

A Few Important and Original Aspects of Carlo Cattaneo's Philosophical-Linguistic Ideas

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The essay has two main purposes. The first is a general reconstruction of Cattaneo's linguistic thought, highlighting the most important aspects of both his reflections on the connection between language and the community of speakers, and his study of the functions and properties of language. The latter includes an analysis of the influence Cattaneo's philosophy had on the sphere of Italian linguistics at the turn of the 20th century.

Keywords: linguistics, philosophy of language, connection between language and nation, linguistics and anthropology

A Polyhedric Perspective

Carlo Cattaneo's (1801-1869) centrality in the mid-19th-century Italian cultural sphere has much to do with several influential aspects of his education: the vein of liberal and secular thought in early-19th-century Italian learning, the study of law which was always foremost in his research, and his vigorous interest in ethnography and social psychology¹. His personality as a polyhedric, multifaceted scholar strongly influenced by classical culture and enlightenment philosophy was expressed in several forms, in all of which his efforts were notable: as an economist, critic, historian, political writer, founder of the magazine *Il Politecnico* (1839-1844) and, last but not least, a linguist.

Within the framework of this rich and varied intellectual exploration, his positivist-historical ethnic-linguistic studies held a place of particular importance, as did his political projects focusing on the concept of the nation and "nationality". Cattaneo used this term in reference to both the highest, most unifying form of cultural aggregation and to a populace's necessary direct participation in the development of civil society. We will focus here on Cattaneo's interest in linguistics², highlighting his influence in stimulating consideration of Italian as a common language that reflects the connection between the vitality of language and the cultural vitality of the nation: language, he asserted, was "the unifying bond in geographic and social terms" (Vitale, 1984, p. 457), as it permitted Italians to participate in their country's cultural progress. Cognizance of the common nature of the language underpinned Cattaneo's favorable attitude towards its renewable nature, and consequent rejection of purist apprehensions—Hellenism and provincial particularisms alike. At the same time, with his cogently European cultural point of view, he was also staunchly opposed to neo-Tuscanism and Manzonian Florentinism,

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¹ For a comprehensive portrait of Cattaneo and his relationships with his contemporaries see Alessio (1957) and Mazzali (1990).

² Studied in particular by Timpanaro (1969, pp. 229-283). See also Gensini (1993, pp. 237-240), Beninca (1994, pp. 576-580), Geymonat (2018).

as well as to the academicism of the Crusca scholarly society, holding resolutely to principle of the unity of national culture and civic life.

This stance also explains his two-pronged position regarding dialects. On one hand, he re-proposed—in new but not antithetical terms—relationships between dialects and language, recognizing the validity of dialects as repositories of historic cultural heritage worth preserving, appreciating the value people placed on dialect cultures, and also underscoring the value of literature in dialect. On the other hand, however, he considered dialects elements that could be overcome in the interactive process of development of a common language, and was aware that people speaking a common language could only be engaged to the extent that they managed to progressively abandon the exclusive use of dialects.

The Historical and Social Conception of Language

Cattaneo's earliest writing on linguistics is "Nesso della nazione e della lingua valaca coll'italiana", published in 1837³ as part of a more general (never completed) work concerning the influence of barbarian invasions on the Italian language. It is a study on the shift from late-Roman society to feudalism and then communal society, patently historical and ethnographic in nature. This type of common thread running between linguistics, history, and ethnography marked all of 18th- and early 19th-century enlightenment culture, but it appears even more accentuated in Cattaneo's research. He developed his working method in the wake of Romagnosi's teachings, but with one substantial difference: while Romagnosi tended to boil down the history of civilization to the history of juridical institutions and was only marginally interested in linguistic matters, Cattaneo, even in this early writing, put the linguistic question front and center, considering language to be an expression of nationality and a testimony of events in the history of peoples.

The social, and in a broader sense political function of language was thus emphasized for the purpose of studying interconnections among things, the links that make up the social chains that bind individuals together as members of a community: words, rich in subtle meanings, can be fully understood only when situated in a social context broader than that of their immediate reading or use (Lewis, 1987, p. 17). The nucleus that holds individual and collective memories together is made up of language, and the exercise of language strengthens that nucleus on which much of a people's identity depends, its historical consciousness. In this case, Cattaneo referred to language not only as a set of syntactic rules and sounds, but also as a socially and regionally differentiated modality—i.e., language not as system, but rather as norm and institution, a mirror reflecting its speakers' cultural and social identity: "it is in the words of language that the paths of memory particular to each community are condensed" (De Mauro, 2008, p. 67).

