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Misunderstanding Metaphors: Linguistic Scepticism in Mauthner's Philosophy

Nous sommes tous dans un désert.
Personne ne comprend personne.
Gustave Flaubert¹

This essay is an overview of Fritz Mauthner's linguistic scepticism, which, in my view, represents a powerful hermeneutic category of philosophical doubts about the communicative, epistemological, and ontological value of language. In order to shed light on the main features of Mauthner's thought, I draw attention to his long-standing dialogue with both the sceptical tradition and philosophy of language. This contribution has nine short sections: the first has an introductory function and illustrates several aspects of linguistic scepticism in the history of philosophy; the second offers a contextualisation of Mauthner's philosophy of language; the remainder present a broad examination of the main features of Mauthner's thought as follows: the impossibility of knowledge that stems from a radicalisation of empiricism; the coincidence between word and thought, thinking and speaking; the notion of use, the relevance of linguistic habits, and the utopia of communication; the deceptive metaphors at the root of an *epoché* of meaning; the new task of philosophy as an exercise of liberation against the limits of language; the controversial relationship between Judaism and scepticism; and the mystical silence as an extreme consequence of his thought.² Mauthner turns scepticism into a form of life and philosophy into a critique of language, and he inaugurates a new approach that is traceable in many German—Jewish thinkers of the early twentieth century as such as Landauer

1 This verse of Flaubert is quoted by Mauthner; cf. Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 2nd edition, 3 vols. (Stuttgart and Berlin: J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1913): I, 49.

2 It is worth saying a few words about the peculiar conception of mysticism—so called “neue Mystik”—that was developed in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century by poets and writers as Julius and Heinrich Hart, Wilhelm Bölsche, Willy Pastor, Rainer Maria Rilke, Alfred Mombert, Bruno Wille and others. This new kind of mysticism does not deal with the traditional idea of a mystical union between God and soul, but rather with an aware feeling of connection between the individual and the community, the present and the past. This kind of secularised mysticism combines aesthetical-linguistic aspects—it is not by chance that most of these authors were writers and poets—with a political and social idea of regeneration of humankind. Cf. Walther Hoffmann, “Neue Mystik,” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, eds. Friedrich Michael Schiele and Leopold Scharnack, vol. 4 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913): 608–611; Uwe Spörl, *Gottlose Mystik in der deutschen Literatur um die Jahrhundertwende* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997); Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Mystik der Moderne. Die visionäre Ästhetik der deutschen Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Metzler 1989); Anna Wolkowicz, *Mystiker der Revolution. Der utopische Diskurs um die Jahrhundertwende* (Warsaw: WUW, 2007).

and Wittgenstein. My goal is to show how the practical aim of Mauthner's *logos-scepticism*, i.e., liberation from the illusions of words, is in line with the therapeutic value of ancient scepticism and, moreover, his mystic silence—as the extreme consequence of a radical mistrust of language—is a modern (and tragic) achievement of ancient *ataraxia*.

Philosophy of Language or Linguistic Scepticism?

Linguistic scepticism could be broadly defined as a discussion about language and its limit, which constitutes one of the most extensively discussed problems in Western philosophy. Even if this binomial is not as common in the history of scepticism, it's worth analysing because on the one hand, it is the expression of a radical and paradoxical form of scepticism, which concerns language, seen as a deceptive tool at the root of human knowledge and as the only medium by which we can develop a sceptical enquiry; on the other hand, this sceptical enquiry of language spans the entire history of philosophy, which—starting from ancient Greece—has always mistrusted vocal expressions and the articulated thought.³

However, if—according to Aristotle—philosophy begins with wonder, one can say that philosophy of language arises from doubts about language and its communicative, epistemological, and ontological value.⁴ To sum up, the main problems are as the following: the main target of communicative doubt consists of the assumption that there is an isomorphism between reality and language, which constitutes the basis for the communication; in fact, linguistic reference to the world is possible only if reality and language have an analogical structure; if not, the latter is only an obstacle to knowledge. Epistemological doubt refers to the verifiability of statements through the connection between subject and predicate, which should be proved in order to have knowledge;⁵ ontological doubt deals with the power of the word and its conformity to the essence of the object it signifies, faced with the so-called 'archaic fusion'⁶ of word and thing and the question of the correctness of names, which is connected to the long-standing juxtaposition of *fusei–thesei*, i.e.

³ This linguistic-sceptical-attitude is related to the etymology of the word 'theory', which comes from the Greek *theorein*—'to consider, to speculate, to look at'—, which is connected to sight—*horáo*—and not to the hearing that is the sense of language *par excellence*. Cf. Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2003): 14–73.

⁴ Questionable is the position of Weiler, who saw the critique of language only as a peculiar argument of scepticism, from Sextus Empiricus to Hume. See Gershon Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970): 269.

⁵ This is the *logos apophantikos* (apophantic speech) of Aristotle that is not the task of language in general, but a peculiar form of *logos semantikos*, which could also be *logos praktikos* and *logos poietikos*. Cf. Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, trans. Ella M. Edghill, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941): ch. 4ff.

⁶ Cf. Guido Calogero, *Storia della logica antica. Logica arcaica* (Bari: Laterza, 1967): 63–95.

the debate about the relationship between sound and meaning as occurring by nature or by arbitrary negotiation.⁷ Traces of this discussion can be found throughout the history of philosophy, combined with other issues such as the origin of language, the heterogeneity of languages, the possibility of translation, the correspondence between voices and meaning, and so on.⁸

However, in the history of Western metaphysics, language was always treated as a secondary subject or as an insurmountable obstacle to epistemology. With the exception of Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), it was only in the nineteenth century that the question of language—thanks to the works of Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt—did become a central philosophical subject by itself, to be investigated in all its nuances. Among the philosophers of language, Fritz Mauthner (1849–1923) was certainly the precursor of the linguistic turn of the twentieth century, even if he was for many years a largely forgotten figure.

Mauthner's thought is visible in the debate on the role of language supported by Neogrammatical School of Hermann Paul (1846–1921), who offered a radical empiricist approach to language by asserting that there are only individual speech-acts.⁹ Moreover, the context in which we should locate Mauthner's scepticism is the so called *Sprachkrise*, a complex phenomenon of linguistic critique diffused in the philosophical and literary debate among German-speaking thinkers, poets, and intellectuals before World War I,¹⁰ whose works consist in a 'proving ground for world

7 As is common knowledge, this was one of the most discussed issues in the theory of language: from Plato's *Cratylus*, Aristotle, Stoicisms, and Sextus Empiricus, passing through the Middle Ages, the Baroque, and Romanticism, up until the twentieth century, when Saussure stated that language is an arbitrary sign and there is no natural link between signifier and signified.

8 Cf. Jürgen Schiewe, *Die Macht der Sprache: Eine Geschichte der Sprachkritik von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Beck, 1998); Eugenio Coseriu, *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: UTB, 2003); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

9 In his *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, Paul highlights the role of metaphors in phonetic and semantic shifts, seen as individual products based on the dialectic process between a usual meaning of a word and an occasional one. Cf. Hermann Paul, *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1880). Mauthner quotes Paul in his *Beiträge*. Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 25: 'Sprache ist Abstraktion. Es gibt nur individuelle, atomisierte, momentane Sprechfähigkeit.'

10 Viennese culture was a nodal point at the turn of the last century, characterised by crisis, based on a distrust of reason, a failure of bourgeois values, and a general demystification of tradition. During this period there was a fin-de-siècle reassessment in many cultural fields: in painting with Klimt und Schiele, in music with Schönberg and Mahler, in psychology with Freud and in physics with Ernst Mach, whose theory of knowledge as ordered sense-experience was decisive for Mauthner. Cf. Christian Mittermüller, *Sprachskepsis und Poetologie: Goethes Romane 'Die Wahlverwandtschaften' und 'Wilhelm Meister Wanderjahre'* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2008); Magdolna Orosz and Peter Plesner, "Sprache, Skepsis und Ich um 1900. Formen der belletristischen Ich-Dekonstruktion in der österreichischen und ungarischen Kultur der Jahrhundertwende," in *...und die Worte rollen von Ihren Fäden fort...: Sprache, Sprachlichkeit, Sprachproblem in der österreichischen und ungarischen Kultur und Literatur der Jahrhundertwende*, eds. Magdolna Orosz, Amália Kerekes and Katalin Teller (Budapest: ELTE, 2002): 355–368; Günter Saße, *Sprache und Kritik: Untersuchung zur Sprachkritik der Moderne*

destruction.”¹¹ At the core of *Sprachkrise* there is a mistrust of language, seen as a defective means and an aesthetical device. Influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), Karl Kraus (1874–1936), and all the Jung-Wien¹² members put the epistemological efficacy of language in doubt.

Fritz Mauthner as Sceptic of Language

Mauthner was considered a dilettante and autodidactic philosopher, who, nevertheless, produced a huge corpus: three volumes of ‘Contributions toward a Critique of Language’, a ‘Dictionary of Philosophy’, ‘History of Atheism in the Western Society’,¹³ as well as many essays and novels. Mauthner’s interest in language was due to autobiographical factors: he was a German-speaking Jew—his grandfather was a follower of Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676)—who grew up in a Czech-speaking society.¹⁴ Speaking three languages led him to a critical awareness of language itself, which is at the root of his linguistic-sceptical attitude. Furthermore, he was a journalist, and had to utilise rhetorical techniques to draw the attention of the readers on a daily basis. He was also a writer and a translator, and it’s not by chance that his critique later became the theoretical basis for the work of many writers as James Joyce (1882–1941), Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), and Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986). However, Mauthner was certainly a controversial figure who received very little attention from the philosophical circles of his time, which regarded him as quite suspicious.

He was almost forgotten for many years and one can say that a critical remark by Wittgenstein sealed his fate. In fact, the Austrian philosopher wrote in his *Tractatus*: ‘All

(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977); Martin Kurzreiter, *Sprachkritik als Ideologiekritik bei Fritz Mauthner* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1993): 25–80; Gerald Hartung, *Sprach-Kritik: Sprach- und Kulturtheoretische Reflexionen im deutsch-jüdischen Kontext* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2012).

11 Karl Kraus, *Untergang der Welt durch schwarze Magie* (Munich: Koesel, 1960): 418; quoted by Linda Ben-Zvi, “Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language,” *PMLA* 95.2 (1980): 184.

12 ‘Young Vienna’ (*Jung Wien*) was a literary circle and a cultural movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Among the group’s members were: Schnitzler, Bahr, von Hofmannsthal, Salten, Dörmann, von Adrian, and many others. Cf. Istvan Varkonyi, “Jung Wien,” in *Encyclopedia of German Literature*, ed. Matthias Konzett (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publisher, 2000): 550–551.

13 Mauthner, *Beiträge*; idem, *Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Neue Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 2nd edition, vol. 3, (Leipzig: Meiner, 1923); idem, *Der Atheismus und seine Geschichte im Abendlande*, vol. 4, (Stuttgart and Berlin: DVA, 1924).

