CHAPTER I

The text and its style: Schleiermacher's theory of language

For at least three decades, the cultural academic disciplines have
seen a flourishing and proliferation of theories which in one way or
another orient themselves via the theme of language. Whether this
occurs in the different varieties of analytical philosophy, structural
semiology or existentialist hermeneutics – what is common to
them all is their attempt to revise, by means of linguistic theory, the
modern paradigm of 'transcendental consciousness' or 'subjectiv-
ity'. Before suggesting possible motives for this change of para-
digm, I would like to point to an apparently contingent fact,
namely that the shared concern with this paradigm has by no
means drawn together the strands I have mentioned in a unity of
discussion and cohesiveness of research. Certainly in Germany –
and the same is true of the Scandinavian countries and the United
States – there have been fruitful discussions between positions of
analytical philosophy and of phenomenological hermeneutics. But
the few, timorous attempts to initiate a discussion between repre-
sentatives of these two movements and French post-structuralist
semiologists[1] have met with almost no response. More recently,
the initial polemics and resistance typified by Alfred Schmidt's
Geschichte und Struktur (Munich, 1971) have given way to a first

[1] My respect for the representatives of this direction of thought calls for a distinction to be
made between them and those befuddled opponents of enlightenment (allegedly) follow-
ing in Foucault's footsteps and above all the intellectual Calibans of the 'Anti-Oedipus',
whose garbled 'discourses' one can hardly study without experiencing the sort of pleasure
that Schopenhauer felt when reading Hegel. (See my essay, 'Die Welt als Wunsch und
Repräsentation', in *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare. Studien zur deutsch-französischen Hermeneutik
und Texttheorie*, new expanded edn. (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), pp. 561ff.) Certainly it is
necessary to extend the theory of psychosis to pathological phenomena in society: that
this need not itself be done 'en style de psychose' or 'en psychose' is demonstrated by
Sartre in his lucid analysis of 'objective neurosis' in the fourth part of his *Flaubert*.

hesitant, then curious and finally almost totally positive receptive-
ness to the ideas, strange and impossible to ignore, which come
pouring in, in an ever-growing tide – and generally in dubious
translations – from France. But as far as I can see the divide in
scientific standards which previously more or less followed the
national boundaries has simply moved into Germany, without any
effective attempts being made to mediate between the divergent
methodological options. The effect of the methodological split is of
course most visibly mirrored in the inconsistent methods used in
literary studies, which have long been dependent on the impetus of
new ideas from related disciplines, notably from philosophy and
sociology, since their exponents find themselves incapable of inde-
pendently laying down a satisfactory theoretical basis. German
studies in particular offer a striking instance of the general experi-
ence that the march of time is not necessarily accompanied by an
advance in insight. In this discipline, as Ernst Robert Curtius said
about literary criticism, there is Romanticism and there are begin-
nings. Ironically, this gives German studies the advantage that in
the extremity of their need they can legitimately look back and
draw upon the rich resource of the fundamental work done by the
Romantics, without thereby manifesting a merely archaeological
interest in acquiring knowledge. I want to try to show how relevant
the philological approach of Schleiermacher in particular has
remained, and how well he lends himself to getting the dialogue
moving between structuralist positions, and hermeneutic positions
and positions in analytical philosophy.

Before I start, I want to attempt to guess why there has been this
failure to bring about discussion precisely with the contemporary
French theoreticians. If the differences between on the one hand
the analytical approaches based on methodological discipline and
on the other those of existentialist hermeneutics which seek to base
scientific hypotheses on irreducible effective-historical communi-
cation processes – if these differences can be cleared up, as is
shown by the examples of Apel, Taylor, von Wright or Toulmin,
then this is because they are all, if you will allow me this simplifica-
tion for the sake of brevity, committed to a 'semantistic' perspec-
tive. They are concerned either to explain the process of under-
standing meaning or to examine the validity of judgements

