

Zeitschrift: Vox Romanica
Herausgeber: Collegium Romanicum Helvetiorum
Band: 35 (1976)

Artikel: Two renaissance contributions to the semantic analysis of language
Autor: Read, M.K. / Trethewey, J.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-28012>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Two Renaissance Contributions to the Semantic Analysis of Language

There have been numerous attempts in recent years to "reassess" the achievements of traditional linguistic scholarship. In reaction to the scornful rejection of this scholarship which frequently characterized linguists of the Bloomfieldian school, such attempts have often sinned in the other extreme, presenting a flattering, and therefore untrue, picture of traditional ideas. We believe that a more understanding approach will reveal that pre-nineteenth-century and pre-twentieth-century scholarship is certainly less homogeneous than was formerly believed; that it is frequently distinguished by its own particular excellence; but that, at the same time, scholars are usually seen to accept general philosophical assumptions which are not so much personal as characteristic of their age. In order to illustrate these points in detail, we propose to study two Renaissance sorties into the semantic analysis of language.

As is well known, the "analytic" or "atomistic" approach to meaning constituted the basis of traditional scholarship. Conventionalists and naturalists might have disagreed as to the nature of the relationship between the *form* of the word and the *thing* to which it referred, but both found the categorization of the world into semantically discrete units in no way problematical. Similarly, realists and nominalists were divided over the question of the degree of reality of the *meanings* (concepts) associated with *forms*, but both accepted that universals could be unambiguously recognized¹. Despite a fundamental continuity in the Western linguistic tradition, however, which even survived the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, there were general shifts in emphasis and orientation which help to explain, if they did not actually cause, the sporadic undermining of the atomistic approach to meaning in the sixteenth century. The Modistae based their views on a moderate realism and an implicit belief in the naturalist standpoint, and they did not concern themselves with linguistic change, of which they were largely unaware². In contrast, the Humanists embraced a notably conventionalist view of language; they believed that thought and language were clearly separate and separable and, from a nominalistic standpoint, pleaded the need to return to the "res" and to the realities of everyday life and language; and moreover, they were intensely aware of the fact of linguistic change, an awareness well illustrated by Valla's denunciation of the Donation of Constantine as a forgery³. It is in this context that we must view the work of Nebrija

¹ Cf. J. LYONS, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, Cambridge 1968, p. 403-412.

² Cf. F. P. DINNEEN, *An Introduction to General Linguistics*, New York 1967, p. 145; p. 146; and R. H. ROBINS, *A Short History of Linguistics*, London 1967, p. 87.

³ Cf. R. M. W. DIXON, *What is Language? A New Approach to Linguistic Description*, London 1965, p. 49; and R. A. HALL, *Linguistic Theory in the Italian Renaissance*, *Language* 12 (1936), 96-107 (p. 98).

and Meigret, if we are to gain a true insight into their ideas on the semantics of language.

Antonio de Nebrija (1444–1522) imbibed the lessons of Italian Humanism at their source, studying as he did between 1463 and 1470 in the Spanish college of St. Clement's in Bologna. The work of Lorenzo Valla had considerable influence on him, and his ideas on language reveal his debt to Italian scholarship. His acceptance of the division between thought and language is implicit in his explanation of his reasons for abandoning his native Spain for Italy as a young man. He notes that although his Spanish tutors, Pascual de Aranda and Pedro de Osma, were eminent thinkers, «en decir sabian muy poco»⁴. His whole approach to language is, moreover, that of a conventionalist. It is true that he never definitely states the Aristotelian principle, but a conventionalist standpoint is implicit in his treatment of language and, more particularly, of orthography. The naturalist tendency to associate the invention of both language and letters with God appears in his *Reglas de ortographia*, but is quickly passed over: «Entre todas las cosas que por experiencia los ombres hallaron, o por reuelacion diuina les fueron demonstradas..., ninguna otra fue tan necessaria ... que la inuención de las letras»⁵. He comments later that letters were invented by someone, «quien quiera que fue»⁶, a statement which seems indicative of his attitude.