14 Cf. Fritz Mauthner, *Erinnerungen von Fritz Mauthner* (Frankfurt am Main: Fisher, 1969): 32–33. From this point of view, it’s worth comparing Mauthner and Kafka, who called his own education ‘sawdust’. Cf. Ben-Zvi, “Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language,” 184; Luisa Bertolini, *La maledizione della parola di Fritz Mauthner* (Palermo: Supplementa, Aestetica, 2008): 7.

philosophy is a critique of language (though not in Mauthner's sense).¹⁵ Nevertheless, nowadays, the affinity between both philosophers is undeniable; Wittgenstein took several ideas from Mauthner and utilised his metaphors—for instance the ideas that language is a game, a city, and a ladder are all to be found in Mauthner.

We have to wait until 1958 for the first critical and serious study of Mauthner's philosophy, written by Gershon Weiler (1926–1994), who also stresses the proximity with Wittgenstein and paved the way for other critical studies.¹⁶ After Weiler, Toulmin and Jani—Wittgenstein's followers—provided a rehabilitation of Mauthner's thought, stressing the affinity between the two thinkers; in the wake of their work, Schiewe defined the linguistic sceptic as the most important precursor of Wittgenstein's philosophy.¹⁷ However, in recent decades, we have seen a revival of interest in Mauthner's thought. Brilliant and comprehensive studies have been offered by Kühn, Bredeck, and Kurzreiter.¹⁸

Mauthner's critique of language is one of the most extreme linguistic scepticisms in the history of philosophy. The complexity of his position is deeply original and he anticipates the linguistic turn by arguing that philosophy of language sheds critical light on all philosophical questions and by admitting that the critical understanding of ordinary discourse is an important philosophical task. He connects epistemology with the critique of language; in fact, the correspondence between the perceived object and the perceptual representation relates—according to Mauthner—to inappropriate linguistic representations of the world. Because of its syntactic and semantic structure, language gives an improper experience of reality and it's not by chance that the work of Mauthner culminates with a mystical apology of silence in accordance with his godless mysticism ('gotlose Mystik') that transcends the limits of language and which he links to Spinoza, Meister Eckhart, and the Upanishad tradition.¹⁹

However, silence as the extreme step of linguistic scepticism constitutes a *topos* in the history of philosophy since Cratylus,²⁰ due to the paradoxical challenge of a

15 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. David F. Pears and Brian F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961): 4.0031.

16 Gershon Weiler, "On Fritz Mauthner's Critique of Language," *Mind* 67 (1958): 80–87; idem, *Mauthner's Critique of Language*, 298–306. The first study on Mauthner's philosophy was written by Max Krieg in 1924, consisting only of a sum of quotations with no critical approach. Cf. Max Krieg, *Fritz Mauthners Kritik der Sprache: Eine Revolution der Philosophie* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1914).

17 Allan Janik and Stephen E. Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon, 1973); Schiewe, *Die Macht der Sprache*, 176–196.

18 Joachim Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik: Fritz Mauthners Leben und Werk* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1975); Elizabeth Bredeck, *Metaphors of Knowledge. Language and Thought in Mauthner's Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992); eadem, "Crumbling Foundations: Fritz Mauthner and Philosophy after Philosophy," *MAL* 23 (1990): 41–53; Kurzreiter, *Sprachkritik als Ideologiekritik*. See also Gerald Hartung, ed., *An den Grenzen der Sprachkritik: Fritz Mauthners Beiträge zur Sprache- und Kulturtheorie* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2003).

19 Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 83.

20 Cf. William Marias Malisoff, "Cratylus or an Essay on Silence (Not Illustrated)," *Philosophy of Science* 11.1 (1944): 3–8.

critique of language by means of language. Consequently, instead of coping with the grammatical limits of our knowledge, Mauthner decided to spend the last years of his life isolated in a glass-house ('Gläserhäusle') on Lake Constance. Thence, at the end of his critique, there is an autobiographical and theoretical mysticism, which stems from a deep awareness and brings a single human being in connection with the word, far away from any form of linguistic articulation.²¹

The genesis of his 'Contribution' was tormented and lasted twenty-seven years; in fact, in 1873 he started to work on the first draft, then he began to write again, during the night, in 1891. But the incentive to finish his writing came from his friendship with Gustav Landauer (1870–1919), who actively participated in the composition.²² The first volume is an analysis of the essence of language and the issue of psychology; the second is a confrontation with the contemporary linguistic sciences, in particular with the Neogrammatic School, and their main topics—for instance meaning, metaphors, the origin of language, writing and oral delivery, animal and human language. The third volume provides an in-depth examination of grammar and logic.

Mauthner starts his work by quoting the first sentence of the Gospel of John: 'In the beginning was the word.'²³ But he rejects this assertion by showing that the word is an enemy and that language is a prison, from which men should liberate themselves. His work begins by stating the impossibility of a general definition of language beyond singular speech-acts.²⁴ Through a combination of linguistic and epistemological doubts, the three volumes of 'Contributions toward a Critique of Language' are an example of an impeccable linguistic scepticism which is, at the same time, a radical attack on Western metaphysics. Mauthner systematically denies the possibility of knowledge because it is mediated by language, which can refer to

21 Cf. Fritz Mauthner, *Wörterbuch*, I, 384: 'Seit zehn Jahren lehre ich: das Ichgefühl ist eine Täuschung, die Einheit des Individuums ist eine Täuschung. Wenn ich nicht Ich bin, trotzdem aber bin, dann darf ich wohl auch von allen andern Wesen glauben; sie sind nur scheinbar Individuen, sie unterscheiden sich nicht von mir, ich bin Eins mit ihnen, sie und ich binnen Eins. Sind das bloß philosophische Wortfolgen? Spiele der Sprache? Nein. Was ich erleben kann, ist nicht mehr bloß Sprache. Was ich erleben kann, das ist wirklich. Und ich kann es erleben für kurze Stunden, daß ich nichts mehr weiß vom *principium individuationis*, daß der Unterscheid aufhört zwischen der Welt und mir.'

22 Cf. Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik*, 201: 'Die Mitarbeit Landauers an der *Kritik der Sprache* ist für das Jahr 1898 bezeugt, aber es ist anzunehmen, daß Mauthner in Gesprächen mit dem leicht begeisterten und begeisternden Anarchisten die eigenen Gedanken einer geistigen Revolution schärfer faßte und mutiger vorantrieb.'

23 Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 1.

24 Cf. *ibidem*, I, 4: 'Die Sprache in diesem Sinne etwas ganz anders bedeutet als eine Sprache oder die Sprachen [...]. Die einzelnen Sprachen sind also die außerordentlich komplizierten Lautgruppen, durch welche sich Menschengruppe miteinander verständigen. Was aber ist die Sprache, mit der ich es zu tun habe? Was ist das Wesen der Sprache? In welcher Beziehung steht die Sprache zu den Sprachen. Die einfachste Antwort wäre: die Sprache gibt es nicht; das Wort ist ein so blasses Abstraktum, daß ihm kaum mehr etwas Wirkliches entspricht.'

reality only metaphorically, in his view. Accordingly, since language is a collection of abstractions, the entire history of philosophy is nothing but a sum of meaningless problems and linguistic illusions.

Mauthner's 'Contributions' have a helpful task, because they were written in an attempt to disclose the tricks and lies of language in order to demonstrate that it is useless as a means for the perception of reality. He turns philosophy into a permanent critique of language, which is seen in terms of its deceptions but also in terms of its inevitability. Hence, one can say that the most radical form of scepticism, which concerns language, is at the same time the most paradoxical. Surely, Mauthner is aware of the problems involved in writing a critique of language in a rigid language²⁵ and his battle against it is also undeniable in his style; he puts linguistic scepticism into practice by breaking the rules of grammar in order to invoke doubts in his narrative thread. Starting from these premises, Mauthner rethinks the task of philosophy as a disclosure of the deceptive use of language, by showing its artificiality and its arbitrary commonality of meanings. Therefore, linguistic scepticism should have the power to liberate us from superstitions and from the tyranny of words; in fact, the abstractive mechanism of language has a tendency to reify words, to remove them from their common usage. This reification constitutes words as both fetishes and superstitions, namely the naïve belief that nouns always correspond to concrete objects, or better that they are a mirror of the reality. By breaking with this paradigm, which stems from Ancient Greek philosophy and is based on the isomorphism between logic, language and reality, Mauthner attacks the possibility of knowledge and offers an extreme form of linguistic scepticism that leads to the achievement of a mystical silence.

Impossible Knowledge: Mauthner's Epistemology

The impossibility of knowledge is due to an epistemological process that combines the selectivity of the accidental senses, the uninterrupted change that constitutes the process of reality, and the metaphorical nature of language. Mauthner's epistemology has two main aspects: on the one hand, it is a radicalisation of empiricist positions, which leads to the abolishment of the difference between thoughts and sensation, to the coincidence of speaking and thinking, and to the disappearance of intellect;²⁶ on the other hand, the ontological basis is the idea of reality as an on-going flux that conveys Mach's conception.

²⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, I, 2: 'In dieser Einsicht liegt der Verzicht auf die Selbsttäuschung, ein Buch zu schreiben gegen die Sprache in einer starren Sprache.'

²⁶ Cf. Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique*, 61: 'The significance of this doctrine can best be appreciated in the context of the history of empiricism. All major empirical philosophers have distinguished between sensations, impression etc. and a mental capacity such a reflection, understanding, etc. It was assumed that the ordering capacities of the mind are not themselves results or effects of the sensations or im-

At the core of Mauthner's epistemology is the assumption that there is an irreconcilable gap between sense-experience as achieved by accidental senses ('Zufallssinne'), which are five only by chance, because they are a fortuitous result of humankind's evolution²⁷—and language as a collection of memory-indices, which offer only an approximation of experience. However, even if language deletes the uniqueness of human experience by transforming it into a series of tautologies, and even if it can refer to reality only metaphorically, it is the only possible articulation of knowledge.

In Mauthner's view, there are two different processes: the first is extra-linguistic and is made up of sensations, perceptions, and intuitions; the second concerns representations of sense-experience mediated by language. Mauthner distinguishes between accidental sense's experience, a pre-linguistic phenomenon that allows the inner process to occur, and thought that is always articulated in words.²⁸ But sense-knowledge has no value at all, because every time that we refer to it, we use words that precede us and fail in their communicative task. Hence, there is no difference between thinking and speaking, because the articulation of our on-going inner processes always happens in an historical language.

