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**THINKING OR SPEAKING:
THE PARADOXES OF THE EPICUREAN THEORY OF LANGUAGE**

Julie Giovacchini

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem I propose to tackle is a recurrent one and has been vigorously dealt with in the historiography of ancient Epicureanism.¹ It is at the crossroads of philological and philosophical difficulties, within the philosophical doctrine itself, at the intersection of cardinal questions pertaining to physics, anthropology, noetics, and epistemology. The Epicurean theory of language is indeed based on ethical, political, and pedagogical purposes that are not always explicit. The nature of language is directly linked to its social use, which explains the tensions and possible contradictions within the Epicurean doctrine.

I will thus discuss these contradictions, so as to show how an anthropological approach can allow us to address this problem differently and in a slightly less aporetic way. In particular, I propose to show how taking into account certain sources dealing with Epicurean hypotheses concerning the origin of law and the organization of human societies can provide valuable information concerning the actual semantic functioning of language, understood as a technology in the true sense of the word (i.e., involving a learning context as well as an expertise). This approach will allow me to show how Epicureanism can assume, on the one hand, that the meaning of words proceeds from an initial experience common to all but, on the other hand, that it is also susceptible to learning and to varying degrees of precision and truth according to the capacities of the speakers within a society.

¹ It is quite impossible to propose an exhaustive bibliography about the question of Epicurean theory of language and the epistemological issues I am going to deal with in the following pages. I will mention several recent and former publications as far as they constitute stepping stones in Epicurean studies; I will certainly neither analyze nor even mention all the relevant papers about the subject.

2. THE THREE-LAYERED PROBLEM OF EPICUREAN THEORY OF LANGUAGE

When we approach the problem of language in Epicureanism, we cannot but be struck by the glaring contrast between the scarcity of the texts and the abysmal problems they raise.²

Some texts approach language through questions of logic or dialectics; it is, for example, the case of Diog. Laert. X 31 (= 1), Epicur. *Nat.* XXVIII (*PHerc.* 1479) fr. 13 col. V sup Sedley (= 2), or Epicur. *Hrdt.* 37-38 (= 3).

1.

As for dialectics, they dismiss it as useless; for it is enough that physicists progress according to the words that come from things.³

2.

I know very well that you will quote many, whom you [Metrodore] could observe, who spoke giving to words grotesque meanings and even in any other sense than the one to which one mentally associates it in the usual language; but as for our own practice, we do not use anything instead of the habits of the language and we do not change the names when it is a question of obvious realities.⁴

3.

First of all, therefore, dear Herodotus, we must grasp the realities placed under the words, so that we have by referring to them something to evaluate what is supposed or sought or doubted, and that everything is not undecided for us, who would go back to infinity in the demonstration, and that we do not have empty words. It is indeed necessary that the first notion according to each word be perceived directly and that it does not require a demonstration, if we really find ourselves in the case of possessing what to which to relate what is sought or doubted or supposed.⁵

² For the Epicurean doxography by Diogenes Laertius, I usually quote (from Dorandi 2013). For Epicurus' *Letters* themselves, I use Marcovich 1999; for Lucretius, Martin 1969. For more peculiar texts, I mention my source in the relevant footnote each time.

³ Diog. Laert. X 31: Τὴν διαλεκτικὴν (fg. 36 Us.) ὡς παρέλκουσαν ἀποδοκιμάζουσιν· ἀρκεῖν γὰρ τοὺς φυσικοὺς χωρεῖν κατὰ τοὺς τῶν πραγμάτων φθόγγους.

⁴ Epicur. *Nat.* XXVIII (*PHerc.* 1479) fr. 13 col. V sup Sedley (= Trismegistos 59760); for the edition of the source, see <http://papyri.info/dclp/59760>: πάνυ γὰρ οἶμαι| σε πολλὰ ἂν ἔχειμ προε[ν]έγ-| κασθαῖ ἂ ἔθεώρεις γελοῖως [π]ώ[ς] |τι[να]ς ἐγδεξαμένους καὶ π[άν-]| τ[α] μᾶλλον ἢ τὸ νοούμενον| κατὰ τὰς λέξεις, οὐκ ἔξω τῶν| ε]θισμένων λέξεων ἡμῶν |χρωμένων οὐδὲ μετατιθέν-| των ὀνόματα ἐπὶ τῶμ φανε-| [ρ]ῶν. For a more detailed explanation about the context of this quotation, see Masi in the present volume.

⁵ Epicur. *Hrdt.* 37-38: Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν τὰ ὑποτεταγμένα τοῖς φθόγγοις, ὡς Ἡρόδοτε, δεῖ εἰληφέναι, ὅπως ἂν τὰ δοξαζόμενα ἢ ζητούμενα ἢ ἀπορούμενα ἔχωμεν εἰς ταῦτα ἀναγαγόντες ἐπικρίνειν, καὶ μὴ ἄκριτα πάντα ἡμῖν ἢ εἰς ἄπειρον ἀποδεικνύουσιν ἢ κενούς φθόγγους ἔχωμεν· ἀνάγκη γὰρ τὸ πρῶτον ἐννόημα καθ' ἕκαστον φθόγγον βλέπεσθαι καὶ μηθὲν ἀποδείξεως προσδεῖσθαι, εἴπερ ἔξομεν τὸ ζητούμενον ἢ ἀπορούμενον καὶ δοξαζόμενον ἐφ' ὃ ἀνάξομεν.