This conception of language is clearly influenced by Vico; in fact, Cattaneo had a great interest in Vico's work from early on, thanks in part to his reading of Romagnosi and Ferrari, who interpreted it in the light of secular anthropology and the enlightenment. From Ferrari's book *Vico et l'Italie*, published in Paris in 1839, Cattaneo took some cues for his essay "Sulla scienza nuova" published in the Politecnico that same year⁴. An interest in primitive eras and the collective lives of peoples, as well as the relationship between language and nation,⁵ are undoubtedly Vico-esque motifs, from which Cattaneo drew certain excesses of 18th-century

³ In the *Annali universali di statistica*, available in Cattaneo (1948, I, pp. 209-237).

⁴ In Cattaneo (1957, pp. 39-75).

⁵ The consideration of language as the binding tie of a community identified with the nation is also found in an important exponent of classicism, Giordani (Cecioni, 1977, p. 59).

rationalism; but he never gave up on the idea of progress, nor was he influenced by the theological aspects of Vico's philosophy. His enlightenment education led him to reject romantic and spiritualist myths; to celebrate Locke as a maestro, counterposing him with the vagueness of idealism; and to dispute the positions of Rosmini, Gioberti, and even Mazzini. In his work, the Enlightenment "reveals itself in the form of a radical anti-mythology" (Alessio, 1957, p. 19). As far as romanticism is concerned, Cattaneo's position is basically one of extraneousness (Timpanaro, 1969, pp. 233-234): speaking, as many have done, of Cattaneo's romanticism might make sense if we mean romanticism as a general spiritual category, defining any form of interest in primitive eras, folk traditions, and the connection between language and nation as romantic. But if we mean romanticism as a historically specific cultural movement, then we cannot ignore the fact that Cattaneo always demonstrated a critical, distant attitude to it that led him to move towards classicism, which, with all its limitations, represented an antithesis of romanticism⁶. This critical position was motivated by his aversion to Medievalism—that religious conception of life that the romantics shared, albeit with different nuances, and the ambiguous way they exalted the folk spirit, intended more as an attachment to local traditions, and a form of ingenuousness than as a democratic aspiration. Even the Lombardian romantics, who were rightly considered the heirs of the Enlightenment by dint of their battles concerning the deprovincialization of culture—hence the *Conciliatore* can be considered the continuation of the *Caffè*—never completely clarified their relationship with the conservative ideology of European romanticism, from which they were never able to fully distance themselves.

Cattaneo discussed relations between Romans and barbarians and the origins of the Italian language in several writings following that first 1837 essay, maintaining that Italian was derived from Vulgar Latin and considering the influence of barbarian languages in its formation to be extremely limited, all the more so as he believed that the number of barbarian dominators had been very small, contrary to the opinions of many historians. To better evaluate this idea of Italian as a continuation of Vulgar Latin, Cattaneo felt that it was also necessary to keep in mind the influence of ancient languages on Italic populations conquered by the Romans (Etruscan, Umbrian, Celtic, etc.). This is the important substrate theory, without which it would be difficult to explain, for example, the variety of Italian dialects, a phenomenon that mainly involved phonetics rather than lexicon, and was therefore not a general blending of languages, but a single new language pronounced in different ways based on earlier phonetic habits kept alive by their rootedness in speakers' usage⁷. These habits constitute concrete evidence of the ethnography of Italy prior to Roman conquest.

Substrate theory is one of the most important aspects of Cattaneo's ideas on linguistics; the theory had already been put forward in the 16th and 17th centuries (by Pasquier and Du Change, for example), and was later reprised by Scipione Maffei. But Cattaneo was the first to offer a significant refinement. The theory initially met with resistance; mid-19th-century comparative linguistics did not view it favorably (August Schleicher is one example). Ascoli too had criticized substrate theory at first, but later, following a general change of opinion, ended up acknowledging its validity and made it central to his studies on Romance dialectology (Timpanaro, 2005, pp. 238-242). Today we can say that this same tie between linguistics and ethnography is one of the points of convergence between Ascoli's linguistics and Cattaneo's thinking, demonstrating the degree to which it positively influenced Italian linguistic studies between in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

⁶ For example, the review of Balbo's *Vita di Dante* di Balbo published in the *Politecnico* in 1839 (now in Cattaneo, 1957, pp. 380-395) criticizes the work's religious and metaphysical content and defense of neo-Guelphism. The review of Tommaseo's *Fede e Bellezza* (ivi, pp. 396-407) is also very negative.

⁷ On substrate theory see the bountiful pages in Timpanaro (1969, pp. 246-253).

