original sin: "leur langage est corrompu comme leur coeur" (XI: 199). As we discuss this linguistic corruption, we will see that it is the inevitable consequence of the human dual nature.

In the course of this presentation of the weaknesses of verbal communication, it will be useful to compare it to another form of communication—not the wordless communication of the mind with the Divine Reason we have just mentioned—but a speaker's gesture, mannerisms, and facial expressions, by which he expresses his feeling and interior dispositions. This "body language" is a component of what I have labeled the inauthentic model of communication, just as the wordless vision in God is a component of the more perfect form. Malebranche labels gestures and the like a "language naturel" because they represent directly and in a universal way the sentiments felt (XI: 255), while verbal language consists of an audible sign which is arbitrarily attached to an idea. It is this arbitrary character which is the first source of the potential disadvantages of language. Because there is no resemblance, no necessary relation between the idea and the sign that represents it, the word is harder for the mind to possess than a simple gesture (IV: 104). Malebranche discusses in some detail how this arbitrary link between sign and idea is reinforced; rather than treat this point here, I refer the reader to Robinet (1978: 162–64), who treats the matter thoroughly.

The second potential disadvantage of verbal language stems from its association with the body through the senses. Given that the appeal of the senses is more attractive than the appeal of pure ideas, the word as sound often overpowers the word as meaning or idea. The cadence of prose, the harmony of a sentence—both elements which appeal to the ear—often have more persuasive power than the ideas which the words are supposed to represent. This power is so great, in fact, that if a speech is beautiful enough, it can generate a feeling of persuasion in an audience without the audience ever being quite sure of what it has been persuaded (I: 345). In this respect, facial expressions and gestures are again more effective than words because the visual stimulation that they arouse is more gripping than the auditory stimulation of language. When such expressive delivery is combined with stylistic brilliance, an orator has a sure hold on the unreflecting majority of his listeners who are so captivated by the surface appeal to the senses that they never apply their reason

to the issue under discussion. It is of just such a seductive orator that Malebranche exclaims, "le don de la parole est le plus grand des talens" (III: 173–74). This absence of reflection in most humans makes for a mechanical kind of persuasion which transforms them into machines (XI: 205; 199). In contrast to the authentic form of communication in which we communicate indirectly with each other through the union of minds with God, here one body acts more or less directly on another. This mechanical persuasion never rises above the level of the senses to involve the reason since it depends chiefly on the sounds of words and the way in which they are delivered rather than their meaning.

A word's sound served as a barrier of sorts to authentic communication in the situation I have just described; in contrast, the third problem area associated with language stems from lack of precision in a word's meaning. As we have seen, for Malebranche, words ideally are meant to represent clear and distinct ideas. However, ideas are, in fact, often hazy and confused, and the meanings of the words which represent them equivocal. The causes of the resulting ambiguity are multiple, but all interfere with language's potential as an instrument for communicating the truth.

First, some ideas are by their very nature hazy and confused. This is especially true of various sensations experienced by the body; heat, cold, colors, tastes, and the like. Such feelings concern only the body and have a unique quality for each individual (I: 453). It is only by conjecture that we assume that others have more or less the same sense experiences as our own. The consequence is a certain imprecision: "Or les hommes n'ayant leurs sentimens qu'à cause du corps, et leurs corps n'étant pas disposé en tous de la même manière, il arrive souvent que les mots sont équivoques" (I: 452–55). To illustrate his point that words cannot adequately represent sensations he cites the case of the blind to whom it is impossible to give "La moindre connoissance de ce que l'on entend par rouge, verd, jaune" by verbal means (I: 145).

Popular usage is another source of lack of precision in language. Terms dealing with morality, where words like shame, love, and despair are often surrounded by a certain ambiguity furnish many examples. Malebranche classifies such words as "abridged expressions," short-hand notations for several notions (II: 222). The abridgment itself is not to be condemned if it is only that—the combining of two clear and distinct ideas (II: 222), but too often we take it for granted that these ideas are clear simply because they are familiar (XI: 30; cf. XI: 74).

Malebranche realizes that we are not required to speak with the precision of a philosopher on all occasions. He notes that even Scripture uses what he considers imprecise language since it is written for the mass of Christians rather than for the thinking elite (III: 232–33). He is much less indulgent with professional writers of various sorts who aim at specialized audiences. For example, he criticizes scholastic theologians for what he considers their mental gymnastics, which he believes are based on the failure to clearly define terms (XVI: 73).

On the other hand, Malebranche sees equivocation as less likely in body language. He believes that facial expressions, in particular, reveal in a direct and universal way a speaker's feelings, and thus that it is much more difficult to deceive someone about our true sentiments using them than with words (XI: 255).

Ambiguity will cease to plague human language only “quand les hommes aimeront uniuernent la verité, alors ils prendront bien garde à ce qu’ils disent” (III: 173). That day will come, however, only when humans no longer depend on their bodies, that is to say, after their death (III: 174). Only then will language be purified, if it will be necessary at all. This is not to say, however, that Malebranche has no use for language. In this life it is the occasional cause by which we communicate with each other through the Divine Reason. If language is easily corrupted, it is because there is a striking parallel between language and the human dual nature. Just as the body and mind are absolutely distinct and dissimilar yet joined together, so the link between a word’s sound and its meaning is completely arbitrary (I: 213). Thus, it is not surprising that one can find both the best and the worst in human nature and human language. When properly used, verbal communication serves as a stimulus for the mind’s contact with the Divine Reason through vision in God; when abused, verbal language joins the natural language of gesture and facial expression in a mechanical persuasion which degrades humans into machines (cf. XI: 136). Such mechanical persuasion is more powerful in the short run but because it is directed at the body rather than the understanding, no essential truth is communicated. The kind of dialogue which heightens the mind’s attention to the Divine Reason is a slower process, accessible perhaps only to a rational elite because it must make use of the impure instrument which is human language, but its results are more permanent and more satisfying.

In conclusion, I hope that I have shown that Malebranche’s views on language are as important to understanding his notion of communication as his views on psychology and epistemology. I would only add that while I have not attempted to situate Malebranche in the development of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century language thought, it is to be hoped that specialists in historical linguistics will be encouraged by the rival of interest in him in literary and philosophic circles to reassess his role in the history of the theory of language.

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