The main task of our five senses is to allow human orientation in the world,²⁹ rather than the pretension of giving us exhaustive knowledge, they are closer to a

pressions. Now what Mauthner is doing is to abolish the distinction between sensations and thought, between what comes to us through our senses and the mental operations we perform on the material thus given. In other words, just as sense-organs are part of the natural history of man, so are his thinking capacities too.' However, according to Weiler, the empiricist theory is the weak point of Mauthner's scepticism, cf. *ibidem*, 4: 'His radical empiricism was no logical empiricism. Thus, his account of logic, which follows in broad outlines the doctrine of Hume, is of special interest and also of special difficulty. It is here that the central tension of Mauthner's thought is most apparent. Critique of language, which suggests that even empirical statements are but tautologies (since they only repeat what is already known), is not easily compatible with an empiricism which holds, in any of its versions, that facts are describable independently of each other. This tension is essentially one between two conflicting tendencies built into language, between the demand that statements should be connectable coherently and the demand that facts should be statable independently of each other.'

²⁷ For instance, according to Mauthner, we don't have any sense of radioactivity. Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 252.

²⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, I, 221: 'Fast alle Empfindungen und sehr viele Wahrnehmungen haben wir ohne Hilfe der Sprache; und da Empfindungen und Wahrnehmungen uns leicht zu verständigem Handeln veranlassen, was ungenau auch auf Denken zurückgeführt werden kann, so gibt es da so etwas wie Denken ohne Sprechen. Verstehen wir jedoch unter Denken nur diejenigen Prozesse in unserm Gehirn, bei denen sich Empfindungen oder Wahrnehmungen mit Vorstellungen assoziieren oder Vorstellungen untereinander, so kann von einem Denken ohne Sprechen nicht die Rede sein.'

²⁹ Mauthner connects his epistemology with Plato's myth of the cave; cf. Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique*, 59–60: 'Mauthner's own inspiration came from Plato's Cave in the *Republic*. Those who sit in the cave with their backs to the entrance can see only the shadows of those who accidentally pass the entrance of the cave. Moreover, the light available, the shape and the size of the opening are also accidental. The human mind is likened by Mauthner to Plato's chained observers and just as the latter can perceive only a small fraction of what goes on outside the cave, so the human mind can register only a fraction of what there is.'

survival instinct and constitute a step in human evolution.³⁰ Instead of a Kantian purity, human reason is impure because it is already contaminated by language and—like our senses—is a random product. In fact, Mauthner defines the human senses as accidental (*‘Zufallssinne’*), drawing attention to the word ‘accidental’,³¹ used to connect contingency with selectivity, which in his perspective is nothing but a synonym of a limited view. If the senses are accidental, human knowledge is free from any form of teleology that, according to Mauthner, is just an incorrect assumption suggested by the reifying power of language.

Mauthner connected the assumptions of empiricism with linguistic theory and—by amending the empiricist slogan—he says that nothing is in our language that wasn’t previously in our senses;³² but if the senses are able to grasp reality, language, which stems from their internalisation, is the result of an abstraction.³³ However, even if language deletes the uniqueness of human experience in a series of tautologies, it is a collection of memory-indices, which preserve our misunderstandings by using an inherited catalogue of words that offer only an approximation of the momentary and individual sense-experience. This is why ordinary language is mistaken and misleading and *the* truth is nothing but an abstract substantive.³⁴ The unreliability of language is also due to the polysemy of every single word that is used by each person in a peculiar way without

30 Evolution and development play a central role for memory and sense, thence for our image of the world. But according to Mauthner, Darwin had not properly considered the function of tradition and of heritage; despite its revolutionary value in terms of liberation from a theological idea of evolution, Darwin’s theory is only a genial hypothesis, used in an improper way by his followers, who turned his theory into a mythological pseudo-religion. Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, III, 579: ‘Die Lehre Darwins, daß die Zweckmäßigkeit der Organismen ohne jede göttliche Allweisheit durch Anpassung und Vererbung zu erklären sei, diese Lehre ist uns nichts mehr als eine genial Hypothese. Die unvorsichtigen Darwinianer [...] mussten wieder Begriffsromantik treiben. Es ist aber ein undankbares Geschäft, ihre immerhin kühnen Luftschlösser zu bekämpfen, wenn man es erleben muß, daß die von Darwin hinausgeworfene Teleologie in langsamer Arbeit wieder hineingeschmuggelt wird, wie wir es bei den letzten Kongressen der Naturforscher erleben konnten. Dogmatismus hüben und drüben, bei den Neovitalisten wie bei den Monisten.’

31 The word ‘Zufall’ is the German translation of *accident*, which plays an important role in the history of philosophy, especially in the Aristotelian tradition. Cf. Krieg, *Fritz Mauthners Kritik der Sprache*, 66: ‘Der Zufallsbegriff ist also etymologisch—aus dem Akzidenzbegriff hervorgegangen, aus dem Gegensatz zum Wesentlichen. Zufällig ist das Unwesentliche, [...] aber im Laufe der Zeit [...] gewann der Zufallsbegriff die Bedeutung eines Gegensatzes zum Notwendigkeit.’

32 In the history of Western philosophy there is a well known opposition between empiricism and rationalism. If the former affirms that *nihil est in intellect quod prius non fuerit in sensu*, the latter corrects this sentence by adding *nisi intellectus ipse*.

33 The critique of abstraction, with regard to an individualisation of language, is sustained in a quotation from Spinoza’s *Tractatus*. Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 5: ‘Natura sana nationes, non creat sed individua.’

34 Cf. Mauthner, *Wörterbuch*, III, 384: ‘Was ist Wahrheit? *Un mot abstrait* jedenfalls, und zwar ein abstraktes Substantivum. Nun haben wir gelernt, daß schon in der Wirklichkeitswelt nur Eigenschaften existieren, nicht die Dinge außer und über ihren Eigenschaften, daß die Dinge, die Substantive, einzig und allein in ihren Eigenschaften existieren und nicht zum zweitenmal neben ihren Eigenschaften.’

any guarantee of semantic commonality. The individualisation of language in Mauthner's thought makes communication impossible by leading to a perspectival and relative conception of all linguistic activities.

The second notion on which Mauthner's epistemology is based is the conception of reality elaborated by Ernst Mach, whose lecture held in Prague in 1872 was very important for Mauthner because of the sceptical principles that were articulated as the theoretical foundations of Mach's physics.³⁵ Mach's most relevant writings are *Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen* (1886), *Erkenntnis und Irrtum* (1905), and *Prinzipien der Wärmelehre* (1896), where many pages are dedicated to the problem of language. Mach's critique of mechanism was based on the assertion that science should acknowledge phenomena without searching for abstractions beyond them, thus avoiding the risk of turning science into metaphysics. His theory of knowledge is a phenomenology based on complexes of elements that coincide with different images of the world. From a logical perspective, concepts are determined products but, from an intuitive point of view, they are only confused images. Instead of a defined notion, concepts are a useful mark for human orientation in the world. Mach disintegrates the object and the subject too: the former is the sum of different sensations and, at the same time, the 'I' is nothing more than a hypostatisation of one entity that must not be separated from sensations. His critique of abstractions also implicates language and the fetishisation of the word by denouncing the provisory fiction of the frame of reference.³⁶ But these premises don't lead him to a sceptical conclusion. On the contrary, he retains his trust in scientific research, even if it only concerns temporary knowledge.

Mauthner wanted to perform the same task for philosophy as Mach had done for physics, but in a different way: dealing with a sceptical and radical perspective that involved language. The main feature of Mauthner's critique of language is the unbridgeable gap between word and object. Moreover, in a revolutionary gesture, Mauthner turns not only the truth but the entire verbal world into a linguistic product. There are three different perspectives that allow us to have many different frames of reference; in this respect one can say that there is in Mauthner a linguistic,

35 Cf. Fritz Mauthner, *Erinnerungen* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1918): 210: 'In dem gleichen Jahr 1872 ließ mich Mach seinen Vortrag über *Die Erhaltung der Arbeit* lesen und ich erhielt, so wenig ich damals von mathematischer Mechanik verstand, einen Anstoß, der ohne mein Wissen durch Jahrzehnte fortgedauert haben muß. Denn als ich fast dreißig Jahre später diesen Vortrag las, ohne mich der ersten Lektüre zu erinnern, war ich über die sprachkritischen Ahnungen erstaunt und hatte plötzlich die entschiedene Vorstellung, alle diese schlagkräftigen Formulierungen schon einmal in mich aufgenommen zu haben. Machs erkenntnistheoretischer Positivismus—der die metaphysischen Worte nicht, wie Auguste Comte, haßt, sondern psychologisch beschreibt, also erklärt—hatte in meinem Unterbewußtsein nachgewirkt.'

36 Cf. Katherine Arens, *Functionalism and Fin de Siècle: Fritz Mauthner's Critique of Language* (New York/Berne/Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984). Arens shows the influence of Mach's work on Mauthner philosophy, by asserting a kind of functionalism, seen as the use of different theoretical models to explain by contingency a certain *phenomena*.

anti-idealistic, and anti-realistic perspectivism. Our images of the world are always mediated by language.³⁷

According to Mauthner, there are three grammatical categories that mediate three different points of view: the adjectival category concerns the immediate sense-apprehension of reality and the object's properties, perceived as different qualities; the nominal category gives ontological status to objects and experience, and—by combining the adjective with a hypostatisation—leads us to the mystic constitution of reality; the verbal category refers to scientific words and turns sensation into memory in a process of becoming, dealing with causes and effects. If reality is a flux in incessant change, adjectives and verbs are more adequate than substantive, which gives the illusion of permanency. The three grammatical categories are unable to express the truth or to grasp the world.³⁸

Words are Concepts, Concepts are Words: the Identity of Language and Thought

The belief that language is a cloth for thought is, according to Mauthner, a myth. As we have seen, Mauthner states that thinking is always an articulation of on-going inner processes in an historical language; hence it's impossible to distinguish thinking and speaking. The coincidence between them is always experienced in everyday speech; only if we introduce a theoretical order does the relation between them become problematic. The boundaries of language set the limits of thought: 'There isn't thinking without speaking, i.e., without words. There isn't thinking, there is only speaking. Thinking is speaking when judged for its cash-value.'³⁹ What Mauthner wants to deny is the abstract faculty of thinking, which is supposed to exist somewhere. This supposition comes from a trick of linguistic reification, which forces us to believe that each noun corresponds to a substance that exists.

Furthermore, both speaking and thinking are connected to the definite movements of the organs of speech and brain processes. The relevance of practice is stres-

37 Cf. Fritz Mauthner, *Drei Bilder der Welt: Ein sprachkritischer Versuch*, ed. Monty Jacobs (Erlangen: Verlag der philosophischen Akademie, 1925): 2: 'Wir haben von der Welt keine anderen Bilder als sprachliche; wir wissen von der Welt nichts, weder für uns selbst noch zur Mitteilung an andere, als was sich in irgend einer Menschengesprache sagen läßt.'

38 Cf. *ibidem*, 167: 'Keines der drei Bilder kann richtig sein, weil jedes mit dem Fluche seiner besonderen Bildsprache belastet ist; die Vereinigung wird wahrscheinlich nicht möglich sein, weil eine Vereinigung der drei Sprachen—bisher wenigstens—nicht anders möglich als als in einer unserer Gemeinsprachen, die eben zur Welterkenntnis noch ungeeigneter sind als die von mir im Geist erdachten Teilsprachen der drei aller möglichen Weltansichten.'