Nebrija firmly supported the phonetic, or more strictly, phonemic, rather than the archaizing principle in orthography, as one would anticipate in a conventionalist, who was, as a general rule, little interested in the origins of language: «No tienen otro vso las figuras delas letras, sino representar aquellas bozes que enellas depositamos»⁷. Likewise, as a conventionalist, he underlined the considerable variety of languages («Cada lengua tiene ciertas y determinadas bozes»⁸), and used this fact to argue the need for the orthographical systems of languages to be in a sense unique. We will see that this non-isomorphism on the level of phonology was carried over by Nebrija into his study of semantics. Significantly, it is to Aristotle that he looks for his definition of language⁹.

Like the Italian Humanists, Nebrija was intensely aware of linguistic change. In the prologue to his *Gramatica*, he embraces a cyclic view of change, exemplifying the principle by tracing in some detail the developments of Hebrew, Greek, Latin

⁴ *Vocabulario español-latino*, Salamanca 1495, no pagination.

⁵ *Gramatica de la lengua castellana; Muestra de la istoria de las antigüedades de España; Reglas de ortographia en la lengua castellana*, edition by IG. GONZÁLEZ-LLUBERA, London 1926, p. 234. The *Gramatica* was first published in Salamanca in 1492, and the *Reglas* in Alcalá in 1517.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Gramatica*, p. 239.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ «Assí que las letras representan las bozes, y las bozes significan, como dize Aristotiles, los pensamientos que tenemos enel anima.» *Gramatica*, p. 19.

and Castilian. He believed that Castilian had reached the peak of its development in his own age, but, while proudly proclaiming its achievements, stated that unless measures were taken to «fix» usage, the language could only decline. Though in certain respects treating Latin as very much a *living* language, he was aware of Castilian's Latin origins («No es otra cosa la lengua castellana, sino latin corrompido»¹⁰), and stresses the grammatical isomorphism of Latin and Castilian grammar: «No quiero ahora contar entre mis obras el arte de la gramatica..., contraponiendo renglon por renglon el romance al latin»¹¹. He was not however entirely oblivious to differences on this level of analysis between Latin and Spanish. He rejects, for example, on one occasion certain Latin figures of speech in Spanish «porque aunque el griego y latin sufra tal c[o]mposicion, el castellano no la puede sufrir»¹².

Having sketched in the framework of Nebrija's assumptions and beliefs concerning language, let us now proceed to consider that aspect of his semantic analysis of language which we wish to isolate as being of special interest.

One of the more belated but perhaps one of the more fruitful applications of the structural approach to language in the twentieth century has been in the realm of semantics. Modern scholars have engaged in extensive studies of lexical systems in the vocabularies of different languages, particularly with regard to such clearly circumscribed fields as kinship, colour, flora and fauna, etc. It has been shown that the vocabularies of different languages are non-isomorphic; and that a language embodies in an important sense the culture of the society of which it is the medium of discourse. The modernity of this approach to semantics is frequently stressed. Humboldt, in the nineteenth century, is usually seen as the first linguist to conceive of «an organically articulated totality» on the semantic level, the tradition being continued by Sapir and Whorf in the twentieth century. The nineteenth-century abandonment of the view that all languages have the same grammatical and semantic structure is attributed to the demonstration by nineteenth-century comparative philologists that all languages are subjects to continuous change. It is our view, however, that some of the above tendencies are prefigured in the work of Nebrija. A combination of certain assumptions regarding the nature of language and the specific task of composing a Latin-Spanish dictionary led the Spanish Humanist to a potentially very fruitful view of the semantic structure of language. In his work on orthography he had been content to see word, concept and object as corresponding simply and unambiguously¹³. He found in his lexicographical pursuits, however, that the situation was rather more complex than this. Here, the non-isomorphism

¹⁰ *Gramatica*, p. 31.

¹¹ *Vocabulario español-latino*, no pag.

¹² *Gramatica*, p. 130.