Studies on the origins of Italian are also important in explaining Cattaneo's position in the debate on the question of language, which was of great significance to Italian culture at the time. Cattaneo in fact saw no dissonance between his commitment as a militant linguist and his studies of historical linguistics; on the contrary, he considered the historical study of languages to be the basis and foundation of normative linguistics⁸. Faced with the problem of how the Italian language must have been formed and regularized, he put up an unyielding anti-Tuscan fight on two essential fronts. The first was a direct one—reprising an argument that had first been launched by the Lombardian Enlightenment with the important journal *Il Caffè* (1764-1766)—against the archaic, traditionalist model of the Accademia della Crusca, which promoted a fossilized conception of language untouched by innovation and based on the strict division between language and culture. The second front concerned Manzoni's model, which was certainly more modern and functional, but which seemed to Cattaneo too focused on a concept of popularity that he did not share, as it was based not on the intention to facilitate the use and comprehension of language among the lower and working classes, but rather on the reclamation of expressions familiar only to a specific community and foreign to the rest of the population (Cattaneo, 1948, p. 8).

As an alternative to this model, which he considered archaic and useless, Cattaneo suggested a form of language that constituted a point of contact between the various Italian dialectical traditions and could thus be a tool for the diffusion and circulation of ideas, playing a truly unifying role for the nation. A language both distinguished and popular⁹, both austere and modern (Timpanaro, 1969, p. 237), would prove suitable not only for literary culture, but for the scientific and philosophical spheres as well.

Cattaneo and the Philosophy of Language

From his earliest writings on linguistics, Cattaneo demonstrated that he possessed two abilities in which he surpassed other Italian authors of his day. The first was the ability to go beyond national boundaries, studying Germanic languages and Romanian, for example. The second was his firm grasp of the principle that the commonality of two languages is demonstrated more by the similarity of their grammatical structures than their vocabulary—a principle drawn from the new comparative linguistics of Bopp and the Schlegel brothers¹⁰ who, in that period, had become important and argumentative interlocutors for Cattaneo, and had imparted new developments to his ideas about linguistics. In 1839 Bernardino Biondelli¹¹ began to publish in the *Politecnico* a series of articles on Indo-European linguistics, reviewing important works by comparative linguists¹², thus informing the Italian audience of their scientific findings. These articles led Cattaneo to take a critical position with regard to this line of study, and to write the essay “Sul principio storico delle lingue europee”¹³.

In this essay, Cattaneo criticized the idea that a common origin of peoples could be deduced based on affinity among languages; he himself was convinced that there was no essential link between linguistic affinity and racial affinity, and that linguistics and anthropology must be meticulously kept separate. Moreover, he believed that there had been too much insistence on Indo-European unity, neglecting the differences among various languages due to the substrate. He was also suspicious of the Orientalizing exaltation which he saw as perhaps the most

⁸ Here the Lombardian writer reprised an idea firmly rooted in Italian culture dating back to Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*.

⁹ Here we can perceive an echo of Monti's *Proposta di alcune correzioni ed aggiunte al Vocabolario della Crusca* (1817-1822), which Cattaneo had read in his youth with great interest.

¹⁰ On comparative linguistics see Morpugo Davies (1994).

¹¹ On Biondelli's positive role in the development of linguistic studies in Italy see de Mauro (1980, pp. 49-52).

¹² For example, Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik*.

¹³ Published in the *Politecnico* in 1841, it is certainly his widest-ranging and most original written work on linguistics-ethnography.

ephemeral and misleading consequence of Indo-European comparative studies (Marazzini, 1988, p. 406). According to Friedrich Schlegel,¹⁴ the substrate had a mainly negative function, corrupting the perfect form of Sanskrit; in Cattaneo's view, on the contrary, the blending of Sanskrit with primitive European languages gave rise to a fertile grafting, because the substrate "represented the principle of linguistic variety, which was not erased by the unifying action of the colonizing populace" (Timpanaro, 1969, p. 266).

Linguistic affinity is thus not associated with original identity in Cattaneo's system, but is more accurately the result of a slow, progressive acceptance on the part of populations due to the establishment of political, economic, and cultural relations among them (Cattaneo, 1957, pp. 450-453). So not a point of departure, but of arrival: European languages are not the result of progressive changes to a primitive shared language, but the grafting of a shared language onto the different languages spoken long ago in various countries. In Italy, for example, languages once spoken in different areas of the peninsula and the islands included Phoenician, Greek, Oscan, Umbrian, Etruscan, Celtic, and others; over the course of time, these languages became the respective dialects of a shared language (thus gaining affinity with it and with one another), which allowed different communities to approach and understand one another.

Based on these considerations, Cattaneo maintained a specific position within the sphere of the heated debate over the monogenesis or polygenesis of language: he roundly rejected the former, but at the same time distanced himself from the particular type of polygenism advocated by Schlegel, which consisted of clearly separating out a few original linguistic types from which many "daughter" languages would have been derived. In Cattaneo's view, on the other hand, there were many original primitive languages, and their numbers had been progressively reduced as tribes began to come together in larger aggregates. Thus for Cattaneo, unlike for Schlegel, there were no languages that were perfect from the outset (inflected languages); all languages had humble or, as he put it, "feral" origins. Figures who offered models of this way of understanding linguistic polygenism include Epicurus, the great Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico, and Melchiorre Cesarotti¹⁵.