39 Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 176: 'Es gibt gar kein Denken, es gibt nur Sprechen. Denken ist das Sprechen auf seinen Ladenwert nur beurteilt.' In fact, there is no English translation of Mauthner's works. However, in his *Mauthner's Critique of Language*, Weiler translated several passages and this quotation is taken from his book.

sed in order to bring a critique to abstraction, which is why memory needs memory-marks and signs are in a broad sense linguistic deeds.⁴⁰ With a brilliant intuition that anticipates the discussion of performativity in the philosophical debate, Mauthner connects speech-acts ('Sprechakte') with thought-acts ('Denkakte').⁴¹ Word and concept are identical, because the former is nothing but the public articulation of the latter, which is primarily a psychological product that doesn't exist at all until we pronounce it. At the same time, the word is not an adequate expression of our inner processes because it is a transposition of them into an inherited historical grammar, syntax, and semantic.

There is a coincidence between speaking and thinking, but—as we have seen—there is a distinction between knowledge and thought.⁴² It seems that the process of knowledge-acquisition based on our senses is interrupted when our on-going inner perception is articulated in language. When one starts to think, that is, to speak, each form of knowledge is denied. Thinking is a construction created by articulating words and by exercising linguistic habits that are preserved by memories.⁴³ Furthermore, the preserving role of memory is also underlined with respect to oral and written language; if the former is the sum of thought and phonemes and a form of human memory, the latter is a composition of speech and graphemes and an artificial improvement of memory-indices. In fact, alphabetical characters have preserved the notions for centuries and, as Hegel had already claimed, they are an exercise in abstract thought as well.⁴⁴

40 Cf. *ibidem*, I, 226–227: 'Gibt es Denkakte ohne Sprachakte? [...] Fast alle Empfindungen und sehr viele Wahrnehmungen haben wir ohne Hilfe der Sprache; und die Empfindungen und Wahrnehmung uns leicht zu verständigen Handeln veranlassen, was ungenau auch auf Denken zurückgeführt werden kann, so gibt es da so etwas wie Denken ohne Sprechen. Verstehen wie jedoch unter Denken nur diejenigen Prozesse in unserem Gehirn, bei denen sich Empfindungen oder Wahrnehmungen mit Vorstellungen assoziieren oder Vorstellungen untereinander, so kann von einem Denken ohne Sprechen nie die Rede sein. Denn die Vorstellung ist ein Erinnerungsbild und unterscheidet sich etwa von der Erinnerung an eine einfache Empfindung gerade dadurch, daß sie ein Bild ist, ein Zeichen für die Beziehungen verschiedener Erinnerung. Wir kommen da ohne das Bild von Bildern oder Zeichen nicht aus. Gedächtnis ohne Gedächtniszeichen ist nicht möglich; und Zeichen sind im weitesten Sinne sprachliche Akte.'

41 One can say that Mauthner's was a precursor of Austin's theory of language. Cf. John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

42 Cf. Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique*, 16: 'The isolated acts of thought are real for the person in whom they take place but once we proceed from these particular occurrences to the notion of thinking in general or to a characterisation of acts of thought in a public language, we lose our grip on the occurrences itself. Thinking is but a construction and is different from individual acts of thought.'

43 It would be interesting to analyse the theoretical value of habits in sceptical studies from Ancient philosophy to the twentieth century.

44 Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 213–214: 'Die sichtbaren und darum dauernden Schriftzeichen lassen die Begriffe länger und ungestörten festhalten als die flüchtigen Lautzeichen. So hat die Schrift gegenüber der Sprache Vorteile und Nachteile, ist aber im Grunde die gleiche Geistestätigkeit;' referring to Hegel's analysis of language, cf. George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind, Being*

Memory plays a central role because it is nothing but language and vice versa; it is not separable from concepts, words, or experiences. Mauthner doesn't distinguish memory as a faculty from its effects and that's why there is only an illusory divergence between language, memory, ego, and conscience. Memory is essentially unreliable because it can only approximate past sensory experience. The approximation of our accidental senses and the ambiguity of words necessarily lead to metaphorical representations of the reality. Since the net of accidental senses is partially saved, memory reproduces a false perspectivism;⁴⁵ furthermore, it is an unreliable process because it is necessarily based on forgetfulness.⁴⁶ However, memory—thanks to its preservation of tradition and habits—has a social role that coincides with the common use of language.

Utopia of Communication: Language as the Rule of a Game

In a strategic move, Mauthner turns Humean habits of thought into the habits of language, which is inner process and social product too. The antinomy between the individual and the social aspects is only apparent. Mauthner takes linguistic conventionalism to the extreme by asserting that language is only an inherited catalogue and a sharing of traditional metaphors that is far removed from knowledge. In fact, the collection of words is nothing but a sharing of linguistic habits ('Sprachgewohnheiten')⁴⁷ which are supposed to be similar for everyone. This commonality attests to the nonexistence of private language and, furthermore, such sharing is based on a supposed family-resemblance of meaning, which is the weak foundation for human communication. Language is a random and conventional construct that contains within its structure the totality of the speaker's experience; it doesn't have any epistemological values and it can't communicate any provisory form of truth, because there are no guarantees of an objective knowledge of the word or of inner experience. The difficulty of capturing the inner

Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971): § 459.

45 Kurzreiter, *Sprachkritik als Ideologiekritik*, 161: 'Auch die Leistung des Gedächtnisses beruht auf einer Fälschung, d. h. sie gründet in einem speziellen Perspektivenzusammenhang. Nicht alles, was durch das Netz der Zufallssinne geht, wird im Gedächtnis gespeichert, denn es ist kein Reservoir zahlloser, regelloser Eindrücke; es registriert, vergleicht und interpretiert, ist also beständig in Bewegung.'

46 Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 531: 'Aber das Gedächtnis ist auch wesentlich untreu. Das Gedächtnis wäre unerträglich, wenn wir nicht vergessen könnten. Und die Worte oder Begriffe, die erst durch das falsche Gedächtnis entstanden sind, wären für den Alltagsgebrauch ungeeignet ohne die Eigenschaft des Gedächtnisses: untreu zu sein. Es trifft sich nur gut, daß alle diese (menschliche gesprochen) Fehler des Gedächtnisses im Interesse des menschlichen Organismus liegen. Wir könnten weder leben noch denken, wenn wir nicht vergessen könnten.' Notice that *Funes the Memorious* of Borges was deeply influenced by these words of Mauthner, cf. Jorge Luis Borges, *Funes the Memorious*, in idem, *Labyrinths*, trans. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Direction, 1964): 59–66.

47 Mauthner, *Beiträge*, II, 117.

self comes from the absence of a self-observational organ and, since the ego has no way of articulating itself, it cannot be known.

Language as an inner product is connected to the idea of psychology.⁴⁸ Mauthner's position in respect to this discipline is twofold:⁴⁹ on the one hand, he defines psychology as a pseudo-discipline of mental acts, created by a kind of duplication of the external world and by an unfair application of the same criteria to a supposed interior state. On the other hand, this connection of inner and external world is the same movement of language, and, for this reason, it is hard to neglect it. It is clear that, although there is no method for studying the inner world, we are aware of the fact that there are inner goings-on, or better, 'experiences' ('Erlebnisse'), which cannot be described.

Since a private language cannot exist, language is only a shared means of communication, even if true communication between people is impossible. In fact, as we have seen, it is impossible to say that the meaning and the reference of a word are the same for everybody, since words precede us and do not correspond to our sense experience. Hence, communication is a utopia and the commonality of meaning, which exists only in its shared use, is as arbitrary as the 'rule of a game' ('Spielregel'), which acquires value only if it shared by two or more players;⁵⁰ unlike a prescription, a rule here is something that deals with habits and regularity concerning a use.⁵¹ In-between people ('zwischen den Menschen'), this is the *milieu* of language

⁴⁸ The connection between language and psychology is first brought to light by Aristotle, but it acquired more relevance thanks to Mendelssohn during the Enlightenment in Germany. According to Jewish philosophers, psychology is the human faculty for the production of signs. Cf. Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe*, 27 vols. (Stuttgart: Frommann Holzboog, 1971 ff.).

⁴⁹ On Mauthner's idea of psychology, cf. Elisabeth Leinfellner, "Fritz Mauthner," in *Sprachphilosophie, Philosophy of Language, La philosophie du langage*, eds. Marcelo Dascal, Dietfried Gerhardus, Kuno Lorenz, and George Meggle (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1992): 495–509, 496: 'Einerseits lehnt Mauthner aus empirischen bzw. empiristischen Gründen die traditionelle Form der Psychologie ab: die Introspektion sei unwissenschaftlich und unsere sensualistische, nach außen gerichtete Sprache könne auf unser Innenleben nur völlig uneigentlich, d. h. poetisch angewendet werden. In der Psychologie ist demnach, wie in der Philosophie, für Mauthner die Sprache zugleich Objekt und Mittel der Analyse. Andererseits aber konnte Mauthner aus empirischen und erkenntnistheoretischen Gründen dem Psychologismus nicht ablehnen. [...] Mauthner war davon überzeugt dass unsere psychologischen Funktionen unsere Auffassung der Welt bestimmen, und dass die Sprache mit diesem psychologischen Funktionen, dem Denken (als Vernunft) mehr oder minder identisch ist: die Logik ist ein Teil der Psychologie.'

⁵⁰ Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 25: 'Die Sprache ist nur ein Schein wert wie eine Spielregel, die auch umso zwingender wird, je mehr Mitspieler sich ihr unterwerfen, die aber die Wirklichkeitswelt weder ändern noch begreifen will.' However, the notion of *Spielregel* is not itself free of theoretical misunderstandings; cf. Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique*, 109–111.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibidem*, 114: 'There is no prescriptive rule we could appeal to, such that we could infer from it in advance a decision for all possible cases of doubt. We can only consider what the accepted usage of the word is and what the reasons for this usage are. And these reasons, again, cannot be stated by referring to a prescriptive rule but rather they must be put in empirical terms and mention similarities

that works as an exchange, by leading to an arbitrary commonality of meaning, like a rule of a game, without grasping the real world. But in its practical purposes, in its everyday use, far away from any kind of abstraction, language can also be a useful tool because it is a sign.⁵²

To consistently conceive of only one speaker is impossible. Linked to this topic is the affinity between language and socialism, discovered by Mauthner and later developed by Gustav Landauer.⁵³ In fact, in his *Critique*, Mauthner argues that only field for the realisation of communism is language, where there is no privacy at all and common property ('*Gemeineigentum*') is a set of shared *Weltanschauung*.⁵⁴ The semantic and syntactic rules are necessary and paradoxically anarchic at the same time, because they don't have a metaphysical foundation or an ontological premise.⁵⁵

Mauthner's conception of the social role of language is connected to the notion of use. Since language cannot correspond to reality, it is a *Spielregel* that acquires validity only when it is submitted to by more than one speaker. If meaning is nothing but use, Mauthner rejects every kind of reference theories.⁵⁶ By seriously doubting the possibility of absolute communication, he throws off the teleology of signs and this revolutionary suspension of the teleology is nothing but an *epoché* of meaning that is the dark side of Mauthner's philosophy of language.

and dissimilarities obtaining between objects which are being considered together for the purposes of a particular naming-decision.'