¹³ «Que assi como los conceptos del entendimiento responden a las cosas que entendemos, y assi como las bozes y palabras responden a los conceptos, assi las figuras delas letras han de responder alas bozes.» *Reglas*, p. 237.

of Latin and Spanish could not be easily sidestepped, and the lack of coincidence between the semantic patterning of Castilian and Latin forced itself upon Nebrija's attention. He looked to linguistic change as the major cause of this divergence:

Tanta mudanza hay en los vocablos de las cosas que duran con la naturaleza o pare la luxuria: o busca la ociosidad. Deste genero son las vestiduras, armas, manjares, vasos, naves, instrumentos de musica, y agricultura: y de cuantas artes vemos en cada ciudad muy rica y bastecida. Esto habemos asi largamente dicho porque ninguno se maraville si no siempre dimos palabras castellanas a las latinas¹⁴.

Linguistic change relates in two ways to denotation, according to whether things are «natural» (that is, «perdurables con la misma naturaleza») or man-made (that is, «puestas en solo el uso y albedrio de los hombres»). Nebrija would seem to suggest that natural things better preserve their original names; whereas evanescent man-made objects change, along with the words that name them («se mudan cada dia con sus nombres»).

Nebrija is doubtful as to the status of «especies» (i.e., species, types, etc.). The philosophers, he says, claim them to be eternal, but some have certainly disappeared (have not banana trees disappeared, at least from Spain?), and others nature produces from nowhere (are there not now many kinds of citrus fruit unknown to the Ancients?). This leads Nebrija to a view of semantic relativity. He points out, taking the examples of birds of prey used in hunting, that the semantic divisions drawn by the modern vernacular often do not correspond to those drawn in Latin, based on an Aristotelian categorization:

Las aves de caza, que propriamente asi se llaman: y de las cuales usan los cazadores de nuestro tiempo, en dos generos las repartió Aristotiles, el autor de todos el más diligente. ...Mas porque en aquellos tiempos esta arte de acetreria aun no era hallada: ni el uso destas aves tan espeso: harto les pareció partirlas en dos linajes por la diversidad del vuelo. Pero los nuestros que tienen esta arte en gran estima: hicieron en este genero muchas diferencias¹⁵.

We may represent Nebrija's comparison between these two semantic fields in Latin and Spanish thus:

Latin:	bajovolantes / altovolantes	aves de caza
Modern Spanish:	gavilán / azor / neblí / sacre / etc.	

Sometimes, as in the case of hunting birds, for example, Nebrija notes that the development has been from simplicity to complexity, and inevitably so, since, as he explains, many new things have come into existence since the days of the Ancients. But at other times, he continues, pointing to the example of bees and bee-keeping, distinctions drawn in Latin have been lost in the modern languages.

¹⁴ Quoted from EL CONDE DE VIÑAZA, *Biblioteca histórica de la filología castellana*, Madrid 1893, p. 1450. NEBRIJA's *Dictionarium latino-hispanicum* was first published in Salamanca in 1492.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 1448.

Our second Renaissance scholar is the translator, grammarian and spelling reformer Louis Meigret, who was born at Lyon in about 1510 and who died after 1560, presumably in Paris where he had lived since 1538. His professional preoccupations led him to have insights into the semantic analysis of language which, though apparently rather different from Nebrija's, are yet of comparable interest and derive from strikingly similar views on the nature of language in general. Like Nebrija, Meigret adopts a basically conventionalist view of language. It is true that he opens a chapter of his *Grammère* with the statement that «nature ne nous a point auantagé d'un moyen plus eze qe de la parole» for facilitating social intercourse¹⁶. But he is referring here merely to man's innate faculty of language, the existence of which most conventionalists were inclined to admit. Moreover, though Meigret certainly believed that the Greek and Latin languages and civilizations surpassed those of the modern world, he sees their excellence as a product of human skill and application, rather than of nature. He gives nature no credit for the qualities of individual languages, ancient or modern, the diversity of which he recognizes together with all their various orthographic conventions: «Les hommes diuersement, & selon les contrées, s'aydent des voix par ung commun artifice, & vsage, pour faire entendre plus aisément leurs fantaisies, les vngs aux aultres. Er pour lesquelles d'auantage ilz ont inuenté pour une plus grande aisance des notes, que nous appellons letres¹⁷.» Elsewhere he states that it was the Ancients who invented characters, on the basis of the phonetic principle¹⁸. Orthography is undoubtedly for Meigret, as for Nebrija, man-made.