concerning the meaning of utterances. The question of *How to Do Things with Words* is, despite its choice of methodology, not funda-mentally irreconcilable with the question of how linguistic world-views are built up and how they determine the meaning horizon of the language participants fitted into them. Even where the cat-egory of the subject is no longer considered appropriate to explain the *Meaning of Meaning*, what is attempted is a reformulation of the classical critique of reason as a critique of meaning. To investigate the meaning of human utterances is clearly even more fundamen-tal than to investigate their rationality. Here it has been perfectly possible to link up with neo-Kantian traditions (for instance that of Cassirer) in which the restrictively logical meaning of the transcen-dental synthesis was extended to include the activities of the capacity to symbolise in general and the capacity for language in particular. And if – especially since Wittgenstein – the symbolic forms are thought of as regulatory apparatuses which determine the concrete actions of denoting and of investing with meaning, and even have the power autonomously to bring about extensions of and changes to the lexico-syntactical repertoire, they are there-by also deemed to have the capability of spontaneity and reflection which were traditionally thought of as essential characteristics of subjectivity. Viewed from this kind of perspective, the English Channel, which has often, metonymically, been held accountable for the division between Anglo-Saxon and continental philosophy, has not really had the effect of 'splitting the discourse': after all, the premises and methods of analytical philosophy too are based on the paradigm of reflection which has dominated continental meta-physics ever since Parmenides.

    This at any rate is the objection which both analytical and in the broadest sense hermeneutic theory must expect to encounter as soon as they take on the challenge of contemporary French semiol-ogy. Derrida, for instance, has claimed to see the same premises at work in Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and in Austin's and Searle's speech-act theory (and incidentally also in Foucault's 'archaeol-ogy'),[2] surreptitiously welding the disagreeing positions into the unity of a *single* scientific formation. According to Derrida, they are

[2] Jacques Derrida, 'Avoir l'oreille de la philosophie', interview with Lucette Finas, in *Ecarts. Quatre essais à propos de Jacques Derrida* (Paris, 1973).

unanimous in suggesting that consciousness, speech or 'discourse' have in principle access to the meaning of the utterances that are made, even if these – as elements in social orders – may at first be concealed from the individual and need to be brought back by means of what Merleau-Ponty called 'archaeological' reconstruction. For Parmenides' *noein*, the thinking perception of what is in its being, only creates *meaning* if something positive, and not nothing (μὴ ὄν), is given. That which does not exist simply *is* not, and thus has no presence, no truth which could be repeated in the same form, and is not a possible object of a necessarily *general* knowledge. Friedrich Schlegel called Parmenides' nothing an '*emptiness* which seeks to be filled', indeed 'a gap in existence' which – itself invisible – gives the visible its determinacy.[3] Within the framework of a structure the only things that are visible, objective, significant, and so are also capable of being reduplicated and generalised, are the signs and their relationships with one another (the mass of the codifiable). The gap as such evades the eye of knowledge, although it is precisely the gap that installed the positive terms in their function as signs, i.e. as units of expression of meaning. For, as Saussure had shown, the way that the identity of the signs is created and they are fitted into the economy of a structured system is that very definite cuts are made in the unarticulated mass of the material of signifiers (whose meaningfulness he characterises as 'en soi nulle' – nothing in itself), and that through these cuts the individual blocks are split off from one another and are precisely thereby invested with profile, contour, individuality, in short, with 'differential characteristics'. Only after the work of differentiation and of the formation of intervals between the 'full and positive terms' has been concluded[4] (and strictly speaking it continues unceasingly, with every new use of a sign), can the 'distinctness' of the signs as a synthesis of intelligible meanings and material substrates of expression be completed. To put it differently, it is only through the subtraction, as it were, of the work of differentiation from the completed structure of signifiers that this structure changes from being a meaninglessly furrowed material into a

[3] Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe seiner Schriften,* ed. Ernst Behler (Munich, Paderborn and Vienna, 1958–), vol. XII, p. 192.
[4] Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Paris, 1972), p. 38ff.

subdivided order of signs which are capable of conveying meaning – an old insight, most famously expressed by Spinoza in the words, 'Omnis determinatio est negatio' (Every determination is a nega- tion) and perpetuated in Sartre's formulation, 'That which is not is the reason for the determinacy of that which is.'[5]

