06 2004

Wit and Innovation

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The human animal is capable of changing forms of life and diverting from consolidated habits and rules. We would go as far as to say that the human animal is 'creative', were this term not so equivocal. Put in this way, this is an indubitable observation, but far from a happy conclusion, it prompts all sorts of questions and doubts. Which elements of praxis and discourse give rise to unpredicted outcomes? How is a state of equilibrium broken? And finally, what makes an action innovative?

The tried and tested way of settling the discussion whilst appearing to fully engage with it demands that the term 'creativity' is employed in such broad terms that it becomes coextensive with 'human nature'. Thus we rapidly come to several reassuring tautologies: the human animal is supposedly capable of innovation because it enjoys the gift of verbal language, because it does not inhabit an invariable and delimited environment, or because it is historical; in short, the human animal can innovate because it is ... a human animal. Applause and the curtain falls. This tautology eludes the most interesting and awkward issue: that transformative action is *intermittent,* rare even. To try to explain it by appealing to distinct features of our species is to bark up the wrong tree: these

features are equally present when experience is uniform and repetitive.

According to Noam Chomsky, our language is 'constantly innovative' because it is independent from 'external stimuli or inner states' (and for other reasons that I won't recount here) (Chomsky 1988: 6-7, 113-46). So far so good; however, why does this unremitting independence only occasionally give rise to unusual and unexpected verbal performances? It is no surprise that, having attributed it to language in general, that is, to human nature, Chomsky goes on to conclude that creativity is an unfathomable mystery. Another example of this can be found in philosophical anthropology. Arnold Gehlen claims that *homo sapiens* is an instinct forsaken animal continuously faced with an overabundance of stimuli that have no biological direction and whence no univocal behaviour can derive: that is why his action, 'unfounded' as it is, can be nothing other than creative (Gehlen 1940: 60-87).

Yet this still fails to answer the crucial question: how is it that such overabundance of purposeless stimuli primarily produce stereotypical performances and only rarely give rise to sudden innovation?

It is legitimate to deduce the conditions under which conduct can vary from some defining features of our species, but it would be a glaring mistake to identify these *conditions of possibility* with the particular *logical-linguistic abilities* used to actually modify a particular behaviour. Between one and the other lies a hiatus: the same discrepancy that separates the a priori intuition of space from the inferences through which a geometrical theorem is formulated or understood.

Neither the independence of statements from ‘external stimuli or inner states’ (Chomsky) nor instinctual forsakenness (Gehlen) can explain why when asked ‘How is it going?’ by a blind man a lame man replies with a cutting and creative ‘As you can see’. Chomsky and Gehlen only point to the reasons why the lame man *can* react this way to the blind man’s involuntary provocation (besides many other less surprising ways: ‘well, and you?’, ‘smashing!’, ‘could be worse’); they say nothing of the effective procedures that give rise to the unpredicted swerve in the dialogue. The logical and linguistic resources used by innovative action are more circumscribed and less generic than its conditions of possibility. Despite being a natural prerequisite of all human animals, only under certain critical circumstances do these resources get used and gain greater prominence. Such circumstances would be: when a form of life that once seemed incontrovertible begins to seem ill-fitting; when the distinction between ‘grammatical’ and ‘empirical’ realms (respectively, the rules of the game and the facts to which those rules should apply) becomes blurred; when, however fleetingly, human praxis runs up against that tight corner known by jurists as a *state of exception.*

To avoid the danger of tautology I propose a very limited, almost narrow, acceptation of ‘creativity’: the forms of verbal thought that allow for change in one's behaviour in an emergency situation. A tautological reference to 'human nature’ explains neither the state of equilibrium, nor exodus from it. Vice versa an investigation into the logical and linguistic resources that only become prominent in crisis emphasises the *techniques* of innovation as well as throwing a different light on repetitive behaviour. Rather than the constitutive independence of verbal language from environmental and psychological conditioning, it is the unexpected joke of the lame man that clarifies salient characteristics of stereotypical responses

that probability would have had as given. The suspension or change of a rule shows the often unperceived paradoxes and aporias that underlie its most blind and automatic application.