These texts contemplate what are the rules of a true discourse, how one can evaluate the value of a statement; for this set of texts the conclusions seem to be:

- first, that a true or non-empty discourse (whether truth and density are indeed synonymous, which is another difficulty⁶) is the one that speaks about an empirically verifiable reality;
- second, that there are criteria of evaluation of this discourse which are different from the traditional dialectical criteria (maybe this difference is only apparent) but which exist nonetheless (there is indeed a rule or a canon of true discourse); the main rule being to come back to “what is under the words” which, according to the texts, can be interpreted either as a rule of physical foundation (physics, and not dialectics, is what gives its rules to the discourse), or as a rule of common or first use, or finally, in a lighter way, as the rule of an obvious starting point which is not itself subject to explanation or clarification;
- third, that the philosophically correct discourse does not, or as little as possible, depart from language as it is immediately understood and usually practiced (what is sometimes called ordinary language); but from one text to another it is difficult to determine if this practice of ordinary language is based on the idea that this language would be closer to reality or to the nature of things, or on the fact that for methodological reasons we have to start from what is usually said (what is best understood and therefore clearest, but not necessarily the most accurate or closest to nature).

Some texts deal, or at least seem to deal, more specifically with semantics, that is, the theory of meaning: under what conditions is a word or a sentence signifying (and not only true, which distinguishes this question from the previous one and perhaps allows us to introduce a nuance of meaning between empty discourse and false discourse). We can read such attempts, for example, in Epicur. *Nat* XXVIII (*PHerc.* 1479) fr. 12 col. III Sedley (= 4), Diog. Laert. X 33 (= 5), Polystratus, *Περὶ ἀλόγου καταφρονήσεως* (*PHerc.* 336/1150) col. VIIIb Indelli (= 6), Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1119 E-F (= 7).

4.

We said in the explanations then stated that all error in men has no other form than that which is produced from preconceptions and appearances through the multitude of linguistic habits, and...⁷

⁶ We can find a very interesting attempt about the distinction of semantic and syntactic application of the logical principle of bivalence, in relation with the specific Epicurean conception of causality, in Bown 2016a.

⁷ Epicur. *Nat* XXVIII (*PHerc.* 1479) fr. 12 col. III Sedley: ... ἐλέγομεν κατὰ [τ]ὴν [ἐ]κ-| κειμένην ἔρμηνίαν τῶν| ὅτι πᾶσα ἡ ἀμ[α]ρτία ἐστὶν| τῶν ἀνθρώπων οὐδὲν ἔτε-| ρον ἔχουσα σχῆμα ἢ τὸ ἐπὶ| τῶν προλήψεων γιγν[ό-]| μενον καὶ τῶν φαιν[ομ]ένων| διὰ τοὺς πολυτρόπους ἐ[θι-]| σμοὺς τῶν λέξεων, καὶ ...

5.

About preconception, they say that it is like a conscious grasp, or a right opinion, or a notion, or a general concept stored, that is to say the memory of what has often appeared to us from the outside, for example when we say: “that is a man”. Indeed, at the same time that we pronounce “man”, immediately according to a preconception we think of the image of the man, from previous sensations. And therefore, for any name, what is first placed below is obvious. And we would not have undertaken to look for what we are looking for, if we had not first had it in mind; for example when we say: “this is a horse or an ox”; it is necessary according to a preconception to have first had in mind the shape of the horse or the ox. And we would not have named anything either if we had not previously learned its image according to a preconception. So the preconceptions are obvious.⁸

6.

... those who, in their very words, draw every conclusion from deductions or first principles which they do not apply in life, and to which they do not conform; and consider also those who, in order to obtain the favor of those around them, or to deceive the crowd by immediately obtaining its assent and seducing it, construct a multifaceted discourse which tends neither to the amendment of their own existence, nor to the betterment of life, either for themselves or for their hearers...⁹

7.

The scandal, Colotes, is not the refusal to say that a man is good, or even that horsemen are innumerable, but the refusal to say and even to believe that the god is god, which you do, you, by not consenting to recognize that Zeus is “Generator”, Demeter “Lawgiver” and Poseidon “Nourisher of the shoots”. It is this separation of terms that is perverse and fills life with an atheistic contempt and audacity, every time you tear off the names that are closely associated with the gods, making sacrifices, mysteries, processions and feasts disappear in the process. [...] In fact, these considerations touch on the most important and serious subjects, because it is in the heart of realities that they bring deception, and they are not limited to words or to an assembly of sayable, or even to a habitual use of terms. For if these considerations are really enough to turn life upside down, are there people who offend language more than you, who simply do away with the genre of sayables, attributing true being to discourse, and admitting only words and contingent facts,

⁸ Diog. Laert. X 33: Τὴν δὲ πρόληψιν λέγουσιν οἰοεὶ κατάληψιν ἢ δόξαν ὀρθὴν ἢ ἐννοίαν ἢ καθολικὴν νόησιν ἐναποκειμένην, τουτέστι μνήμην τοῦ πολλάκις ἐξωθεν φανέντος, οἷον ‘τὸ τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν ἄνθρωπος’. ἅμα γὰρ τῷ ῥηθῆναι ‘ἄνθρωπος’ εὐθύς κατὰ πρόληψιν καὶ ὁ τύπος αὐτοῦ νοεῖται προηγουμένων τῶν αἰσθήσεων. παντὶ οὖν ὀνόματι τὸ πρῶτως ἐπιτεταγμένον ἐναργές ἐστι· καὶ οὐκ ἂν ἐζητήσαμεν τὸ ζητούμενον εἰ μὴ πρότερον ἐγνώκειμεν αὐτό· οἷον ‘τὸ πόρρω ἐστὼς ἵππος ἐστὶν ἢ βοῦς’. δεῖ γὰρ κατὰ πρόληψιν ἐγνωκέναι ποτὲ ἵππου καὶ βοῦς μορφὴν· οὐδ’ ἂν ὠνομάσαμεν τὴ μὴ πρότερον αὐτοῦ κατὰ πρόληψιν τὸν τύπον μαθόντες. ἐναργεῖς οὖν εἰσιν αἱ προλήψεις.