However, making this link with Spinoza, Hegel or Sartre does not get us any further. For them, negation remains in the inter- mediate space between two positions, for whose benefit it works and cancels itself out, whereas the offence committed by Derrida or Lacan against 'semanticism' in the understanding of meaning consists of an insistence on a negation that cannot be dialectically cancelled out, which splits the meaning away from itself without permitting it to return to itself. When Gadamer speaks of the 'speculative structure' of language,[6] this is intended to suggest that the two elements in the process of communication 'are mirrored in each other' and thus are essentially similar in nature: in the process of the effective-historical consciousness one mind is always speak- ing to another mind or, to put it in a more pointed fashion, the context of meaning of one tradition is speaking *to itself* in the form of an understanding which is open to this tradition. In this way, in both Gadamer and Ricoeur – and in all information and com- munication theories – effective-historical hermeneutics becomes linked with the paradigm of reflection, for which the alienation of consciousness from itself can be only one stage on the path of its constant return into itself. There is, however, as Derrida empha- sises, an alterity of quite another order, which is necessarily ne- glected in such conceptions. After all, within the order of a linguis- tic world-view every element, even before it is able to comprehend itself as what it is, carries within itself the trace of all other elements of the structure of signifiers, i.e. it acquires its identity-as-meaning precisely not through its specular reference to itself or to an indestructible core of *truth* but through its unreserved externalisa- tion to that which is other than itself: 'An interval', says Derrida, 'must split it away from what it is not, so that it can be itself.'[7] Thus the meaning that is to be understood is not based on a continuum

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[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris, 1943), p. 130.
[6] *Wahrheit und Methode*, 2nd edn. (Tübingen, 1965), pp. 432ff.
[7] *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris, 1972), p. 13.

entirely made up of meaning like itself, but on something which is itself not meaningful. The immediate transparency of the meaning is already clouded in its very origin; and if one were to call meaning the sayable, one would have to call its origin silence, as for instance Mallarmé does.

The trouble is that this is also true of reflection itself – that is, of the basic theorem of the modern period by which philosophy thought that it had proved its claim to be rigorously scientific. For one can *neither* think of reflection without presupposing simple self-conscious identity (otherwise the one element in the relationship cannot be certain of seeing in the other *itself* and not another); *nor* can one ignore the fact that this identity is not directly present to itself but must call upon the other – the other element in the relationship – to bear witness to its sameness to itself. Hölderlin already demonstrated the aporia in this form. Fichte, to whom he refers, admittedly discovered that the witness of the other was vouched for by the pre-reflexive knowledge of one's own identity. But Fichte too became entangled in a circular argument. On the one hand, he explains in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (of 1798), the determinacy of the idea of 'I' (the *concept* of it) is bound to the *difference* between at least two expressions which are distinguished from each other ('You think "I" and thus you do not think everything else, you do not think "not-I" '). On the other hand this split between the two elements must also be got round by means of an immediate *intuition* of their *non*-separation, for otherwise the other is no longer the same as the One, and the indispensable identity of the thought 'I' is lost.[8]

So there is no way round this: the condition of possibility of the 'I' is that it gives itself to the other. This giving of itself now of course splits the self into two parts, even though retrospectively it may well deny its differential basis. Nevertheless the path of the reflected one to itself as the one reflecting is barred, by the irremovable externality of a signifier. 'A speaking', Derrida says, 'has preceded my self-consciousness'.[9]

This thesis – and this brings me to the real subject of my lecture

[8] See also J.G. Fichte, '*Wissenschaftslehre 1798 (nova methodo)*' in Hans Jacob (ed.), *Nachgelassene Schriften* (Berlin, 1937), vol. II, pp. 355ff.
[9] *La dissémination* (Paris, 1972).

– is prefigured in Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* (Doctrine of Faith) and his *Dialektik*. He was the first, to my knowledge, to draw conclusions relating to the theory of signs from the failure of the reflection model, which result in the project of his *Hermeneutics*. That he nevertheless did not give up the theorem of a meaning-creating subject – albeit a semiologically demoted one – is what makes his position so attractive in the context of the current debate about methods in linguistic and literary studies.