52 Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 48: 'Die Sprache ist also als Sprache [...] etwas Reales. Ist so real wie eine Zeichnung, wie ein Zeichen. Als Zeichen, als hörbare Signale, müssen wir uns die Anfänge vorstellen.'

53 It's worth drawing attention to Mauthner's linguistic socialism: he uses the Darwinian concept of progress in a messianic sense. Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, III, 591: 'Wir denken nämlich alle, wenn wir Entwicklung oder Evolution sagen, an ein Fortschreiten von niedrigeren, schlechteren Formen zu höheren, besseren Formen. Wenn der sozialistische Volksredner es als Ziel der Entwicklung hinstellt, daß der Individualismus der Vergangenheit einem Sozialismus der Zukunft Platz machen werde, so schwebt ihm und uns die Zukunft als eine höhere, bessere Gestaltung vor.' The political consequences of Mauthner's scepticism have been highlighted by Landauer. According to van den Berg, Mauthner was persuaded that a political revolution had to begin with a revolution of language. Cf. Hubert van den Berg, *Avantgarde und Anarchismus. Dada in Zürich und Berlin* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1999), 257; Walter Fähnders, "Sprachkritik und Wortkunst, Mystik und Aktion bei Gustav Landauer," in *Anarchismus und Utopie in der Literatur um 1900. Deutschland, Flandern und die Niederlande*, eds. Jaap Grave, Peter Sprengel and Hans Vandervoorde (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 139–149.

54 Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 27: 'So ist sie (die Sprache) dafür bis heute die einzige Einrichtung der Gesellschaft, die wirklich schon auf sozialistischer Grundlage beruht.'

55 Cf. *ibidem*, I, 249: 'Die Wirklichkeit in der Sprache, wie in aller Natur, ist gesetzlos, trotzdem sie notwendig ist.'

56 Cf. Leinfellner, "Fritz Mauthner," 499: 'Die Referenztheorie der Bedeutung hat Mauthner jedenfalls abgelehnt: wir geben Worte aus wie Banknoten und fragen nicht ob dem Wert der Note im Schatz etwas ein empirisches Referenzobjekt entspricht.'

The Mendacious Trope: Semantic, Anthropoetic, and Metalinguistic Metaphors

Mauthner's dismissal of the doctrine of meaning, seen as the purpose of communication, marks a divide in the history of philosophy of language. It's worth analysing how the semantic *epoché* is connected to the identification of word and metaphor that plays a pivotal role in Mauthner's linguistic scepticism. The peculiarity of Mauthner's conception consists in the fact that this trope is not only a rhetorical figure, but reveals the linguistic mode of operation; or better, language is a sum of metaphors: it can only refer to the world metaphorically, because words are "pictures of pictures of pictures."⁵⁷ Not only poetry or novels, which have an aesthetic value,⁵⁸ but all the supposed truths and sciences are a collection of metaphors, which contain an anthropomorphic horizon.⁵⁹ Through his conception of metaphor, Mauthner connected truth and grammar by drawing attention to the linkage—which gained huge popularity in the second half of twentieth century—between theology and linguistic research, power and language. According to him, the belief in language—and the belief in God as well—hides an anthropomorphic view. This topic was extremely important to Mauthner, who spoke of 'logocracy' in his 'Dictionary'.⁶⁰ Even if words are unable to describe and express reality, they are persuasive because they exercise a social and political power.⁶¹ If substantives seduce us into admitting an entity or a sub-

57 It's worth noting that the same expression can be found in Landauer's writing, speaking of the community as 'bond of bonds of bonds;' cf. Gustav Landauer, *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* [1911], 2nd edition (Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1919): 132: 'Gesellschaft ist eine Gesellschaft von Gesellschaften von Gesellschaften; ein Bund von Bündnen von Bündnen.'

58 However, according to Mauthner, language can't be an artistic product, because it's not the creation of something but can only be a means for poetry. Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 26: 'Ein Kunstwerk kann die Sprache schon darum nicht sein, weil sie nicht die Schöpfung eines Einzigen ist.' Nevertheless, poetic language, as articulated in Mauthner's work, is at the root of the development of language and science, in accordance with the tradition that starts with Vico.

59 Cf. *ibidem*, I, 367. According to Mauthner, metaphors are vocal images of images and his position is very similar to Nietzsche's in *Wahrheit und Lüge*, where he defines the truth as 'a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms [...], a sum of human relationship.' Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954): 42–46, 42. However, Mauthner stresses the differences, because, from his point of view, Nietzsche's critique of language was not particularly radical, in fact it dealt only with moral and ethical factors, but not with knowledge as such.

60 Mauthner, *Wörterbuch*, II, 305.

61 Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 42: 'Weil die Sprache zwischen den Menschen eine soziale Macht ist, darum übt sie eine Macht aus auch über die Gedanken des einzelnen. Was in uns denkt, das ist die Sprache; was in uns dichtet, das ist die Sprache.' With respect to power and language, Mauthner follows Stirner's ideas. In the study entitled *Die Sprache*, he stresses the relevance of anarchism in the matter of language: 'Die Macht der Sprache über die Sitte, über die gemeinsten Gewohnheiten menschlichen Handels hat vorher niemand so zornig erkannt wie Max Stirner in seinem feuerbrünstigen Feuerwerk *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. Stirner sagt [...] ,die Sprache und das Wort tyrannisieren uns am meist ärgsten, weil sie ein ganzes Heer von fixen Ideen gegen Uns aufführt';' cf. Fritz Mauthner, *Die Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten

stance, language is a weapon or a whip and, since language is a collection of illusions, it constitutes a useful tool for political systems.⁶²

Certainly, Mauthner uses this rhetorical trope in a sceptical way even if his theorisation stems from a constant dialogue with the philosophical tradition. Discussion of rhetoric was the trend of the moment, taking into consideration the works of Biese, Bruchmann, and Gerber, whose *Die Sprache als Kunst* was the theoretical foundation of Nietzsche's theory of language.⁶³ Mauthner is aware of previous debate on metaphors in the history of philosophy, but—in spite of this serious confrontation with the most important doctrines—his conception is peculiar: he elaborates an original theory of metaphor by underlining its semantic role, anthropo-poietic value and meta-linguistic function.

In order to shed light on the semantic role of metaphor, Mauthner identifies a shift of meaning in the linguistic mechanism and—since there is no difference between word and thought—with the thinking process too. We are able to draw analogical connections because we have the capacity to note similarities and to connect what is unlike; this ability is nothing other than faculty to create metaphors that, according to Aristotle, is also the peculiarity of philosophising. Hence, if according to the Greek philosopher this was a step towards knowledge, in Mauthner's view this net of similarities is at the root of linguistic misunderstandings. By breaking with the Aristotelian tradition whereby metaphors have a cognitive function,⁶⁴ analogic is a logical error that infers from similar properties to unknown similar properties.⁶⁵

The etymological meaning of transmission ('Übertragung') is used by Mauthner as a working principle of language; it is the nourishment of words and it is also the heart of his semantic conception that is always ambiguous. Far from being univocal, the meaning of the word is connected to a plurality of representations, which is the reason for linguistic polysemy and the consequent misunderstanding. Furthermore,

& Loening, 1906), 83. However, Mauthner criticised the solipsism in Stirner's thought. Cf. Kurzreiter, *Sprachkritik als Ideologiekritik*, 106: 'Mauthner sieht in Stirners Auffassung des Selbst einen weiteren Markstein der Ideologie. Stirner hat niemals das endliche Ich sprachkritisch hinterfragt, sondern es vielmehr zum alleinigen Ausgangspunkt seiner Philosophie erhoben. Mauthner irrt sich zwar grundlegend, wenn er Stirners Intentionen als Solipsismus auslegt.'

⁶² Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 86: 'Die Sprache ist die Peitsche, mit der die Menschen sich gegenseitig zur Arbeit peitschen. Jeder ist Fronvogt und jeder Fronknecht;' idem, *Die Sprache*, 89: 'Die Volkssprache als wirkende Macht ist demokratisch. Die abstrakte Volkssprache als Objekt der Wissenschaft sowohl wie als Wertobjekt des Gefühls ist sozial.'

⁶³ Cf. Alfred Biese, *Die Philosophie des Metaphorischen* (Hamburg and Leipzig: Leopold Voss, 1893); Kurt Bruchmann, *Psychologische Studien zur Sprachgeschichte* (Leipzig: W. Friedrich, 1888), Gustav Gerber, *Die Sprache als Kunst*, 2nd edition (Berlin: Gaertners, 1871).

⁶⁴ For instance, Mauthner stresses the ambiguous Aristotelian use of metaphor, seen as a synonym of trope and of translation in general and as metaphor itself. On the gnoseological value of metaphor in Aristotle, cf. Umberto Eco, "Aspetti conoscitivi della metafora in Aristotele," *Doctor Virtualis* 3 (2008): 5–7; Samuel R. Levin, "Aristotle's Theory of Metaphor," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 15.1 (1982): 24–46.

⁶⁵ Cf. Mauthner, *Wörterbuch*, I, 145.

the meaning is exposed to an on-going change, a kind of semantic *Heracitism*,⁶⁶ which is the basis of the same metaphorical process.

However, metaphor is not only a transmission, it is also, and even more so, a translation from the unspeakable to the speakable that is the basis of all grammar and syntactical rules according to him. The institution of meaning is an on-going metaphorical process and a transposition through analogies, which is the constitutive mechanism of language. In fact, metaphors are the primary sources—as Vico first noted—of the linguistic growth process: “each word contains the infinite development from a metaphor to another metaphor.”⁶⁷

Mauthner also confronts the gradual loss of sensible figures in the historical development of language. The emergence of a complex vocabulary stands at a progressive distance from sensibilities and a process of abstraction;⁶⁸ each word stores its own metaphors. The correspondence between name and reality is always ambiguous and metaphors hide in the world in some way. However, the metaphorical shift didn’t only work in an immemorial past, it consists in an on-going translation from an impression to a word already defined. This aspect deals with the question of the heterogeneity of languages, which doesn’t concern different tongues, but rather the same one: “there are no two men who speak the same tongue.”⁶⁹ Metaphors cope with

66 Mauthner utilised the famous image of the river, adapting it to language; cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 7: ‘Man kann nicht zweimal in denselben Fluß hinabsteigen gilt auch für die Sprache.’ See Ludger Lütkehaus, ‘Im Anfang war das Wort, und Gott war ein Wort. Sprachkritik bei Fritz Mauthner und Goethe,’ in Fritz Mauthner—*Sprache, Literatur, Kritik: Festakte und Symposion zu seinem 150. Geburtstag*, eds. Helmut Henne and Christine Kaiser (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010): 13–32, 27: ‘Kernüberzeugung von Mauthners Sprachkritischen Heraklitismus: die Sprache ist prinzipiell nur dem Sein gewachsen, nicht dem Werden, dem Geschehen, dem Prozess.’