Not surprisingly, in view of his conventionalist standpoint, Meigret, like Nebrija, supported the phonetic principle in orthography. Meigret showed himself, however, to be rather more intolerant and quick-tempered in his rationalism than Nebrija. He rejected views opposed to his own and based on the non-phonetic principle as the *irrational* practice of our misguided predecessors. His definition of usage is significant in that it specifically excludes «abuse» of language. Usage is based on reason and is therefore virtuous.

Also like Nebrija, Meigret was very much aware of linguistic change. Whenever he broached the subject, he expressed progressive rather than cyclic views, though this is probably the deceptive impression one gets from his having concentrated on

¹⁶ *Le Tretté de la Grammère Françoise*, edition by W. FOERSTER (Heilbronn, 1888), p. 8. We refer throughout to this edition. The original was published in Paris in 1550. The spelling is that of Meigret's reformed orthography, which has been described and its importance in the development of French orthography and printing conventions studied by NINA CATACH in *L'Orthographe française à l'époque de la Renaissance*, Geneva, 1968, p. 87-95 and 444-448.

¹⁷ *Traité touchant le commun usage de l'écriture Françoisse* (Paris, 1545), *Proesme aux Lecteurs*, no pagination. The first edition was published in Paris in 1542. We quote throughout from the second, revised edition. The spelling is unreformed.

¹⁸ *Grammère*, p. 4.

the first part of the cycle¹⁹. Meigret saw his fellow countrymen as naturally inclined towards *rational* practice and «l'amendement continuel en tours ars, & sciences»²⁰. He believed, moreover, that the French language was now so enriched that it was an admirable vehicle for any science or art²¹.

Finally, Meigret was, like Nebrija, engaged on a practical task: the development of an orthographical system which accorded with reason as he saw it.

It is difficult to decide to what extent Meigret's views on language developed out of the process of formulating his orthographic theory for publication in 1542 and the subsequent need to defend it, and to what extent they were already mature in his mind before he became preoccupied with spelling reform. Published opposition to his ideas—from Guillaume des Autels in 1548 (*Traité touchant l'ancienne esriture de la langue françoise*) and Jacques Peletier in 1550—did not cause him to modify or develop in any way his views on orthography or the arguments he used to justify and defend them, which suggests that his theories were more than just makeshift aids to defence. Moreover, they are the same whether presented vigorously in the truculent epistle *Ao' Lecteurs* which precedes the *Grammère* of 1550, or more calmly summarized in his preface to *Le Menteur*, or used in the body of his *Grammère*. Whatever the source, however, Meigret expressed in these works ideas which display insights into language which, as far as we know, were completely new and original in Europe in his day. Professor Ullmann has said of the modern context theory of meaning: «This is in many ways the central problem of all semantic studies, linguistic and other. Nowhere is the contrast between ancient and modern views more marked than in this province²².» Meigret, we believe, stands as a very early precursor of «modern views» in this field.

Meigret's purpose is to defend his purely phonetic orthography against the view common in Renaissance theory that etymological spelling was justified to avoid homonymic clash²³. His answer to this particular challenge is to point out that there

¹⁹ Meigret's most famous rival in the field of spelling reform, Jacques Peletier du Mans, expresses admiration tinged with anxiety when reviewing the current state of the French language and culture:

«Ne voyons nous pas les disciplines, les arts libéraux et mécaniques, comme j'avais dit dès le commencement, être réduits quasi à l'extrémité de ce que l'homme en peut comprendre? Ne voyons nous pas les magnificences et somptuosités en telle essence qu'elles n'en peuvent plus, et que leur grandeur ne saurait plus si peu croître qu'elles ne les assomme? Bref, ne voyons nous pas les esprits si ouverts, et qui commencent à vouloir passer si avant qu'il faut non seulement qu'ils demeurent mais encores qu'ils reculent arrière?» *Dialogue de l'ortographe*, edition by L. C. PORTER, Genève 1966, p. 87. (The first edition was Poitiers, 1550.) Peletier could therefore be said to conform more nearly than Meigret to the Aristotelian cyclic view of cultural change.

