Introduction

Clotilde Pontecorvo*

When Antonella Castelnuevo and Bella Kotik-Friedgut, two scholars and authors of the volume I am introducing, invited me to preface their study about L. S. Vygotsky and B. Bernstein in the light of the Jewish tradition, I accepted this invitation with great pleasure. It seemed to me a very original perspective from which we can look at the contribution of such important and contemporary social scientists. Nevertheless, it has not been an easy task; not least because, as far as I know, there was not any direct connection between the two authors during their scientific life, with the exception of Bernstein's letter¹ written to L. S. Vygotsky's widow after her husband's death. However, the Jewish tradition accompanies each of them, although in very different aspects of their theoretical studies and of their empirical research. With reference to both the authors, anyway, Judaism goes to the roots of their fundamental theoretical reflection.

With reference to L.S. Vygotsky's work, the most relevant thematic is that included in his volume *Thought and Language*, which was posthumously published in 1934, and in particular the seventh and last chapter of the book.

* Emeritus Professor in Psychology of Education, University La Sapienza, Rome.

1 Vygotskaya and Lifanova 1996: 15-16. The article to which Bernstein refers was originally published as "Thought and Speech," *Psychiatry* 2 (1939): 29-54. Bernstein very likely read the version re-published in New York in 1961, *A Book of Readings*, 509-537. Letter dated November 27, 1964. Source: L. S. Vygotsky's personal archive.

Here L. S. Vygotsky tackles the theme of the difference between spoken and written language, highlighting the mainly predicative character of the speech. Among the plurality of examples he gives, narrative texts prevail, taken in particular from the most important Russian literature of the nineteenth century, with many references to Tolstoy's works. This specific underlining of the narrative dimension connects to the distinction Auerbach makes in *Mimesis*, between biblical language and the language of Homer's works, as well as the modern romance. The author we aim to talk about is Aharon Appelfeld, who discloses the elliptical communicative way of the Bible in a text called *The Language and the Silence*, in which he retraces his personal relationship with the language he discovers after escaping from the Nazi extermination camp in Transnistria, where he lost his parents.² He thus mastered biblical Hebrew and began to write fiction. The writing style is predicative and narrative, rich in actions and feelings, whereas in other kind of prose prevails a descriptive and materialistic language with a very accurate analysis performed by the middle generation, those that after their parents' death, managed to escape from the extermination camps, without having any spoken language yet. This is described in his first autobiographic book. In his biography, Appelfeld tells how, at the time they escaped, his father had brought him to a place bordering the Warsaw ghetto, reassuring the boy that he would come back to take him, leaving him with a gun to defend himself, only if necessary. He found escape in the underworld of Ukrainian crime, although he was aware of the huge distance that separated him from the liberal Judaism of his parents and the modern religiosity of his grandparents, not to mention his communist uncles, who had contributed to the liberation of humanity.

Once he saved himself, Aharon approached Israel in 1946, at the age of 13, finding himself with no thinkable memories, refugee, without any shared value at all, without a past, an orphan without any relatives or friends, and especially without his own language, as spoken in the new country.

Appelfeld shows very perceptively his discovery of the Bible, which he read and copied daily, becoming, after the war, an original and well known

2 The text of Aharon Appelfeld was given to me by Professor Elena Löwenthal, a great expert and translator into Italian of the most important literary works of contemporary Israeli authors, during university annual course within the three-year Diploma of Jewish Studies of UCEI Rome, in the year 2012-2013.

Israeli writer. Using the Bible as a model of communication for written language, Aharon managed to write his first work, and, as he was very proud of it, decided that should be his path in life, although he continued tilling the soil and the plants for economic reasons.

Among the many relevant examples of implicit language offered by L. S. Vygotsky are those taken from the Lev Tolstoy's work about Anna Karenina in which the two protagonists talk each other through the initials of short phrases by which they remember their past events, common or not.³ To Vygotsky, this is typical of the dialogue between lovers. Likewise, Aharon's very first mnemonic connection is mediated by the writing of his parents', grandparents' and uncles' names on some little cardstock that he kept hidden into his coat pocket, in order to be able to recover them every time he needed, due to psychological reasons. Those written names offered him a real connection to his past life, to which he could always refer. This transition made him able to move out from silence and to start to build up a language through the imitation of the biblical one that suits him very much since it is absolutely essential and never redundant, useful to express himself synthetically, choosing the adequate words.

To conclude our comments to L. S. Vygotsky, I refer to the ways in which his life was dominated by the research of a personal Spinozian synthesis that from his devotion to Jewish ideas, wants to reach universal human values, as is clear from his latest book completed on his deathbed.

While in our commentary to L. S. Vygotsky we used the Bible language analysis offered by Appelfeld, with reference to B. Bernstein we use the distinction between the two codes, restricted and elaborated, which can be found in every community and which represent different ways of social integration of language within a society. Historically, societies present diverse structures of social organization which lead to control systems reflecting those structures.