⁹ Polystratus, Περὶ ἀλόγου καταφρονήσεως (*PHerc.* 336/1150) col. VIIIb Indelli (= Trismegistos 62661, see <https://papyri.info/dclp/62661>): ἤδη [iδ]ε̄ ἐν αὐταῖς ταῖς | φωναῖς τοὺς μὲν διὰ συλ-|λογισμῶν καὶ ἀξιομά-|των ἕκαστα περαίνον-|τας, οἷς οὐδ’ [α]ὐτοὶ ἐπι|(co)λα [τοῦ βί]ου χρῶνται οὐδ’ ἀκο-|λουθοῦσιν, * τοὺς δὲ ἐνε-|κα τῆς πρὸς τὸν πλησίον|ἀρεσκείας ἢ ἀπάτης πρὸς|τὴν ἑαυτο[τ]ις παραυτίκα ἐπίνευ-|σι[ν] καὶ ψυχαγωγίαν τῶν|πολλῶν μηχανωμένων|παντοδαπὴν τινα λαλι-|ἀν οὐθὲν οὐτ’ αὐτοῖς οὐ-|τε τῆς ἀκοῦ[σ]ουσιν εἰς ἐ-|[πα]νόρ[θω]σιν καὶ τὸ βέλ-|[τιο]ν ζ[ῆ]ν σ[υ]ν[ε]τ[ε]ίνουσιν-|[σαν]α[...].α ...

while the intermediate realities signified, which make possible learning, teaching, anticipations, thoughts, impulses, assent, you claim that they don't even have the slightest existence?¹⁰

This second set of texts seems to indicate that the meaning of words is complex. It is at the same time common to all and person-specific; indeed it refers to a singular affect of the utterer but this affect is supposed to be shareable and always referring to a material external reality which is at the origin of this affect.¹¹ The semantics involved is indeed a direct semantics in the sense that it does not suppose a third party between the signifier and the signified, like the Stoic *lekton* for instance.¹² These texts indicate also that language is sufficiently natural for ordinary language to be privileged in most cases and sufficiently conventional for shifts in meaning or language plays to be authorized from time to time, particularly to talk about complex or non-immediately obvious realities.

Finally, some texts question language as a human technology, from an anthropological,¹³ historical, or genealogical point of view (around the question of the invention of language), as well as from a political point of view (how does language act as an instrument of socialization); language is described, in a rather ambivalent way, as a spontaneous technology; it is a skill naturally shared by all but which, like

¹⁰ Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1119 E-F: οὐκ ἄνθρωπον, ὃ Κωλῶτα, μὴ λέγειν ἀγαθὸν οὐδ' ἵππεϊς μὴ (E) ρίους δεινὸν ἔστιν, ἀλλὰ τὸν θεὸν μὴ λέγειν θεὸν μηδὲ νομίζειν, ὃ πράττετε ὑμεῖς μήτε Δία γενέθλιον μήτε Δήμητραν θεομορφὸν εἶναι μήτε Ποσειδῶνα φυτάλιον ὁμολογεῖν ἐθέλοντες. οὗτος ὁ χωρισμὸς τῶν ὀνομάτων πονηρὸς ἐστὶ καὶ τὸν βίον ἐμπλήρῃσι ὀλιγορίας ἀθέου καὶ θρασύτητος, ὅταν τὰς συνευγεμένας τοῖς θεοῖς προσηγορίας ἀποσπῶντες συναναίρητε θυσίας μυστήρια πομπὰς ἑορτὰς. [...] ταῦτα γὰρ ἄπτεται τῶν κυριωτάτων καὶ μεγί(F) στων ἐν πράγμασιν ἔχοντα τὴν ἀπάτην, οὐ περὶ φωνᾶς τινας οὐδὲ λεκτῶν σύνταξιν οὐδ' ὀνομάτων συνήθειαν. ὡς εἶ γε καὶ ταῦτα τὸν βίον ἀνατρέπει, τίνες μᾶλλον ὑμῶν πλημελοῦσι περὶ τὴν διάλεκτον, οἱ τὸ τῶν λεκτῶν γένος οὐσίαν τῷ λόγῳ παρέχον ἄρδην ἀναιρεῖτε, τὰς φωνὰς καὶ τὰ τυγχάνοντα μόνον ἀπολιπόντες, τὰ δὲ μεταξὺ σημαίνόμενα πράγματα, δι' ὧν γίνονται μαθήσεις διδασκαλίαι 1120. (A) προλήψεις νοήσεις ὀρμαὶ συγκαταθέσεις, τὸ παράπαν οὐδ' εἶναι λέγοντες; My translation is much inspired by J. Boulogne's.

¹¹ There is an important confrontation between a Fregean reading of Epicurean semantics, which tries to save Epicureanism from the accusation of psychologism and to restore to logic its primacy, and others' readings which, on the contrary, insist on the irreducibly psychological dimension of Epicurean semantics, in which the state of thinking must necessarily precede the linguistic formulation; a good example of this quarrel can be found in Everson's 1994 synthetic article on the question, as well as in the works of Sedley 2018, Barnes 1996, and the analytical readings of Epicureanism in general.

¹² See again Bown 2016a but also Hammerstaedt 1996: 228-229 who interprets the harsh critics of Sextus and Plutarch against Epicurean assumptions about direct reference as a straw man: Plutarch and Sextus would have refused to see in preconceptions a functional analogue of the Stoic *lekta*. See also Manetti 1996: 174-175.