²⁰ *Le Menteur ou l'incrédule de Luçian traduit de Græc en François par Lovis Meigræt Lionoës...*, Paris 1548, p. 3.

²¹ Cf. *Grammère*, p. 3.

²² S. ULLMANN, *The Principles of Semantics*, Oxford 1957, p. 114.

²³ In his *Dialogue de l'Ortografie*, Peletier's defender of traditional orthography, Théodore de Bèze, provides many examples where «on met ... des lettres pour signifier la différence des mots» (p. 51).

is a way for people to distinguish between homonyms in *speech* (as opposed to *writing*): «la quelle depend du sens, & du iugement de l'home qui saura discerner les diuerses significacions des vocables qui ne sont en rien differens, sinon d'autant que la rayson du propos le requiert». What is true of phonic substance is also true of graphic substance for Meigret, who comments ironically: «Le dy, qu'il faudroit vser de voix superflues en la prononciation: d'autant que les escotans peuuent tumber par la semblance de plusieurs vocables au mesme inconuenient que fait le lecteur»²⁴. This equation between speech and writing, the sound and the character, is not born of confusion and failure to distinguish clearly between the two, a criticism commonly levelled against traditional scholars. Meigret is concerned to stress that «verbal autonomy» can be undermined in a variety of ways and in differing degrees, and that linguistic context determines the meaning of a single word. He does not go out of his way to analyse the phenomenon, nor does he distinguish between different types of plurivalence, but he does present a variety of examples which show that he has given some thought to the subject:

Comme si en parlant du Zodiac, & des estoilles fixes qui y sont, quelqu'vung dye ou bien escriue, que le cueur du Lyon est en la vingt & deuziesme partie du Lyon ou enuiron: la matiere nous deura donner occasion de ne iuger ce Lyon estre vne beste comme nous le voyons en terre. Et toutesfois la prononciation, ny l'escriture ne sont point autre de ce vocable Lyon, soit qu'il signifie vne beste terrestre, ou l'vng des signes du Zodiac²⁵.

And in his *Grammère*: «...nou' dizons vn grant home de bien, & vn gran' larron: la ou grant, sert a l'un de vitupere: & a l'autre, de louanje»²⁶.

In some examples we are in the field of polysemy: «cest arbalestier qui passe, a frappé vne passe, d'une arbaleste de passe», though the distinction between this and homonymy does not strike him as important enough to be worth making, as the next example he gives indicates: «tu dis, tu fais en sorte, que tes dictz, & tes faicts nous sont dix fois plus griefs, qu'vng fes»²⁷. Obviously his argument does not require him to consider the difference between «dis» and «dicts» (or «fais» and «faicts») on the one hand and «dix» (or «fes») on the other. Nor does he pursue the distinction any further in the example he gives in his *Grammère*, where he is still concerned to justify his reformed orthography by demonstrating that words can be recognized:

... par le sens de la matiere: come si je dy, Alexandre set ses set ars liberaos, tout ainsi qe tu les ses: vn François sera bien nyés s'il n'entent bien qe le premier set et vn verbe, & le second nom numeral: & qe le premier ses, et pronom, & le second seconde persione du preznt indicatif du verbe sauoir, tout ainsi qe set et la tierse. Ao demourant je ne voe

²⁴ *Ecriture françoise, Chapitre premier*, no pag.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Grammère*, p. 31.

²⁷ *Ecriture françoise, Chapitre premier*, no pag.

point q'en tenant propos les vns aoz aotres, nous vzions de qelqe note de differenç' aotre qe l'uzaje de parler nous a introduit: ę toutefoes nou' nous ęntęntęndons bien²⁸.