67 Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 115: ‘Jedes einzelne Wort trägt in sich eine endlose Entwicklung von Metapher zu Metapher;’ *ibidem*, I, 113: ‘Die Sprache ist durch Metaphern entstanden und durch Metaphern wächst, wenn dichterische Phantasie die Worte immer wieder ergänzen und bleiben muß.’ The first philosopher to stress this conception was Vico, who systematically connected the origin of human language and the conception of an archaic poetry with metaphors. Cf. Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, trans. Dave Marsch (New York: Penguin, 2001); Donatella Di Cesare, “Sul concetto di metafora in G.B. Vico,” *Bollettino del centro di studi vichiani* XVI (1986): 325–334; eadem, “De tropis: Funktion und Relevanz der Tropen in Vicos Sprachphilosophie,” *Kodikas Kode* 11 (1988): 7–22.

68 Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 124: ‘Die Metapher in der Sprachentwicklung wird mechanisiert dadurch, daß die Vergleichung aus dem Bewusstsein schwindet und das Wort eben eine neue Bedeutung zu gewinnen scheint. In der Poesie, wo das Bildliche aus dem Bewusstsein nicht schwinden kann, ist eine solche Mechanisierung immer eine Abgeschmacktheit.’ Another point of similarity between Vico and Mauthner is the relevance of wit (‘Witz’) which is the translation of Vico’s notion of *ingenium*, so important for the activity of comparison. Cf. Libera Pisano, “Nastri d’eloquenza. Sulla retorica di Vico,” *Filosofia italiana* 1 (2014): 1–16.

69 Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 56: ‘Es gibt nicht zwei Menschen, die die gleiche Sprache reden. [...] Kein Mensch kennt den anderen. Geschwister, Eltern und Kinder kennen einander nicht. Ein Hauptmittel des Nichtverstehens ist die Sprache. Wir wissen voneinander bei den einfachsten Begriffen nicht, ob wir bei einem gleichen Worte die gleiche Vorstellung haben. Wenn ich grün sage, meint der Hörer vielleicht blaugrün oder gelbgrün oder gar rot.’

the radical difference that traverses language itself, and the issue of the diversity is contained in every single utterance.⁷⁰

Speaking deals with an on-going translation from one vocal picture to another, from a lie to a misunderstanding.⁷¹ It always contains a failure; the word misses the reality.⁷² However, metaphors have the same anthropo-poietic function and they forge the representations and creations of the human sphere.⁷³ In the history of humankind, language worked as the only means of ordering experience according to human beings' interests. This is also the function of concepts, which stem from a process of abstractions through metaphors too.⁷⁴ But the rhetorical origin is at the root of the mistrusting of every form of truth.

70 Mauthner deals with the diversity of historical languages by arguing that when we speak another language we realise that the individual language is also an abstraction; cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 196: 'Dann ist Denken und Sprechen nur beim Franzosen identisch. Bei mir freilich nicht; aber nur darum nicht, weil ich gar nicht meine Sprache rede, sondern bloß mühsam zu meiner Sprache oder meinem Denken fremde Zeichen gebrauche. Ich rade-breche französisch und denke deutsch. Durch große Übung oder durch längeren Aufenthalt in Frankreich bringe ich es aber langsam so weit, französisch zu denken, trotzdem Deutsch meine Muttersprache ist.'

71 By asserting that Mauthner follows Hamann, who brings together thinking, speaking, and translating; but Mauthner rejects Humboldt's idea of a spirit commonality, which is the basis of human understanding. In the wake of Mauthner's critique of Humboldt's inner form, one can say that Mauthner would also criticise the generative grammar of Chomsky for the same naïve conception of an interior that is supposed to exist. According to Mauthner, Chomsky's idea would be a kind of dogmatic philosophy that would not only be poles apart from a philosophy of language, but also incompatible with an anarchic political attitude. There is, in fact, a deep connection between the theory of language and anarchy, as one can see in the relationship between Mauthner and Landauer, which constitutes my research project at the Maimonides Centre.

72 Cf. Mittermüller, *Sprachsepsis und Poetologie*, 25: 'Sprechen ist für Mauthner, ganz ähnlich wie für Nietzsche, immer schon uneigentliches Sprechen, Resultat einer unendlichen Übertragungsbewegung von Metapher zu Metapher.'

73 Cf. Jörg Kilian, "Die Geschichte ist die wahre Kritik jedes Worts. Fritz Mauthner und die klassische Semasiologie," in *Fritz Mauthner—Sprache, Literatur, Kritik*: 109–131, 127: 'Die Metapher ist ihm eine 'Übersetzung' und nicht nur eine 'Übertragung,' und zudem ist diese 'Übersetzung' nicht nur innerhalb der sprachlichen Sphäre möglich, sondern auf der Metapher ruht vor allen Dingen die Übersetzung von Außersprachlichen in Sprachliches. Mittels der Metapher holt sich der Mensch die Welt in die Sprache.' This connection between metaphors and anthropogenesis was stressed for the first time by Vico, but it is also traceable in the work of Hermann Paul, quoted several times by Mauthner. Cf. Paul, *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, 94: 'Die Metapher ist eines der wichtigsten Mittel zur Schöpfung von Benennungen für Vorstellungskomplexe, für die noch keine adäquaten Bezeichnungen existieren.'

74 For instance, the general representation of a tree is the result of a subtraction of all the physical particulars such as color, size, height, shape of the leaves, and so on. Mauthner follows Berkeley's argument against abstract ideas, but it's the same argument that Nietzsche gives in *Wahrheit und Lüge*. Berkeley—against Locke—refuses the possibility of creating abstract ideas, which are but a philosophical abuse of language. Yet he doesn't refuse the human faculty of abstraction. According to Mauthner, concepts do not arise through comparison, but rather are the acts of comparison themselves. Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, III, 284.

The metalinguistic value of metaphors is underlined in Mauthner's prose, which is full of metaphors, which led him to write his 'Contributions'. In fact, Mauthner utilised metaphors instead of general and universal definitions, as a substitution for logic. This trope is the tool whereby Mauthner can say something about language. Instead of grasping a general definition, Mauthner uses a certain amount of metaphors in an estranging manner. If *Sprachkritik* should lead to liberation from tyranny of language, the spontaneous question is whether a metaphor is able to save us. But if the last step of his critique is mysticism, metaphor—insofar it is a word—cannot have a soteriological value. If metaphors lead to an on-going misunderstanding, liberation from language is a liberation from metaphors as well. However, it is not by chance that a de-metaphorisation of the world corresponds to mystic silence.

Against the Limits of Language: Philosophy as an Exercise of Liberation

Mauthner's critique of language invests the entire field of humanity, from religion to science, from ethics to history.⁷⁵ He interprets all these fields in the spectrum of language in order to unmask the metaphysical fetishisms of the word that they incorporate.⁷⁶ All metaphysical abstractions are falsities and the result of a linguistic trick, which forces us to believe that each noun corresponds to a pre-existing substance. If the word is not representative of reality, the most important task of philosophy is the critique of language, i.e. liberation from the superstitions and the tyranny of words, which exercise control against our will: 'Even for the anarchist, language is the rope of the law bound around his neck; even the freest philosopher thinks with the words of philosophical language.'⁷⁷

⁷⁵ With reference to Mauthner's conception of history, one can say that he refuses a scientific approach because his philosophy of language operates as a deconstruction of any form of dogmatism; additionally, he denies the teleological process of history in the wake of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. His idea of history is more similar to the life praxis, tradition, and heritage of a single individual. If on the one hand history means change that is on-going and involves the flux of reality and the language, because the meaning of the world is continually subject to change; on the other hand, history is also a word and Mauthner attempts to escape from abstractions and dogmatic definitions of this discipline.

⁷⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, III, 637: 'Jedes Wort hat eine Geschichte, eine Geschichte seiner Formen und seine Geschichte seiner Bedeutung [...] Der Zufall der kleiner persönlichen Erfahrung bestimmt, was der Einzelne bei den Worten sich vorstellt. Die Sprache ist kein Besitz des Einsamen, weil sie nur zwischen den Menschen ist; aber die Sprache ist auch zwei Menschen nicht gemeinsam, weil auch bloß zwei Menschen niemals das gleiche bei den Worten sich vorstellen. Die Worte der Geisteswissenschaften haben ihre Geschichte, die in dunkle Zeiten zurückreicht. Ebenso reichen die Worte der Naturwissenschaften zurück und wieder zurück.'

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, I, 221: 'Die Sprache legt auch dem Anarchisten den Strickt des Gesetzes um den Hals und auch der freieste Philosoph denkt mit den Worten der philosophischen Sprache.' This is the theoretical premise of Landauer's anarchy. One important feature of Landauer's thought is the connection

Mauthner's attitude toward the history of philosophy is paradoxical because on the one hand the attacks on metaphysical abstractions and the radical break with all preceding thinkers are the crucial task of his scepticism;⁷⁸ on the other hand he develops a philosophy by reinterpreting its role and anchoring in the tradition. His rejection of metaphysical doctrines is based on his philosophy of language; for instance, Cartesian dualism is a non-sensical idea, according to Mauthner, because the terms 'mind' and 'body' exist only in language. In the same way, he refuses the opposition between subject and object, or between universal and particular. These are just deceptive issues caused by language; but he rejects the idea of a perfect language, which was stressed by Lull, Leibniz, and so on, as well as the conception of a philosophical grammar, by which some attempted to dissolve language into logic.⁷⁹ Since philosophy as a dogmatic system is no longer possible, it has to deal with a permanent critique of words and with a complete change of attitude towards language.

Mauthner values the history of philosophy from a sceptical point of view and sees himself as a follower of Hume, but he gives his general scepticism a new foundation by means of linguistic criticism. He moves beyond Hume—as we have seen—by turning the habits of thought into habits of language. Real truths, God, laws of nature, or even self-knowledge are illusory words and even the conception of causality is, in Mauthner's view, a metaphor.

The main sources of his thoughts are Sextus Empiricus, the medieval nominalists, the British empiricists, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. A pivotal role, according to Mauthner, is played by the critique of language developed by English empiricists, such as Locke and Berkeley. If the former stressed the value of language for one's gnosological theory in the constitution of abstract notions, by underlining the difference between representations and words, the latter shed light on the signs of

between language and action, *Sprache und Handlung*. This was a peculiar trait of his philosophy, even if it has perhaps not yet received its proper degree of attention. Our approach is to read Landauer's work in accordance with Mauthner's critique of language, without considering Landauer a follower of Mauthner, for three reasons: first, Landauer's sceptical philosophy is the ground and strategy for a peculiar idea of anarchy and also justice, which stands far from Mauthner's political ideas; second, Landauer's philosophy was deeply influenced by Eckhart's mysticism, but also the Jewish tradition as mediated by Buber; and third, Landauer's radical scepticism is connected to a *Gemeinschaftsleben* and the anarchy of language is a model for a political conception. On the differences between Landauer and Mauthner, see Berlage, *Empfindung, Ich und Sprache*, 132: 'Für Landauer ist Mystik die notwendige Konsequenz aus der radikalen Skepsis; Mystik, die sich als Dichtung manifestiert, könne auch vom Unaussprechlichen noch sprechen und so die Skepsis überwinden. Mauthner hingegen bleibt der kritische Haltung treu.'