The following pages focus on wit in the belief that it provides an adequate *empirical basis* to understand how the linguistic animal occasionally imprints an unexpected deviation on its praxis. Moreover, wit seems to be a good example of the narrow acceptation of 'creativity': one that does not tautologically coincide with human nature as a whole, but is rather tried and tested exclusively in critical situations. The main textual reference is to Freud's essay *Witz* (1905): to my knowledge there is no other significant attempt to chart a detailed, *botanical*, so to speak, taxonomy of different kinds of witticism. The profound commitment of the author to clearly identify the rhetorical devices and patterns of reason behind the occurrence of the scathing joke is notorious. I must warn the reader that my interpretation of the material gathered and reviewed by Freud is rigorously non-Freudian. Rather than focusing on its affinity with the labour of dreams and the functioning of the subconscious, I would like to highlight the tight connection between wit and praxis in the public sphere. It shouldn't come as a surprise that in regard to successful witticism I am going to say nothing about dreams and much about *phronesis*, which is the practical shrewdness and sense of measure that guides an agent in the absence of a network of protection from his fellow beings.

Wit is the *diagram* of innovative action. Along with Peirce and mathematicians, I intend diagram to be the sign that reproduces a miniature version of the structure and internal proportions of a given phenomenon (like an equation or a geographical map). Wit is the logical and linguistic diagram of enterprises that interrupt the circular flow of experience in situations of historical or biographical

crisis. It is the microcosm inside which we can neatly discern changes in the direction of arguments and shifts in meaning, that in the macrocosm of human praxis cause a variation in a form of life. In short: wit is a circumscribed linguistic game with its peculiar techniques and its eminent function is to *exhibit the transformability of all linguistic games.*

This general premise is articulated in two subordinate hypotheses that we ought to state now. Here is the first. Wit has much to do with one of the most insidious problems of linguistic praxis: *how to apply a rule to a particular case*. In fact, it has to do with insidiousness, the difficulties and uncertainties that sometimes arise at the moment of its application. Wit constantly demonstrates that there are many different and even contrasting ways to comply with the same norm. But it is the divergences arising through the application of a rule that often provoke a drastic change of the latter.

Far from being situated above or outside of norms, human creativity is even *sub-normative*: it manifests itself uniquely in the lateral and improper paths that we happen to inaugurate when trying to keep to a determined norm. Paradoxical as it may seem, the state of exception originally resides in the only apparently obvious activity that Wittgenstein names 'rule-following'. This entails that every humble application of a rule always contains in itself a fragment of a 'state of exception'. Wit brings this fragment to light.

The second subordinate hypothesis is that the logical form of wit consists in an argumentative fallacy; that is, an undue inference or an incorrect use of a semantic ambiguity. For instance: the attribution to a grammatical subject of all the properties of its predicate, the swapping of the part for the whole or the whole for

the part, the institution of a symmetrical relation between antecedent and consequent, the treatment of a meta-linguistic expression as if it was in language-object. To say it in other words, there is a punctual and meticulous correspondence between the different types of wit catalogued by Freud and the paralogisms studied by Aristotle in his *On Sophistical Refutations*. In the case of wit, argumentative fallacies reveal a productive character; they are useful to something and indispensable mechanisms for verbal action that 'surprises and enlightens' (Freud 1905: 37). Here a delicate question arises: whilst it is true that wit is the diagram of innovative action, we need to presuppose that its logical form, that is the fallacy, has an important role in so far as it changes one's mode of living. However, isn't it bizarre to ground the creativity of *homo sapiens* on reasoning in vicious circles and error? Of course it is bizarre and worse even. But it would be foolish to believe that someone is so foolish to warmly support such a hypothesis. The really interesting point is to understand the circumstances and conditions where a paralogism ceases to be a paralogism, that is, where it *can no longer* be considered mistaken or false (in logical terms). It follows that only under these circumstances and in these conditions the 'fallacy' becomes an indispensable source of innovation.

Chomsky, N. (1988), *Language and Problems of Knowledge. The Managua Lectures*; trad. it. *Linguaggio e problemi della conoscenza*, il Mulino, Bologna 1991.

Freud, S. (1905 [*MdS*]), *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*; trad. it. *Il motto di spirito e la sua relazione con l'inconscio*, Bollati Boringhieri ("Universale"), Torino 2002.

Gehlen, A. (1940), *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*; trad. it. *L'uomo. La sua natura e il suo posto nel mondo*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1985.

'Prologue' by Paolo Virno, Motto di spirito e azione innovativa. Per una logica del cambiamento*, [*Wit and innovation. For a logic of change*], Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005.*