Meigret is clearly concerned with the defence of his spelling reform rather than with semantic theory, which explains why he takes such an optimistic view of the situation and does not attempt to sift all his accumulated evidence. He has nevertheless fully grasped the importance of context in defining meaning:

Croyez q'il n'ęt point de vocable ayant tant de diverses sinificaçions q'on voudra, de qi le bon sęns ne dęceuvre mieus lęs differęnces par le discours de la rėzon du propos, qe par toutes lęs marques q'on saoroęt inuęntęr: attęndu qe si non seulement la marque soet faose, mės q'ęncores le vocable defaille ęn qęlqe syllabe, le bon iujement le rhabille²⁹.

There is a point in the *Grammęre* when Meigret, in trying to formulate a truly French grammar, makes observations which, tentative as they are, further undermine the medieval atomistic view that meanings can be completely isolated. While setting out the various classes of nouns, he points to the fact that some words logically presuppose the existence of others. Such words «sont ręciproques, d'aotant q'en dizant l'un, nou' presuppozons l'aotre: come en dizant pęre, mętre, nous ęntęndons q'il y a filz, ę seruiteur: tęllement qe perissant l'un, l'aotre perit»³⁰. It is plain that the existence of «reciprocity», as he calls it, is incompatible with the atomistic view of meaning. Equally suggestive is his following comment, which implies an awareness of a different kind of semantic dependence, that of collocation, though Meigret insists that in such cases one word does not logically presuppose the existence of the word that collocates with it: «Il ęn ęt qi sont consecutifs, leqels perissant l'un, l'aotre ne perit pas: qoę q'ils soęt adherans l'un a l'aotre: come la nuyt, ę le jour: la dętr' ę la senętre»³¹. Our grammarian has once again, in passing, stumbled upon an important area of semantics apparently without perceiving the full import of what he is saying.

We have seen that Meigret engaged in an explicit discussion of *linguistic* context. Though he never made explicit use of the concept of *situational* context, that is, the physical spatio-temporal context in which a particular utterance takes place, the notion is certainly strongly implicit in his discussion of nouns. As a conventionalist, clearly Meigret was opposed to the notion that names in any way furnish information concerning their referents. As regards proper names, he admits that meaning can obviously be attached to certain of these, as to sobriquets like *Hurt'aopot*, *Fierabras*, *Brizemich*, etc. There are also examples such as «Françoęs qi sinifie ęeluy qi ęt natif de France, ę ęeluy qi porte le nom de Françoęs: come le feu Roę premier du nom.»

²⁸ *Grammęre*, p. 6.

²⁹ *Le Menteur*, p. 10.

³⁰ *Grammęre*, p. 31.

³¹ *Ibid.*

But in other cases the original meaning is lost, as in the case of «IESVS le quel ęn Hebrieu sinifie Saoueur: męs ęn notre lange nou' n'ęn vzons qe pour le nom propre de notre Messias.» Furthermore, names like Boivin and Boileau would not lead us to expect to find «qelqe notable qalité de la pęrsone». Indeed, most people are certainly unconcerned about and generally unaware of the etymological meaning of a name. Hence «combien q'un męme nom propre soęt ballé a pluzieurs, je n'ęn naorey pas toutefoęs la conoęssance, par vn ęntęndement d'une comune substance, qalité, ou qantité», so that people called Pierre, for example, have no substance in common. A name is without descriptive significance, «tout einsi qe le mot du gęt qelqe sinifiaçion q'il ęyt n'ęt ballé qe pour marq, a çeus qi sont ao gęt, sans auoer egart a çe q'il sinifie». Meigret thus provides us with many telling examples, but stops short of building from them a theory of situational context³².

Nevertheless, for a man of his time, Meigret shows a remarkable and original insight into the relationship between syntax and meaning and between meaning and the circumstantial factors of the utterance. The arguments he puts forward foreshadow those of a much later age. As Ferdinand Brunot has said: «Meigret voit souvent loin, parce qu'il ne se contente pas de noter et d'enregistrer; il désire pénétrer et expliquer les faits»³³.

Having considered the positive achievements of Nebrija and Meigret, let us now concentrate upon the more negative aspects of their work, together with their failure, which was a failure of their age, to develop such potentially fertile ideas into a new methodological approach to semantic analysis.