78 Cf. Fritz Mauthner, *Gespräche im Himmel und andere Ketzereien* (Munich and Leipzig: Müller, 1914): 56: 'Die großen Skeptiker, die den Wert der philosophischen Begriffe genauer bestimmten und tote Worte, tote Symbole aus den Zierschränken hinauswarfen, waren bessere Mehrer des Sprachschatzes als die Konservatoren alles alten Gerümpel.'

79 Cf. Leinfellner, "Fritz Mauthner," 497: 'Die Sprache ist weder ein formal perfektes System, d. h. eine Maschine (ein Kalkül), noch ein ästhetisch perfektes System (ein Kunstwerk), noch ein perfektes lebendiges System, d. h. ein Organismus.'

language as a sum of abstractions far removed from perception, on which our knowledge is based. Mauthner's motto—taken up by Salomon Maimon and Gottlob Ernst Schulze (Pseudo-Aenesidemus)—is “Back to Hume!” as opposite to the “Back to Kant!” of contemporary Neo-Kantian scholars.

However, Mauthner's debt to Kantian philosophy is undeniable. Mauthner accepts the notion of the thing-in-itself as the boundary of human knowledge, but he doesn't give—contrary to Kant—objectivity to the human experience of phenomena and he denies the existence of logically necessarily concepts. Furthermore, according to Mauthner, Kant missed the relevance of language and he would have achieved more if had given up on the personification of reason: the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* would have been a *Sprachkritik*.⁸⁰ Mauthner's approach to Kantian philosophy clearly follows the meta-critique of Hamann.⁸¹ Indeed the ambitious Mauthnerian undertaking was not only to carry on the ideas of Hamann, but also to complete Kant's venture through the transformation of his formal logic into a linguistic matter.⁸²

Another important role is played by Humboldt, who completely transformed the approach to language by asserting that it is dynamic *energeia* instead of a defined *ergon*. Furthermore, it's worth remembering that Humboldt was the first thinker to connect thinking and the use of language.⁸³ However, Mauthner refuses the Humboldtian definition of language as a manifestation of spirit, even if he belongs to the tradition of the dynamism of language.⁸⁴ In a fascinating way, Mauthner brings all previous philosophers of language together, from medieval nominalists to romanticists.⁸⁵

80 Scepticism plays a central role in Kant's philosophy for many reasons. First of all Kant—as stated in his *Prolegomena*—was a follower of Hume, who famously interrupted his dogmatic slumber; second, his Copernican revolution puts a limit on human knowledge, which concerns only phenomena and not *noumena*; third, he draws a distinction between a good *skepticismus criticus* and a bad *skepticismus dogmaticus*. On Kant's scepticism, cf. Michael N. Forster, *Kant and Skepticism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Forster distinguishes three forms of scepticism in Kant's philosophy, i.e. the veil of perception, Humean scepticism, and Pyrrhonian scepticism.

81 In the exergues of the first volume of his critique, Mauthner quotes Locke, Vico, Hamann, Jacobi, and Kleist. But the quotation of Hamann has a special relevance; cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, III: ‘Verstehst du nun mein Sprachprinzipium der Vernunft, und daß ich mit Luther die ganze Philosophie zu einer Grammatik mache?’

82 Cf. *ibidem*, I, 300: ‘Das ist die überaus wichtige Parallele zwischen der Sprachkritik und der Kritik der reinen Vernunft. Da für uns Vernunft nichts anderes ist als Sprache, so hätten wir im voraus wissen müssen, daß die Kritik der einen wie der anderen zu dem gleichen Ergebnisse führen würde.’

83 Cf. Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Einleitung zum Kawi-Werk,” in *idem*, *Werke*, ed. Albert Leitzmann, vol. VII (Berlin: B. Behr, 1907): 1–144; Jochem Hennigfeld, *Die Sprachphilosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts: Grundpositionen und -probleme* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1982): 936: ‘Erst Humboldt gelingt es durch die Unterscheidung von *Ergon* und *Energeia* und ihre transzendentalphilosophische Begründung, das Verhältnis von Sprache und Denken auf den Begriff zu bringen. Indem er darlegt, daß die Sprache Tätigkeit (Energie als Tätigkeit des neuzeitlich verstandenen Subjekts) ist, daß die Sprache also nichts anderes ist als die Totalität der jeweiligen Sprechakte, verweist er eine Zeichentheorie in ihre Schranke.’

84 Cf. Lia Formigari, *Il linguaggio. Storia delle idee* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2001): 238.

According to Mauthner, language is an ‘unessential non-object’.⁸⁶ On the one hand he attempts to fight linguistic constrictions; on the other hand there is a kind of unavoidability in language. In the third volume of his ‘Contributions’, Mauthner defines his critique of language in an ironic way, as ‘Hominismus’, that reveals a perspectivism of knowledge. This neologism shows how all language is the embodiment of the human point of view and it should be sharply distinguished from *Humanismus*, which contains the cult of *Menschengeist*. His bitter critique of the ‘Anthropolatrie’—human idolatry—passes through a radical redefinition of philosophy that can no longer be an abstract science or a sterile collection of meaningless words.⁸⁷ It’s simply wrong to think that both science and philosophy stand apart from ordinary language, which is the only one we have, since ideal language is impossible. In addition, philosophy, insofar as it wrestles with the limits of our language, should be a permanent grammatical critique.⁸⁸ The risk implicated in this new task of philosophy determines a transformation of linguistic critique into an epistemological model, which rejects a supposed *a priori* structure of knowledge and is based on an historical horizon. In fact, every word contains the history of its meanings preserved in memory and, as far as language is always an (illusory) sharing, it always has a social value.

85 At the opening of his work, Mauthner quotes Busse, Haym, and Levy as thinkers who seem not to have continued in the wake of Humboldt, Herder, and Hamann. However, Mauthner’s confrontation with the romantic treatment of language is twofold: on the one hand he rejects the romantic comparison between organism and language because it is not fertile and only repeats sterile tautologies; on the other hand, regarding the relevance of the social function of language, he compares it to the ether—a comparison that was very popular in the literature of the nineteenth century.

86 “Wesenloses Unding,” cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, 181.

87 Cf. Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik*, 70: ‘Philosophie wird möglich durch den Mißbrauch einer völlig entleerten Sprache, deren Worte den Schein eines Inhalts nur deshalb vortäuschen können, weil sie in das grammatische System passen wie sinnvolle Worte und analog dazu hinter ihnen Bilder vermutet werden, die gar nicht existieren.’

88 Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, III, IX-X: ‘Wenn ich meine skeptische Sprachkritik nun in einer lachenden Stunde “Hominismus” zu nennen bereit war, [...] so war ich mir bewußt, den allzu geläufigen Ausdruck “Humanismus” nur darum vermieden zu haben, weil sich die Anthropolatrie—die Anbetung des Menschengeistes, die wie unlöslich mit dem Begriffe “human” verbunden ist, die “Menschenwürde” des uns Deutschen bekannteren Schiller—gar so schlecht mit dem Kern und Wesen meiner Erkenntnistheorie verträgt. Denken ist Sprechen: das ist meine letzte Meinung *cum beneficio inventarii*. Es ist nicht genug, wenn man etwa sagt: Philosophie sei nur in Sprache möglich; in Menschensprache, aus Menschensprache. Philosophie ist die Grenze der Sprache selbst, der Grenzbegriff, der *limes*: ist Kritik der Sprache, der Menschensprache.’

Judaism and Scepticism: A Controversial Relationship

The relationship between Judaism and scepticism is treated in one article that appeared posthumously in English in 1924,⁸⁹ in which Mauthner discusses whether scepticism is simply a tendency or whether it is characteristic of Jewish thinkers. At the beginning of the article Mauthner asks two questions: whether scepticism coincides with a bad *Weltanschauung* and whether there is an affinity between scepticism and Judaism. He quotes the German poet Christian Morgenstern, who reiterates the connection between Jews and sceptics; their common ground—according to Morgenstern—is a form of a destruction that Mauthner also acknowledges.⁹⁰ Mauthner's definition of scepticism follows the etymology of the word, i.e. *skeptesthai* is connected to the gaze, because it means 'to look, to observe;' hence, sceptics are people, who—before making a judgment on a specific topic—look around and observe with attention. Mauthner distinguishes two forms of mistrust that are not scepticism: a little doubt ('kleiner Zweifel'), which coincides with a mistrust of frankness, and a scientific doubt that concerns representations and general definitions. In this latter field the role of Jews was crucial in terms of their contribution to science and philosophy. However, both forms are different from high mistrust, i.e. scepticism proper, which starts with Socrates and concerns the possibility of knowledge.

Concerning the relationship between scepticism and Judaism, Mauthner begins by remarking on the paradox of religion and scepticism: if the Jews believe in one God, creator of the world, it's a contradiction to consider them sceptics. But on the other hand the Jewish idea of an unmentionable and unknowable God prepares the ground for a deep scepticism, whose clues are traceable in Qohelet. However, Mauthner refuses any form of generalisation and he doesn't agree with Morgenstern, according to whom Jesus and Spinoza were also Jewish sceptical figures. In fact, Jesus—as far as we know about his thought—was more of a creator than a destroyer; and while Spinoza criticised the canon of the Bible his critique wasn't sceptical, especially because, in his 'On the Improvement of the Understanding', he issued harsh words against scepticism and agreed with Descartes on the possibility of getting and knowing the truth.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Cf. Fritz Mauthner, "Skepticism and the Jews," in *Menorah Journal* 1 (1924): 1–14. This article was first published in an English translation; the German version appeared many years later; cf. idem, "Skeptizismus und Judentum," in *Studia Spinozana* 5 (1989): 275–307.

⁹⁰ Cf. Christian Morgenstern, *Stufen. Eine Entwicklung in Aphorismen und Tagebuch-Notizen* (Munich: Piper, 1918), 105–106: 'Alles Jüdische ist vorwiegend destruktiv. Jesus, der größte Jude, ist auch der größte Destruktor der Welt. Spinoza ist nichts anderes und wird darum auch von dem jüngsten jüdischen Destruktor Mauthner in seiner Eigenschaft als Antiteologe über alle andern Denker erhoben. Mit Mauthner selbst kommt vielleicht die tollste Zerstörung in Gang, die die Geschichte des Geistes bisher erlebt hat.'