Within less literate and evolved societies, the concept of ritual is central for religious behaviour, which allows one to distinguish between what is legitimate and what is not in a given culture. Originally, the use of language is essentially based on oral discourse, characterized by face-to-face experiences. As the

3 This phrase "Les Montagnes de la Suisse sont belles" was written in the form of a series of letters: "L mdl S sb" behind which there is the vague outline of a mountain range (see: Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Part IV, chap. XIII).

complexity of the division of labor increases, as in the case of ancient Jewish culture, there are individuals capable of using an elaborate language, based on universal principles and characterized by an out-of-context explicit discourse. Therefore, there is a pedagogical discourse lived as a symbolic system of conscious control that affects every form of even sociological knowledge acquisition.

These themes concern the way the biblical narrative transmits Jewish people's moral order and defines their identity as a people; in particular, the divine discourse includes the values and the sense of knowledge in the Jewish culture throughout the language between God and man, as a privileged path towards the knowledge that can then be transmitted from one generation to another. This raises the question about how the transmission relates to the type of knowledge that can be acquired by the members of the social community.

The Jewish Bible is not a history book, as it does not offer an accurate account or a chronicle of events. The stories it tells do not happen meaninglessly or in a vacuum but presume the references to an ancient civilization, typical of the Jewish people of that time, whose leaders are mortal and fallible. Even Moses can be guilty of sin, thus he cannot access the promise land. Only God has the supreme power, He is the guardian of justice and owns the truth, even if a "Midrash," which is an ancient interpretative tale that refers to creation, says that when He creates mankind the truth will come up from earth, a metaphor which gives value to mankind's contribution.

In the post-World War II period, the Jewish communities in England appear to present a distinction between orthodox and reformed people, the latter mainly from the middle class, whilst the orthodox communities include lower classes and are located in the East of London, and consider themselves more tied to traditional ways of cultural transmission.

Bernstein perceives the marginalization of the minority group made up of English Jewish adolescent males, tied to rituals expressed through a restricted code; to that group he paid considerable educative and research attention, beginning with his very first job in a Jewish Settlement of London in 1960. There, the majority of community members belonged to the reformed synagogue. After this early phase of his studies, Bernstein underlines how social differences represent critical aspects of the human condition that are

responsible for the internalization of conceptual structures transmitted by gestures, rituals, objects, words, by everything which is permitted during feasts and everyday life. All that differentiates linguistic forms and ways of socialization.

Though considering himself a member of a middle social class, this series of acts identified him as being influenced by the Jewish tradition. Gradually, the Victorian religious culture, which was considered an essential aspect of the English moralistic style, modifies itself through the secularization of a great part of Europe.

With reference to Bernstein, since the very beginning of his theoretical writings, a close relationship between his biography and his theory is highlighted. His first employment was with young Jews, coming from a deprived social environment, speaking a simple language, which Bernstein called restricted code at a later stage, considering the mother as the primary source of knowledge and transmission, while education is the final purpose a human being can reach, and it must aim at mastering an elaborated code. Hence, his fundamental distinction between elaborated and restricted codes. He thus uses a symbolic way profoundly related to the Jewish tradition, which proceeds from a primary transmission operated by the mother to reach a final ideal—educative control of a complex linguistic code. The same objective can be found in L. S. Vygotsky, drawing on the traditional Jewish Seder, which underlines the transmission from one generation to another.

Being Jewish in this scenario of the early twentieth century can mean being excluded from the chance of taking a relevant place in society. The contrast between reformed and orthodox Jewish people, who yet belonged to the same culture, offered Bernstein the example of a social class difference that can explain the reasons for the academic failure of children belonging to working and lower social classes due to the unequal distribution of knowledge in society. Judaism used to give much importance to the education of poor and the socially-culturally weak people in the name of social solidarity, which is frequently repeated in the Bible and in the synagogue prayers.

Although he was not a Bible scholar, Bernstein was familiar with Jewish language, as well as biblical exegesis. For this reason he was later very influenced by Jewish scholars such as Durkheim, Sapir-Whorf, and Cassirer, as well as by Lurjia and L. S. Vygotsky as he says in the letter mentioned above.

A Jewish inspiration can be found in the sacredness of the language through which God creates the world and all the creatures and by which mankind sets its relationship with God.

Families represent a fundamental transmission agency, as well as an organic link to a community; they represent the first learning context for Jewish culture and for socialization. To Bernstein, common knowledge is transmitted within family, whilst scientific knowledge, as L. S. Vygostky also claims, is transmitted within school, the place of official pedagogy. In this first attempt to catch a connection with Judaism as an instructional aspect of Bernstein's life, we have also given life to our attempt to catch some aspects of Judaism's influence, which will give further developments at a later stage.

REFERENCES

- A. Appelfeld, ed. *The Language and the Silence*, 2013. This publication was edited on the occasion of the XXI International Book Fair. Turin, 8-12 May 2008. Trad. by Prof. Elena Löwenthal.