¹³ As far as the anthropological side is concerned, attention has been historically focused on the opposition between conventionalism and naturalism (see Goldschmidt 1977 and to some extent Brunschwig 1995; see also Manetti 1996: 177ff, Gensini-Vitali 2018, and Taylor 2020); this focus has led to questioning the direct or indirect nature of Epicurean semantics, by confronting it most of the time with the Stoic model, which seems to be its most direct opponent (see Bown 2016b and Atherton 2020), yet also with the Aristotelian model as summarized in the *Peri hermeneias* (see Everson 1994 and Sedley 2018), or with the Platonic model of the *Cratylus* (see Milanese 1996, Goodman-Aikin 2017, in addition to Berg 2007 and Gensini-Vitali 2018). We will not discuss these different kinds of readings here.

any technical procedure, also supposes a stage of rationalization and optimization; and, especially, it is a technology necessary for social life; the best-known is probably Epicur. *Hrdt* 75-76 (= 8).

8.

But it is also necessary to make the hypothesis that nature was instructed and forced in multiple and varied ways by the very realities; and that reasoning in a second time specified what it had caused and added its own discoveries, either more quickly or more slowly, and according to the periods of time [scholia: from a portion of the unlimited] *** or less. And from there the names at the very beginning were not imposed by convention, but the very natures of the men, who felt according to each people singular affects and received singular representations, have, in a singular way, projected the air sent back by each of the affects and representations, so that at a moment the difference emerged according to the geographical situations of the peoples. And then in common, according to each people, the particularities were instituted to make the reciprocal designations less ambiguous and more concise; and for the realities that are not immediately visible, those who perceived them, reporting them, proposed certain words, being forced to utter them or choosing them by reasoning according to the privileged cause that made them express themselves in such a way.¹⁴

From one set of texts to another, one can have the impression that there are inconsistencies or at least shifts, which sometimes lead to paradoxes, particularly when one tries to apply the rules or the hypotheses found here and there to the specific case of philosophical language. I would summarize these problems with the following set of questions:

- Does philosophical language have any particularities?
- Is it a technical language or an ordinary language?
- Are the realities described by this philosophical language sayable or assessable in the same way as other realities?

At first sight, one might think that philosophical language is mainly concerned with the first aspect (the rules of true speech); but insofar as these rules seem in fact to derive from the second (the semantic rules), that is to say, to the extent that

¹⁴ Ἀλλὰ μὴν ὑποληπτέον καὶ τὴν φύσιν πολλὰ καὶ παντοῖα ὑπὸ αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων διδαχθῆναι τε καὶ ἀναγκασθῆναι, τὸν δὲ λογιζόμενον τὰ ὑπὸ ταύτης παρεγγυηθέντα ὕστερον ἐπακριβοῦν καὶ προσεξευρίσκειν ἐν μὲν τισὶ θᾶπτον, ἐν δὲ τισὶ βραδύτερον καὶ ἐν μὲν τισὶ περιόδοις καὶ χρόνοις [ἀπὸ τῶν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀπειροῦ] <*> ἐν δὲ τισὶ κατ' ἐλάττους. Ὅθεν καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὴ θέσει γενέσθαι, ἀλλ' αὐτὰς τὰς φύσεις τῶν ἀνθρώπων καθ' ἕκαστα ἔθνη ἴδια πασχούσας πάθη καὶ ἴδια λαμβανούσας φαντάσματα ἰδίως τὸν ἀέρα ἐκπέμπειν στελλόμενον ὑφ' ἐκάστων τῶν παθῶν καὶ τῶν φαντασμάτων, ὡς ἂν ποτε καὶ ἡ παρὰ τοὺς τόπους τῶν ἐθνῶν διαφορὰ ᾗ· (76) ὕστερον δὲ κοινῶς καθ' ἕκαστα ἔθνη τὰ ἴδια τεθῆναι πρὸς τὸ τὰς δηλώσεις ἤττον ἀμφιβόλους γενέσθαι ἀλλήλοις καὶ συντομωτέρως δηλουμένας· τινὰ δὲ καὶ οὐ συνωρώμενα πράγματα εἰσφέροντας τοὺς συνειδόμενους παρεγγυησαί τινος φθόγγου τοὺς ἀναγκασθέντας ἀναφωνῆσαι, τοὺς δὲ τῷ λογιζομῶ ἐλομένους κατὰ τὴν πλείστην αἰτίαν οὕτως ἐρμηνεύσαι.

it is difficult to see in the texts what concerns all language and what applies only to true speech, the first and the second aspects mutually encroach on each other.

- Is philosophical language a technical language? The density of vocabulary is very high in Epicurean texts; but in this case we have a problem with what is said by Polystratus, since it is supposed not to be the case.¹⁵
- The realities described by philosophy are complex and for some of them hidden; can we speak about them, and under what conditions? how, then, can we bring “what is under the words” to the forefront when it comes to these realities? Is it an allusion to preconceptions?¹⁶ If for instance I talk about atoms to someone who has not read the *Letter to Herodotus*, without making definitions (since it is a well-known prohibition of the Epicurean scientific method), what will they understand?

Let’s rephrase this last question: is the vocabulary of the *Letter to Herodotus* understandable by someone who does not already have an Epicurean philosophical basis? Can we really argue that the *Letter to Herodotus* is a pedagogical and even propaedeutic text? This problem applies more generally to all Epicurean *epitomai*, for example, to the *Ratae Sententiae* whose obscurity nobody will deny in the absence of a solid Epicurean education; is there not also a form of contradiction with some testimonies about the ‘straightforwardness’ of Epicureanism?¹⁷


How can we combine these different aspects of the Epicurean theory of language and resolve this apparent contradiction between the conditions of intelligibility (which involve contextualization and relationalization) and the nature of meaning (which seems to derive from a direct semantics in which words and things are linked spontaneously without intermediary)? At stake is the possibility of a philosophical language accessible to all – speaking not just to speak but to teach and understand.