⁹¹ Benedict de Spinoza, *On the Improvement of Understanding*, trans. Robert H.M. Elwes, in *The Chiefs Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, vol. 2 (London: George Bell, 1884): 1–44.

Moreover, Mauthner rejects the common view that Jews introduced the world to doubt or negation, because the history of scepticism began in Ancient Greece and developed throughout the history of philosophy. He makes a distinction between Eastern European Jewish thinkers such as Maimon, who offers a clear example of Jewish sceptical thought,⁹² and Western European Jews such as Spinoza, who doubted the value of scientific language without a sceptical outcome. Mauthner rejects an absolute coincidence between his scepticism and his being a Jew, because there isn't a Jewish scepticism, seen as a philosophical school. On the other hand he admits that his linguistic scepticism deals with religious critique, as liberation from religious lies; one can say that his relation to Judaism is as estranged as his relationship to language.⁹³ Furthermore, his unsystematic philosophy and mistrust of systems in general can be connected to the Jewish attitude of retiring against systematisation.

Logos-Scepticism and Mystic *epoché* of Language

Mauthner's scepticism deals with a deep logological destruction; in fact he criticises language seen as *logos*, which means at the same time 'word' and 'thought'; but the dismantling of language, by showing all the tricks and deceptions, happens in language itself. Even if thinking and speaking are the same deeds and are useful for human orientation, they are inexact and they fail as a means of grasping the truth. Hence, concepts and words are also vague social products that allow a sharing of information without touching the ground of reality. Instead of a philosophical realism, Mauthner speaks of word-superstition, which constitutes the thread of his critique.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, his radical scepticism is not 'postmodern', because the non-sense of reality is rooted in human boundaries, and there is something that exceeds language and thought: the mystical truth that can be experienced in silence.

The peculiarity of his theory lies in the coincidence of philosophy and scepticism, avoiding the risk of dogmatism.⁹⁵ In fact, the task of his work is conceived

92 Cf. Fritz Mauthner, "Skeptizismus und Judentum," 305: 'Salomon Maimons atomistisch, mikroskopisch eingestelltes Denken ist (bei aller Übertreibung) Maimon.'

93 Cf. Mauthner, *Erinnerungen*, 50: 'Wie ich keine rechte Muttersprache besaß als Jude in einem zweisprachigen Lande, so hatte ich auch keine Mutterreligion, als Sohn einer völlig konfessionslosen Judenfamilie. Wie mir mit meinem Volke, dem deutschen, nicht die Werksteine ganz gemeinsam waren, die Worte, so war mir und ihm auch das Haus nicht gemeinsam, die Kirche.'

94 Cf. Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique*, 141: 'Word-superstition is Mauthner's word for word-realism and it is his acceptance of its ideality which forces him to acknowledge the impossibility of eradicating it from language.'

95 Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, III, 204: 'Das letzte Worte über das Verhältnis zwischen Denken und Sprechen kann von der Sprachkritik nicht gefunden werden, weil die Sprachkritik sowohl an der Bedeutungskonstanz der zu erklärenden und zu vergleichenden Begriffe oder Worte zweifeln muß, als auch an der wissenschaftliche Brauchbarkeit der für die Erklärung und Vergleichung notwendigen psychologischen Begriffe oder Worte.'

as an on-going critique of language by revealing linguistic deception and the grammatical illusion. Linguistic critique is a self-critique of philosophy itself, which lead to a permanent deconstruction: "I must destroy language behind me and in me, step by step: I must destroy every rung of the ladder while climbing upon it."⁹⁶ Dismantling the ladder of knowledge—this metaphor was used also by Wittgenstein—is the same process of dismantling language. In fact, the impossibility of knowledge is not a mere exercise of negation, but this awareness is the high point of our knowledge. Mauthner's theoretical operation is closer to the outcome of negative theology, even if his mysticism is a godless and silent appropriation of the world.⁹⁷

In his autobiographical notes Mauthner sheds light on the relationship between scepticism and mysticism, which is a critique of language or knowledge.⁹⁸ He admits that his scepticism does not call the contradictions of the world into doubt, because all contradictions happen in language, not in speechless nature.⁹⁹ His scepticism deals with the limits of humankind which can not grasp the unity of nature through speaking or thinking but can only feel and live this mystical union. Mauthner is aware of the practical task of his thought, but this kind of liberation from the tyranny of language, according to him, has no absolute value, because it is not a dogma, but a way of life.¹⁰⁰ Mauthner warns of the risk of negative dogmatism and he asserts that only the biggest sceptics were mystics.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, I, 1–2: 'So muß ich die Sprache hinter mir und vor mir und in mir vernichten von Schritt zur Schritt, so muß ich jede Sprosse der Leiter zertrümmern, indem ich sie betrete.'

⁹⁷ Cf. Mittermüller, *Sprachskepsis und Poetologie*, 27: 'Insgesamt lässt sich resümieren, dass die Sprache für Mauthner aufgrund ihrer syntaktischen und semantischen Struktur eine angemessene Wirklichkeitserfahrung verhindert. Nicht zufällig kulminieren daher seine sprachskeptischer Reflexionen in einer Affirmation der sprachlosen Weltaneignung, die auf mystische Konzepte rekurriert.'

⁹⁸ Cf. Fritz Mauthner, "Selbstdarstellung," in *Die Philosophie der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen*, ed. Raymund Schmidt, vol. 3, (Leipzig: Meiner, 1922): 120–144, 138: 'Man kann das auch Mystik nennen, erkenntniskritische, sprachkritische Mystik, zum Unterschiede von der dem abgründigen Meister Eckhart nachgestammelten Schablone der vielzuvielen gottseligen Mystiker.'

⁹⁹ This idea of a speechless nature is a *topos* in the philosophy of language. But in the twentieth century, starting from Mauthner, acquired a big attention, just thinking for instance of Benjamin. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as such and on the Language of Man,' in *idem, Selected Writings, Vol. I, 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996): 62–74.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Mauthner, *Die Sprache*, 84: 'Ich lehre die Befreiung der Menschen von der Sprache als einem untauglichen Erkenntniswerkzeug; aber ich wüßte nicht, wie man sich befreien könnte von der Macht der Sprache über die Sitte, die Gewohnheit, das Handeln, das Leben.'

¹⁰¹ Cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, III, 627: '[...] Aber die erkenntnistheoretischen Skeptiker sind im Kampfe mit dem philosophischen Dogmatismus immer wieder negative Dogmatiker geworden, während die Kritiker bleiben wollten. Nur die ganz großen Skeptiker waren zugleich Mystiker;' see also *idem, Der Atheismus*, I, 4: 'Sprachkritik war mein erstes und ist mein letztes Wort. Nach rückwärts blickend ist Sprachkritik alles zermalende Skepsis, nach vorwärts blickend, mit Illusionen spielend, ist sie eine Sehnsucht nach Einheit, ist sie Mystik. Epimetheus oder Prometheus, immer gottlos, in Frieden entsagen.'

The peculiarity of Mauthnerian scepticism consists in its practical consequences; in fact, it is the way to a silent resignation.¹⁰² Mauthner's scepticism places him in an apophatic tradition that doubts the reliability of words, stemming from Plotinus, Cusano, and Eckhart. This idea received a great deal of attention from those working in the tradition of German Romanticism, from Schelling, Hegel, and so on. But—starting with Mauthner and later mediated by Landauer—the limits and the failure of language became a recurrent trope which is revived in the central Jewish thinkers of the early twentieth century, from Wittgenstein to Rosenzweig, from Celan to Jabès.¹⁰³

According to Mauthner, his linguistic critique leads necessarily to ignorance ('Nichtwissen')¹⁰⁴ and that's why it is a practical exercise. There is a deep-rooted difference between thinking and living, but this praise of life is a result of scepticism and not a vitalistic affirmation in Nietzsche's sense. Speechless and thoughtless are the only adjectives for Mauthner's mystical experience, which is a non-linguistic feeling of unity between the single entity and the entire world.¹⁰⁵ Thanks to its function of laying out the path toward mysticism, Mauthner's philosophical gesture is authentically sceptic. Not only because the act of negation and liberation from false knowledge is at the heart of the scepticism as philosophy, but also because of its therapeutic strategy—in fact, like ancient scepticism, it is a strategy or better an auto-suppressing system, whose function is the achievement of a different way of life—, Mauthner's scepticism has a clear practical aim: one can say that his mystic and silent resignation is a modern form of *ascesis* and the extreme version of *ataraxia* or *apraxia*.

However, even if his *logos-scepticism* is the highest form of suspension of signification through a radical *epoché* of language and thought, his step back from misunderstanding has a tragic flavour, as the silence of nature. Mauthner's disclosure of the fallacies, lies, and tricks of the human sphere is, at heart, a desperate philosophical attempt to cross the boundaries of human being that is—as Aristotle stated—the only living thing that has *logos*—*zōon logon échon*. The risk of errors and the

102 Cf. Mauthner, "Skeptizismus und Judentum," 290: 'Diese hohe Skepsis sucht keinen geschäftlichen Vorteil für das Individuum, das sich durch die Lüge des Verkehrs nicht betrügen läßt, sie sucht auch keinen Comfort für die Menschheit, die materialistisch ihre Lebenswirklichkeit entschleiern muß, sie will nichts, sie schafft nichts, sie lehrt uns die letzte Resignation des erkennenden Menschen, die stille Einsicht, daß wir mit der armen Menschengesprache niemals herankommen können an das, was diese Sprache etwa das Sein oder die Erkenntnis nenn.' However, not only is silence the apophatic consequence of his radical scepticism, but also the liberating laughter that corresponds to a political and social resignation; cf. Mauthner, *Beiträge*, III, 634: 'Die niederste Erkenntnisform ist in der Sprache, die höhere ist im Lachen; die letzte ist in der Kritik der Sprache, in der himmelsstillen, himmelsheiteren Resignation oder Entsagung.'

103 Cf. William Franke, "Franz Rosenzweig and the Emergence of a Postsecular Philosophy of the Unsayable," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58 (2005): 161–180.

104 Mauthner, *Beiträge*, I, XIV: 'Wer Sprachkritik treiben will, ernsthaft und radikal, den führen seine Studien unerbittlich zum Nichtwissen.'

105 Cf. Krieg, *Fritz Mauthners Kritik*, 193: 'Zugleich mit der Skepsis ist die echte, die große Mystik ihm aufgegangen, die einzige Weisheit, die fraglose, sprachlose Hingabe an das All, die Natur, das unendliche Leben.'

semantic shift pass through all human fields; one can say that without the challenge of permanent misunderstanding we would stop speaking, acting, and living as human beings. Hence, is silence the antidote to anthropomorphism or does it rather hide a metaphysical will to power for shaping a new model of human being? Even answering this open question requires words, grammar, signs, and mistakes; from a hermeneutic point of view, the veil of uncertainty leads us not to absolute certainty, but to new questions, new doubts, and new metaphors. The desert of misunderstanding is the linguistic way to a precious and dangerous form of freedom.