In the works I have mentioned, Schleiermacher shows that the concept of the 'subject' seems ill-suited to serve as a philosophical starting-point: even in the highest of all syntheses, that of willing and thinking, it exists as a relation, that is, as a virtual divergence of things that refer to each other. That the subject nevertheless has a knowledge of the sameness of the related things is an achievement whose real ground it cannot attribute to itself. The cognitive ground of self-consciousness – its immediate being-transparent-to-itself – thus becomes peculiarly delayed in relation to the ground of its being. The absolute inwardness of this feeling of identity, says Schleiermacher, comes into being 'only *in* the subject', but is not brought about '*by* the subject'.[10]

Thus the subject has an awareness of the unity which prevails within it, and recognises at the same time that it cannot be the originator of this knowledge. It is familiar with itself only because it reads the characteristic mark of its 'transcendental determinacy'[11] as a pointer to an identity which 'supplements' the 'defect' written into reflection (*Dial O*, p. 287; pp. 290, 295–6). This is, in broad outline, the outcome of 'the analysis of self-consciousness in relation to the co-positedness of an Other' (*Gl*, p. 24), which in its religious attitude causes it to give up wishing to try to recuperate (*einholen*) the ground of its uncontrollable *determinedness* as itself.

Schleiermacher speaks of a 'crisis of the subject': this occurs as soon as the subject can no longer create the truth in which it has its

[10] *Der christliche Glaube*, 7th edn, newly edited on the basis of the second edition and a critical examination of the text by Martin Redeker (Berlin, 1960), vol. 1, § 3, p. 3. (My italics, MF) (Henceforth cited in the text as *Gl* with the number of the paragraph and section, or in the case of marginal comments the page number.)

[11] F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Dialektik*, ed. Rudolf Odebrecht, for the Prussian Academy of Sciences, on the basis of previously unpublished material (Leipzig, 1942, reprinted Darmstadt, 1976), p. 290 (cited as *Dial O*).

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existence but can only bear witness to it. Because 'its power is
broken' (*Gl*, p. 27) in the face of the facticity of uncontrollable
self-mediation, there is no longer a possibility of its being seen as
the location of a truth which is trans-historically present to itself
and which contains, wrapped up in itself, all the facts of the
historical world, and releases them in deductive steps.

This theoretical premise prevents Schleiermacher from using a
whole range of strategies of argument which are typical of ideal-
istic philosophy. Above all, reference to the instance of self-con-
sciousness no longer offers an assurance of the possession of an
'absolute' truth present to itself in a trans-historical perspective.
On the contrary, this truth escapes from it, because it is tied to the
relationship (and thus to time) and is defined as a 'general con-
sciousness of finitude' (*Gl*, § 8,2), i.e. as the consciousness of a
'dependence' which is 'absolute' with regard to its being-at-all and
relative with regard to its 'being in the world' (*Gl*, § 4,2; cp. §§ 3–5).
     The reflection of the crisis of the subject has consequences for
hermeneutics: since '[its] power is broken' (*Gl*, p. 27) in the face of
the facticity of uncontrollable self-mediation, there is no longer
any question of its being the point from which one might by a
monologic process of deduction reach judgements independent of
individual experiences about what exists in the historical world.
Rather, the transcendence of the ground of knowledge forces the
subject to prove the validity of the evidence of its cognitions in the
field of communication between persons. This is the task of dialec-
tics, which Schleiermacher defines as the 'setting out of the prin-
ciples for a discussion conducted in the adequate manner in the
domain of pure thought'.[12] The goal of dialectics is 'knowledge',
i.e. bringing the theory to a state of 'unchangeability and univer-
sality' (*HuK*, p. 414). There must be consensus between the part-
ners in a discourse as to the orientation to this goal; for without the
'presupposition' of an ideal of knowledge (however unattainable)

[12] Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik. Mit einem Anhang sprachphilosophischer Texte Schleier-
     machers*, ed. M. Frank (Frankfurt am Main, 1977) (cited in the text as *HuK*), p. 412. See also
     Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle (Heidelberg, 1959). This edition as-
     sembles in a critical form all Schleiermacher's notes, including early handwritten ones,
     and remains indispensable for the serious student.

there would be, given the insoluble differences between the opin-
ions confronting one another and the inadequacy of a 'truth'
controlling the conversation from above, no guarantee of the
intersubjectivity of the agreements reached in any discourse.