3. BACK TO BASICS: THE CONNEXION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND PRECONCEPTIONS

The difficulty we have to confront is the overlap between epistemological questions (the conditions of possibility and intelligibility of a true philosophical discourse) and specifically linguistic questions (how one speaks, what one speaks about, where

¹⁵ The fact that the Epicurean notion of truth is rather far from the ordinary understanding of the word *truth* is, for example, well explained in Bown 2016a: 475.

¹⁶ See Milanese 1996: 281ff.

¹⁷ See for example Braicovich 2017 and Giovacchini 2019. Masi proposes a subtle and relevant way to explain how a non-technical language could express complex and hidden realities, based on the hypothesis that the objective referent of a name is the “distinctive property of a class of objects”; see Masi p. X  = p. 11) in the present volume.

language comes from); at the heart of this ambiguity, preconception attracts all attention, and one does not know how to handle its double nature, both conceptual (but of a strange and ambiguous conceptuality, that of an acquired individual notion which is at the same time a criterion of truth¹⁸) and linguistic;¹⁹ one will find this difficulty in all studies on preconceptions.²⁰

The usual identification of preconception with the vehicle of meaning induces a major difficulty:²¹ if we push this hypothesis to its extreme, do we not end up with the idea that, just as sensation is always true, language properly based on prenotion itself always and univocally says what is true? In other words, did the Epicureans adopt a maximalist posture consisting in supposing the possibility of an ideal philosophical language which neither says the false nor the non-existent? Did they fall into the paradox of the *Sophist*?

This hypothesis is tempting in view of the reproach made against them for renouncing referentiality by refusing to make the signifier an independent reality – just like the Stoic *lekton*. And this is what can be concluded from the excerpt

¹⁸ Several interpretations clash around the battlefield of the plurivocal nature of preconception. First of all, we can find a confrontation around the question of referentiality between some radical materialist readings (of which a good representative could be Glidden's; see Glidden and Mitsis 1992 for the article of Glidden and Mitsis's critical recovery of Glidden, in which Mitsis reintroduces the notion of representation in order to understand the semantic mechanism. See also Hammerstaedt 1996: 223ff. Sedley 2018, Morel and Konstan 2008, and Tsouna 2016 also question this aspect, in particular by concentrating their readings on the prenotions and the projections of thought; Voula Tsouna proposes a distinction between a Lockean conception (radically empiricist) and a Kantian conception of preconceptions, which she identifies in Morel's interpretation and which gives conceptualization a remarkable importance in the noetic process described in the preserved elements of the Epicurean Canon; in the Lockean conception, preconceptions derive their evidence from the effective empirical rooting in sensation; in the so-called Kantian conception, their association with a mental focus, which is implied by the association that the Canon makes between preconceptions and vocabulary, also plays a part in the process. Voula Tsouna assumes that the first conception alone secures the intrinsic truth and reliability of preconception – and notes that preconception is an Epicurean answer to the paradox of the *Meno*, which would not be so well solved by the Kantian approach. It is a path that has been opened by the very important study by A. A. Long (Long 1971) and that is regularly re-explored as a fertile one – a more recent example should be perhaps Gensini–Vitali 2018.

¹⁹ On Epicurean preconceptions, I mainly refer to Asmis 2009, Hammerstaedt 1996, Morel and Konstan 2008, Giovacchini 2012: 19–27, and Tsouna 2016 as recent syntheses; within the framework of the present paper, I will not discuss the different hypothesis about the constitution of preconceptions in the human mind, in addition to their innate nature; I basically agree on that point with the Lockean conception described by Tsouna. A detailed explanation of the nature of preconception based on the most recent state of the art and particularly on the analysis of Epicur. *Nat.* XVIII can be read in F. Masi's article in this volume.

²⁰ The difficulty has clearly been alluded to by A. A. Long in the conclusion of his key paper of 1971 (Long 1971); in fact I assume that everything written since is an attempt to address the programmatic hypothesis of Long about the preconception being at the same time a vehicle for meaning and a criterion of truth.

²¹ As a matter of fact, it might be possible to develop the whole empiricist epistemology on which is based the hypothesis of preconceptions and the nature of their evidence, without alluding to the theory of language; it is the approach for example of Asmis 2009. A good synthesis can be found in Verde 2010: 78–80.

of Plutarch's *Against Colotes*, in which the Epicureans are accused, among other things, of not having understood the dialectical criticisms addressed to predication, and of having concluded that it was necessary to abolish reference in order to restore the truth of discourse.²²

It is in fact the same difficulty as the epistemological one, which comes from the general choice of sensation as the absolute criterion of truth: in theory, for a consistent Epicurean it would be possible to never be misled by following only sensations even though sensations seem to regularly push us to it – which is properly the subject of the beginning of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* IV.

And yet, supposing I still concede this to him, here is what I will ask him: since he has never seen anything true in things before, from where does he know what it is to know and not to know, and vice versa; what thing gave rise to the notion of true and false; and what thing made it clear that the doubtful differs from the certain? Lucret. IV 473-477²³

We then arrive at two new subsequent questions:

- Is it true that every word is naturally based on a preconception?
- Is it possible to conceive a word for which this is not the case, either totally or partially?