To begin with, the limitations of the two grammarians must be seen in the context of their essentially *practical* approach to language. This approach meant that the problems which presented themselves to the two Renaissance scholars were never isolated for consideration in their own right, as being, that is, an interesting subject for further consideration. Though Bloomfield was in general excessively dismissive of traditional scholarship, his warning about the dangers of a «practical» approach to the study of language in his classic work is strikingly exemplified in the activities of men like Nebrija and Meigret:

The most difficult step ... is the first step. Again and again, scholarship has approached the study of language without actually entering upon it. Linguistic science arose from relatively practical preoccupations..., but people can spend any amount of time on these things without actually entering upon linguistic study³⁴.

In addition to their essentially practical outlook, both Nebrija and Meigret revealed limitations peculiar to their own interests. Hence, alert as he was to the diversity

³² *Grammęre*, p. 29–31.

³³ *Histoire de la langue française des origines à 1900. Tome II: Le seizième siècle*, Paris 1922, p. 143.

³⁴ L. BLOOMFIELD, *Language*, revised edition, London 1935, p. 21.

of tongues, Nebrija never forgot the «orden casi natural y mui conforme ala razon»³⁵ to be found in language, and the «concierto delas partes dela oracion... tan natural a todas las naciones»³⁶. A doctrine of linguistic determinism would thus have been anathema to him and not surprisingly his notion of the relativity of culture, as exhibited in language, loses some of its force and modernity on closer inspection. Particularly, he seems to assume that there exist fixed definitive semantic divisions, and he evaluates languages by the extent to which they measure up to this. Hence, he criticizes the Ancient's paucity of divisions in some fields, which, he believes, reveals that certain species were «del todo o confusamente conocido»³⁷.

The lack of objectivity is also seen in Nebrija's praise of simplicity in language, which exists in paradoxical juxtaposition with his admiration for complexity in the division of semantic fields. The notion of simplicity operative in Nebrija seems to relate to that which pervades the concept of the Great Chain of Being. Despite a greater complexity of construction, the higher creatures were deemed to possess a superstructure distinguished by a supreme economy³⁸. Similarly, superior languages were deemed to possess a characteristic conciseness³⁹. Nebrija would seem to see Latin as superior to Castilian in this respect, suggesting that as regards basic, enduring objects, Latin has one word where the modern vernacular has many. He does, however, boast of the many cases where the situation is reversed: «Muchas cosas tiene nuestra lengua: la fuerza de las cuales, aunque siente la latina: no tiene una palabra por la cual las pueda decir»⁴⁰. He gives the example of *colada* 'blow with elbow', which he notes is matched by a periphrase in Latin meaning 'golpe de codo'.

Similarly, Meigret was too conditioned by the age in which he lived to be able to envisage the dispersion of meaning into ever shifting and changing contexts. His somewhat aggressive rationalism, which as we have seen causes him to defend his «reasonable» orthography and his definition of «usage» with attacks on linguistic «abus» which he regards as against nature and therefore immoral, is basic to all his thinking. He would not have regarded it as a tenable argument against his revised orthography to suggest that people might ignore or even deliberately dis-

³⁵ *Gramatica*, p. 116.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ ViÑAZA, *op. cit.*, p. 1448.

³⁸ For a general discussion of this subject, cf. J. A. MAZZEO, *Renaissance and Revolution. The Remaking of European Thought*, London 1967, p. 174.

³⁹ This is a subject which deserves a more detailed treatment than is possible in the present context. Suffice it for our purpose to note briefly the following examples of the concept of simplicity at work in Renaissance linguistics. M. SALINAS writes: «Dios hizo y crió la lengua hebrea y la enseñó a nuestro padre Adán, y fue la primera y más perfecta, sencilla y sin mezcla» (*Libro apolo-gético que defiende la buena y docta pronunciación*, Alcalá 1563, p. 158). And ANDRÉS DE POZA, speaking of Basque, claimed by him to be one of the God-given Babel tongues: «Enseña al simple y al sabio la naturaleza de la cosa sin otro maestro ni estudio» (*De la antigua lengua, poblaciones, y comarcas de las Españas, en que de paso se tocan algunas cosas de la Cantabria*, Bilbao 1587, p. 32.