Again countering Schlegel, Cattaneo asserted the correctness of agglutinative theory, which stated that even the most perfect and sophisticated forms of inflected languages stemmed from the agglutination of monosyllables that originally had autonomous functions. And in fact, in that first 1837 article he observed that declinations of Latin and Greek language may have arisen from simple nouns with an article attached (Cattaneo, 1948, p. 228).

The polemic with Schlegel also extended to the question of the origin of language. While Schlegel believed that Indo-European inflection was due basically to divine intervention, Cattaneo thought that the origin of language could only be human, and he maintained this position in later writings like the 1862 "Lezioni di ideologia" (the fruit of a philosophy course he had held in Lugano), which included a very interesting section on linguistics¹⁶. In this work, on the one hand he confuted what he saw as the sophism of Bonald, who denied man's faculty to construct a language, and on the other, he reiterated the value of scientific thought, secularity, and denial of the metaphysical. On these themes, Cattaneo moves towards the Enlightenment philosophy of Locke and Herder which flatly rejected the concept of innate ideas and the divine origin of language¹⁷ and was completely immune to the mystical conception of linguistics so dear to the romantics.

¹⁴ Here Cattaneo is referring to the 1808 book *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*. On Schlegel's philosophical-linguistic ideas see Timpanaro (2005, pp. 17-56).

¹⁵ In particular on Cesarotti and his *Saggio sulla filosofia delle lingue* (1800) which was important reading for Cattaneo see Gensini (2020).

¹⁶ The importance of this section is underscored by De Mauro (2010, pp. 67-68).

¹⁷ On this aspect in particular see Prato (2012, pp. 17-22).

In his “Saggio sul principio storico delle lingue europee”, Cattaneo aimed to confirm the relationship between linguistic phenomena and cultural traditions, considering linguistic research to be closely correlated with strictly philosophical thought. In his view, analysis of linguistic phenomena did not boil down to an extemporaneous collection of data, but was in fact a true social science. As for the analytical philosophy of the *Idèologues*—represented for Italian writers primarily by Condillac and Tracy—he certainly acknowledged their merit in having insightfully and accurately examined problems of language from the most concrete and rational perspective possible. At the same time, he was nonetheless aware of his own limitations as well—namely, having indicated the object of his thinking as a rather abstract “man” independent from any relationship with his peers. Condillac’s famous “statue” hypothesis seemed to him emblematic of a concept of human nature isolated from social and historical factors (Gensini, 1993, p. 238). Unsurprisingly, for conferences held from 1859 on at the Istituto Lombardo di Scienze e Lettere, Cattaneo chose the title “Psicologia delle menti associate”¹⁸, in which the term “social psychology” is intended in the anthropological sense, as both a reflection on man based on the relationships that tied him to his peers, and a reconstruction of the mentalities and symbolic systems resulting from social mediation. In these lectures, Cattaneo observed that the yeast that makes ideas ferment does not come from a single mind, because thought develops within the collective sphere (Cattaneo, 1957, pp. 277-278).

From Cattaneo’s new perspective, the genesis of ideas, which Locke had shown to spring from language, can only be rooted in social practices, communication processes that bring individuals together (Cattaneo, 1960, p. 16). Language itself is the society of ideas (Cattaneo, 1957, p. 316), and it is on this terrain that ideology—or the analysis of ideas—meets linguistics. “Ideologia”, as noted above, was the title Cattaneo chose for his 1862 lessons, and the choice was hardly surprising if we consider that with its clear Enlightenment derivation, ideology¹⁹ was the only real form of opposition to conformism in the culture of his time, as it represented an effective weapon for a democratic philosophy that aimed to oppose the spiritualist currents of the Restoration (Formigari, 1990, p. 153).

Carlo Cattaneo does not yet have the reputation he deserves in the historiography of linguistics in Italy and abroad, but as we have seen, his ideas on the status of historical-natural languages and the function of language contain elements of great interest and originality, which we hope will be increasingly grasped and appreciated by scholars who deal with the history of thought on linguistics. It must then be acknowledged that the originality of Cattaneo’s linguistics goes beyond the boundaries of specialistic study to more generally characterize his entire body of philosophical and sociological research, which dovetails with the problems and questions of our own time, and is also open to further forms of development and discussion.

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¹⁸ Published posthumously by Bertani in the collection of *Opere edite e inedite* in 7 volumes that came out in 1881 and 1892, now found in Cattaneo (1957, pp. 270-326).

¹⁹ Now found in Cattaneo (1960, III, pp. 3-204).

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