It would seem that Epicurus himself asked himself this question if we are to believe the fragments preserved in *Nat.* XXVIII (= 3) of his discussion with Metrodorus, in a text which remains very difficult to understand. The most likely hypothesis is that Metrodorus supported a radical conventionalism at a time when Epicurus himself was hesitating about the kind of validation that would be effective for statements and was probably tempted by a clearer demarcation between ordinary language and technical language, so as to avoid some ambiguities and purify philosophical language. If we consider, as we often do, that the *Letter to Herodotus* is prior to *Nat.* XXVIII,²⁴ perhaps we should be aware that the doctrine has evolved on this question... And that therefore there is indeed an obscurity and a complexity to be deciphered in the *Letter to Herodotus*, an obscurity which would have been adopted by Epicurus himself in a later state of the doctrine. Yet we can also be reassured by

²² Barnes 1996 has proposed an elegant but incomplete solution, arguing that in fact the insistence about the direct referentiality appears in contexts where the question which has arisen is specifically the question of meaning (for example in *Adv. Col.*); it has to be distinguished from the epistemological question of the nature of truth (as it is addressed in *Hrdt.* 37); preconception is thus for Barnes the condition, at the same time for true speech and meaningful speech. Even so, this solution does not explain at all how we can say something obviously wrong but understandable.

²³ Et tamen hoc quoque uti concedam scire, at id ipsum / quaeram, cum in rebus veri nil viderit ante, / unde sciat quid sit scire et nescire vicissim, / notitiam veri quae res falsi quae crearit / et dubium certo quae res differre probarit. My translation is much inspired by J. Pigeaud's.

²⁴ See, for example, Sedley 1973.

the words of Epicurus in *Nat.* XXVIII, who himself underlines on several occasions that if his doctrine has evolved, there is no contradiction.²⁵ What we will keep is the idea that there is indeed a link between preconceptions and meanings and that this link is obviously not a univocal one or one that guarantees the relevance of the discourse.²⁶

In that case, though, my aporetic questioning bounces back: if prenotions all come from the most immediate sensible experience, if they are natural, how is it that we do not all have the same prenotions, or at least that we do not all have an equal access to them – how is it that we are not all equally intelligent and wise and fully free-minded? Additionally, therefore, as it is obviously not the case, how do we share preconceptions? – which is the condition of a common language, if language indeed supposes a sharing of meaning. We will note that for example the existence of various languages which are incomprehensible from one people to another is precisely a usual argument, taken up again in Sextus, against the hypothesis of the natural origin of language: if language were natural, we would all understand each other.²⁷ It seems to me, however, that unintelligibility can also play out quite well within the same language – and I take as an example, here again, the complexity of philosophical texts such as the *Letter to Herodotus*, for which I myself have a hard time coming up with clear preconceptions identical to those of my colleagues.

We always find behind these different questions the same dense ambiguity between a theory of meaning and a theory of science or of true discourse. To rephrase the problem in another way: if words have a meaning because they are spontaneously associated with preconceptions, and if preconception is a criterion of truth because of its deeply empirical structure:

- where does this association of word and prenotation come from, is it immediate, is it discursive?
- how is it possible to speak to say nothing or to say a falsehood?²⁸
- what happens when someone speaks to me and I understand what they are saying (there is therefore a meaning and even a common meaning) but I consider it to be false?

²⁵ Epicurus was deeply concerned with the problem of clarity and precision with scientific vocabulary, as well as the difficulty to reconcile both accuracy and use of ordinary language. See Angeli 1985, as well as Erler 1993 and Verde 2010: 22, 223, Tsouna 2021: 192, Giovacchini 2003.

²⁶ See also *Nat.* XXVIII (*PHerc.* 1479) col. III Sedley.

²⁷ Sextus *AM* I.145. Blank 1998: 179 sees here a merely anti-Epicurean argument. Spinelli 1991: 62 proposes a much more cautious reading, focusing on the idea of a *diachronic* building of meaning, which I will use later in my own proposition.

²⁸ Bown 2016a: 497-498 proposes that Epicurus has in mind always two meanings for *true*: in a first acceptance, true means that a thing of the world is “real” or “genuine”; in a second acceptance, “true” is said of “presentations, judgements or statements” and evaluates the correctness of what is said, not of the realities themselves. This suggestion is pretty efficient for understanding the case of judgements about future and past events, but Bown concludes in a sort of hyper-realist position that remains highly doubtful and not necessary in my opinion.

Let us try, for example, to reinterpret, keeping this problematic network in mind, *Hrdt.* 37 and “what lies beneath the words” by trying to better understand this expression in context; we see quite quickly that it is really difficult to understand what is talked about in this passage, that indeed all the interpretative options seem possible.

The preconception can have its criterial meaning; but also, and maybe even more, a weaker meaning, like the one Sextus seems to take up:

For, according to the wise Epicurus, there is neither research nor doubt without a preconception.²⁹

Since there is neither research nor doubt, according to the wise Epicurus, without preconception...³⁰

Here, *preconception* is for the meaning of what we have to start with, within the framework of a progressive (and pedagogically progressive) philosophical exposition; we would then find here a simple resumption of a weak version of the program of *Analytica Posteriora*,³¹ asking for a point of departure beyond which we cannot go back, and which would be: a clear and immediately understandable language.³²

Let’s look at what follows *Hrdt.* 37: the first thing that is introduced is an extremely hypothetical ontology for which it seems very difficult to invoke a preconception in the mind of the reader, since it is certainly not about realities accessible through simple experience. The text indeed deals with principles that correspond to complete physical laws, which are explained in an almost demonstrative way; the *atomon* is not immediately introduced, nor is it clearly understandable; on the contrary, the goal of the text is to introduce for the principles, both the word and the thing, which can be done only from a general ontology based on very encompassing physical principles. A general solution to this problem has long been to assume that for Epicureans, language is a bad philosophical tool – and that it must necessarily be rectified by recourse to non-linguistic procedures: analogy and empirical reasoning; in other words, language is by nature a distorting medium, and one would have to recover immediate interaction with nature and things themselves in order to avoid the pitfalls of lexical ambiguity and overinterpretation.³³ In doing

²⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *AM* XI.21: κατὰ γὰρ τὸν σοφὸν Ἐπίκουρον οὔτε ζητεῖν ἔστιν οὔτε ἀπορεῖν ἄνευ προλήψεως.