⁴⁰ ViÑAZA, *op. cit.*, p. 1450.

regard the «rules» of grammar, that they might use language ambiguously, or even *wish* to do so. Such an attitude, he would have retorted, was immoral, such a playing with language a wicked «abus». Nor did he have to defend himself against such arguments since his enemies (Peletier for instance) were as much infatuated with reason as he was. The Baroque Age might have been capable of making such an attack and hence inspiring further enquiry on someone's part into the ramifications of linguistic and situational context, but by then Meigret was dead and forgotten. He himself would not have appreciated the experiments of Baroque writers and artists: «Toute pourtraicture pour estre louable, doit estre faicte telle, qu'en la voyant on cognoisse le vif, & qu'en voyant le vif, on la cognoisse⁴¹». He would not have been an enthusiastic reader of Du Bartas or d'Aubigné. He was ideologically incapable therefore of investigations which would have meant ultimately admitting that all meaning was contingent. It would have been tantamount to giving the Aristotelian cycle a hefty push towards the downward direction which he and his fellow humanists so feared.

On a more general level, however, one can see in Nebrija and Meigret limitations to their scientific curiosity which stem from another aspect of the humanistic tradition which they espoused. The typical Renaissance grammarian, reacting against abstract medieval speculation about language, adopted a decidedly didactic approach to his subject⁴². In this respect both Nebrija and Meigret are highly representative of their age, for one of their fundamental goals in writing grammars of the vernacular was to facilitate language learning⁴³. Both worked on the assumption that man was a rational creature, and that his languages, reflecting his rationality, were characterized by order and systematization. They aimed, however, at descriptive, rather than explanatory, adequacy, or, in their own words, at «reducing language to rules»⁴⁴. A truly *rationalistic* approach to grammatical analysis, which attempted to «reduce language to reason» began in the Renaissance in the work of J.C. Scaliger and Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas, and was to flourish in the following century in Port-Royal scholarship, but it took the form of reaction against pure descriptivism⁴⁵.

⁴¹ *Esriture françoise*, no pag.

⁴² Compare F. LÁZARO CARRETER: «El auge que la gramática cobra con el Humanismo coincide con el hundimiento de la problemática medieval. No interesan sus contactos con la lógica, porque su fin es puramente didáctico. Se ve, en ella, un instrumento que permite conocer, en sus fuentes, la claridad. Perdido su empleo lógico, adquiere ahora un carácter exclusivamente normativo» (*Las ideas lingüísticas en España durante el siglo xviii*, Madrid 1949, p. 132). Cf. also ROBINS, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁴³ Compare MEIGRET: «le deuoir d'une grammaire jít en la recherche de la doctrine, non seulement de bien, & proprement parler, m'es aosi de bien ecrire...» (*Grammaire*, p. 3-4); and NEBRIJA: «Por esta mi Arte podrían [muchos pueblos barbaros] venir en el conocimiento de ella [nuestra lengua].» (*Gramatica*, p. 8).

⁴⁴ Cf. MEIGRET, *Grammaire*, p. 3; NEBRIJA, *Gramatica*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Cf. CARLOS-PEREGRÍN OTERO, *Introducción a la lingüística transformacional*, Mexico 1970, p. 32-37.

The history of science reveals numerous examples of discoveries which, because the circumstances attending their inception were not propitious, were destined to remain unexplored and undeveloped. The ideas of Nebrija and Meigret regarding the semantics of natural languages are particularly revealing examples of such discoveries in the field of linguistics, for both these scholars were ultimately unable to overcome the restricting influence of pervasive assumptions characterizing the scholarship of their age. To the extent that they were also men of undisputable ability and perception, however, whose views find considerable parallels in modern scholarship, their work is deserving of careful consideration and ultimately, we suggest, of respect.

Aberystwyth

M. K. Read – J. Trethewey