A further presupposition of dialectics implied in the postulate of
the ideal unity of knowledge is the sameness of the object to which
divergent predicates are ascribed. This alone makes possible the
clash between 'contradictions' which are to be resolved by dialec-
tics (*HuK*, pp. 426ff.) The dispute between these cannot of course
be decided 'objectively' (i.e. by an external instance), since a
decision as to whether mutually incompatible judgements are or
are not correct in relation to a 'being' (A) intended as the same, or
to a particular section of being (A'), cannot be made simply by
exclusion. The lack of a trans-subjective criterion for the 'true'
predication of something that exists forces the participants in the
discussion to include in the formulation of their possible consensus
every predicate that is honestly acknowledged to apply to it, i.e. to
admit that the object of the judgement is not indifferent to the
individual interpretations which the totality of subjects forms of it.
The predicated sphere constantly expands with the expression of
views. The recognition of the relativity of one's own point of view
in itself represents as it were the breakthrough to truth: this does
not mean an ability positively to fix a material statement (this
would precisely be relative, because it would rest upon a provi-
sional consensus and would in fact turn into untruth as soon as it
claimed to exhaust the possible meaning of being), but takes the
form of a movement, which totalises every individual insight and is
incapable of ever being completed, towards truth.

Now the concept of a simultaneous relativity and universality of
the interpretation of being, by which a group of subjects defines
itself as this particular 'community of thought' (*HuK*, p. 417), has
the structure of a language, i.e. of a both historically 'empirical'
and 'speculative' apparatus of categories which make communica-
tion possible (*HuK*, pp. 234, 467). There is no community of
thought which has not *ipso facto* recorded its dialectical consensus
in the grammar of a 'linguistic circle' (*HuK*, pp. 420ff.), i.e. codified
it as a context of involvements or signs through which it effects its
synthesis as a society; for the 'idea', according to Schleiermacher,

is nothing but the immediate self-illumination of 'action' (cp. *Dial O*, p. 70). It is as a result of its dependence on specific grammars that dialectics shares in the particularities and disinformations of the historical world (specific traditions, historically or biograph-ically induced understandings of oneself which are reflected in the conventions of speech and are internalised at the same time as the conventions are acquired as so many practices). Dialectics can never wholly free itself from this dependence, since the truth constituted by it can never advance beyond the status of a single and historical interpretation of being, based on intersubjective agreement. For this reason it voluntarily renounces 'any claim to general validity' (*HuK*, pp. 422, 424) (in the sense of an objectivity independent of subjects) and acknowledges that 'the individual character of a language' determines not only the formation of the ideas of the individuals socialised in it but 'also [has an influence on] the way in which every other language is understood' (*HuK*, p. 421). The irreducible non-generalness or 'relativity of thought' (*HuK*, p. 410) points dialectics towards the 'art of interpretation' or 'hermeneutics'. This looks at linguistic utterances chiefly from the point of view of the way in which individuality asserts itself; whereas the aspect emphasised by dialectics is the fact that even the most private utterance of meaning takes place partly with a view to an 'idea of knowledge' common to all thinkers, and must be composed in language partly for the sake of its possible com-municability: 'It is clear from this that both [hermeneutics and dialectics] only come into being together' (*HuK*, p. 411).

Thus it is a consequence inherent in the system that provides the framework within which Schleiermacher's hermeneutic theory of language will develop: the transcendence of being over the mean-ing through which every linguistic community both reveals and conceals it immediately forces one to recognise the concept of an individuality which cannot simply be regarded as a deduction from or something subsumed under the semantico-syntactical system. After all, there cannot, from one end of the historical universe to the other, be a universality whose economy is un-limited and whose structure does not preserve the unity of this particular movement which the crochet needle of an individual