³⁰ Sextus Empiricus, *AM*. I.57: Ἐπει οὔτε ζητεῖν οὔτε ἀπορεῖν ἔστι κατὰ τὸν σοφὸν Ἐπίκουρον ἄνευ προλήψεως...

³¹ See Milanese 1996: 271-272.

³² See, for example, Sedley 2018: “Every word has a primary notion naturally underlying it, and provided that that notion is kept in focus, transparency will be maintained in any discussion, without the dialectical requirement that the parties start by agreeing a definition. Whether or not this primary notion is thought to serve as the word’s meaning, it amounts to a safe starting-point, one that in turn enables collaborative discussion.”

³³ See, for example, Giovacchini 2003 and Giovacchini 2012: 122-127.

so, Epicureans would include language and judgment as part of the same mistrust, considering that its referential nature makes language suspect and that it is necessary to reach things without this intermediary.

Still, we should reconsider this somewhat binary distribution. I think that we have at least one set of texts, from the very first origins of Epicureanism, that can help us understand differently how language should be approached, because these texts confront the question of reference and the relationship between words, references, and realities.

4. PROCESSUAL SEMANTICS, OR LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT

I now propose to question, on the one hand, two *Ratae Sententiae* of Epicurus and, on the other hand, the beginning of Hermarchus's genealogy, transmitted by Porphyry in the *De Abstinentia*, and to confront them with what can be read in *Hrdt.* 75; and to highlight with them the temporality and the incompleteness of the symbolic process. This approach will lead me to defend the hypothesis that Epicurean semantics is above all a processual semantics: at the heart of the Epicurean theory of meaning is the idea that what is said in language is not the relation of word and thing once and for all, but the actual relation, at the moment of speaking and likely to modify in time, in the minds of each of the speakers, between singular affects, preconceptions, and words. Thus, what governs language as a technical rule is not so much its truth as its collective dimension; language is first of all a political technique and as such it is not evaluated only according to its truth value, but also according to its intelligibility and adaptability.³⁴

RS 31

What is naturally right is that which allows us to identify what is useful in order not to harm others and not to be harmed.³⁵

RS 37

What is established as useful in the customs of the community of men among themselves, among the acts which the laws say are right, occupies the place of what is right, whether or not it is the same for all. And if anyone enacts a law which does not result in anything useful in the mutual community, < that law > will no longer

³⁴ This proposition owes a lot to the also been very important for my reflexion, particularly his analysis of the analysis of Spinelli 1991: 62-63; if I am correct, my proposition could be a new piece of evidence in the puzzling issue of the proximity between Epicureanism and some skeptical positions. Some aspects of Bown 2016a have apparent rejection of the principle of bivalence, for which he very clearly shows the relationship with a complex semantic theory involving an important distinction between syntactic disjunction of propositions and metaphysic contradiction between two opposite states of affairs.

³⁵ Τὸ τῆς φύσεως δίκαιόν ἐστι σύμβολον τοῦ συμφέροντος εἰς τὸ μὴ βλάπτειν ἀλλήλους μηδὲ βλάπτεσθαι.

have the nature of what is right. And if what is useful becomes opposed to what is right, and takes a moment to adapt itself to the preconception, it is no less right during that moment for those who do not allow themselves to be troubled by empty sounds, but who focus only to realities.³⁶

Hermarchus (in Porphyri *De Abst.* I.7-8)

Those who follow Epicurus say, developing what looks like a vast genealogy, that the ancient legislators, having closely observed the community of life of men and their conduct towards each other, denounced as impious the murder of a man and attached to it very specific punishments; first of all they quickly identified a certain appropriation of men with men, because of their resemblance of form and soul, and concluded that this kind of living being should not be recklessly immolated, confusing it with the living for which it is admitted; nevertheless < they say > according to these legislators the main reason that this was considered unbearable and denounced as ungodly was that it was disadvantageous for the general organization of life. From this principle, those who understood the advantage of this decision needed no other but those who could not have a sufficient sense of it, fearing the magnitude of the punishment, refrained from recklessly killing one another. Even today, both attitudes are observed. And indeed those who have the intuition of the advantageous character of the convention described above hold to it zealously, but those who are not able to apprehend it fear the threats of the laws, which have been fixed because of those individuals lacking the understanding of the useful, this having been accepted by most < men >. For no rule, written or unwritten, among those which have subsisted until now and which by nature will subsist, was instituted as just by violence, but yielded to it by those who had the use of it. For it was by the wisdom of their souls, not by the force of their bodies or the power of their tyranny, that those who brought such rules to the masses distinguished themselves from the masses, leading to the empirical reasoning of the useful those who before felt it without reasoning, and often forgot it, and frightening the others by the magnitude of the punishments. For there was no other remedy against the ignorance of the useful than the fear of the punishment prescribed by the law.³⁷

³⁶ Τὸ μὲν ἐπιμαρτυρούμενον ὅτι συμφέρει ἐν ταῖς χρεαίαις τῆς πρὸς ἀλλήλους κοινωνίας τῶν νομισθέντων εἶναι δικαίων ἔχειν τοῦ δικαίου χώραν δεῖ, ἐάν τε τὸ αὐτὸ πᾶσι γένηται ἐάν τε μὴ τὸ αὐτὸ· ἐάν δὲ νόμον μόνον θῆταί τις, μὴ ἀποβαίνει δὲ κατὰ τὸ συμφέρον τῆς πρὸς ἀλλήλους κοινωνίας, οὐκέτι τοῦτο τὴν τοῦ δικαίου φύσιν ἔχει· κἂν μεταλίπη τὸ κατὰ τὸ δικαίον συμφέρον, χρόνον δὲ τινα εἰς τὴν πρόληψιν ἐναρμόττη, οὐδὲν ἦττον ἐκείνον τὸν χρόνον ἦν δικαίον τοῖς μὴ φωναῖς κεναῖς ἑαυτοῦς συνταράττουσιν ἀλλ' εἰς τὰ πράγματα βλέπουσιν.

³⁷ Οἱ δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἐπικούρου ὡσπερ γενεαλογίαν μακρὰν διεξιόντες φασὶν ὡς οἱ παλαιοὶ νομοθέται, ἀπιδόντες εἰς τὴν τοῦ βίου κοινωνίαν τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τὰς πρὸς ἀλλήλους πράξεις, ἀνόσιον ἐπεφήμισαν τὴν ἀνθρώπου σφαγὴν καὶ ἀτιμίαις οὐ τὰς τυχοῦσας προσῆψαν, τάχα μὲν καὶ φυσικῆς τινος οἰκειώσεως ὑπαρχούσης τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πρὸς ἀνθρώπους διὰ τὴν ὁμοίτητα τῆς μορφῆς καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς εἰς τὸ μὴ προχείρως φθεῖρουν τὸ τοιοῦτον ζῶον ὡσπερ ἕτερόν τι τῶν συγκεχωρημένων· οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ τὴν γε πλείστην αἰτίαν τοῦ δυσχερανθῆναι τοῦτο καὶ ἀνόσιον ἐπιφημισθῆναι τὸ μὴ συμφέρειν εἰς τὴν ὅλην τοῦ βίου σύστασιν ὑπολαβεῖν. Ἀπὸ γὰρ τῆς τοιαύτης ἀρχῆς οἱ μὲν παρακολουθήσαντες τῷ συμφέροντι τοῦ διορισματος οὐδὲν προσεδεήθησαν ἄλλης αἰτίας τῆς ἀνειργούσης αὐτοῦς ἀπὸ τῆς πράξεως ταύτης, οἱ δὲ μὴ δυνάμενοι λαβεῖν αἰσθησιν ἰκανὴν τούτου τὸ μέγεθος τῆς ζημίας δεδιότες ἀπέιχοντο τοῦ κτείνειν προχείρως ἀλλήλους. Ὡν ἐκάτερον φαίνεται καὶ νῦν ἔτι συμβαίνειν. Καὶ γὰρ οἱ μὲν θεωροῦντες τὸ συμφέρον τῆς προειρημένης διατάξεως ἐτοιμῶς ἐπ' αὐτῆς μένουσιν, οἱ δὲ μὴ δεκτικοὶ τούτου τὰς ἀπειλάς φοβούμενοι τῶν νόμων, ἅς ἔνεκα τῶν ἀσυλλογίστων τοῦ χρησίου διώρισαν τινες, παραδεξαμένων αὐτὰς τῶν πλειόνων. Οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐξ ἀρχῆς βιαιῶς κατέστη νόμιμον οὔτε μετὰ γραφῆς οὔτε ἄνευ γραφῆς τῶν διαμενόντων νῦν καὶ διαδίδοσθαι πεφκώτων, ἀλλὰ συγχωρησάντων

These texts deal with the same linguistic procedure as *Hrdt.* 75; in Hermarchus, it is a question of *naming* a crime by identifying it, which is indicated by the verb *epiphemizein*; what is described in each case is what Verlinskij³⁸ calls a “cultural” process, or more simply: a technological process.³⁹ This intuition will guide my reading of these texts: if what we understand about language does not apply to other technologies, and if we do not have a clear perception of the fact that what is described in Hermarchus’ text as well as in *Letter to Herodotus* is a technological process, it seems to me that we have missed something in our understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, it is always a matter of using a complex technology that is not equally controlled by all; we always find a hierarchy between a spontaneous or “natural” use and a complex or expert use, allowing us to produce an understanding of distant or hidden realities.⁴⁰

RS 31 uses the notion of *symbolon*, obviously to describe a system of reference; this is remarkable because *symbolon* is an *hapax* in the first Epicurean corpus⁴¹: I reckon that one can detect both a deviation from what Aristotle says about linguistic symbolism in the *Peri Hermenias*, as well as a proximity.

In Aristotle’s *Peri Hermenias* we can find a tripartition between words, states of the soul, and realities; words symbolize the states of the soul, which themselves play the role of signs for the pragmata; this is a much-commented passage. I am going to follow Di Mattei’s reading;⁴² Di Mattei insists on the non-equivalence of symbols and signs, on the one hand, and on the fact that precisely in Aristotle’s case the word is not its meaning: *symbolon* does not designate the semantic relation (which is always designated by Aristotle as *semeion*) but describes parallel relations between pragmatic levels: what happens within words happens in parallel within impressions and concepts.⁴³

We use words as symbols to reason, as we use figures as symbols to calculate. The word itself does not say anything about the meaning, which will rather be correctly expressed by, for example, a definition; yet there is in Aristotle a pact of meaning which stipulates that if linguistic symbolism respects rules (grammatical

αὐτῶ καὶ τῶν χρησαμένων. Φρονήσει γὰρ ψυχῆς, οὐ ῥώμῃ σώματος καὶ δυναστευτικῆ δουλώσει τῶν ὄχλων διήνεγκαν οἱ τὰ τοιαῦτα τοῖς πολλοῖς εἰσηγούμενοι, καὶ τοὺς μὲν εἰς ἐπιλογισμὸν τοῦ χρησίμου καταστήσαντες ἀλόγως αὐτοῦ πρότερον αἰσθανομένους καὶ πολλάκις ἐπιλανθανομένους, τοὺς δὲ τῶ μεγέθει τῶν ἐπιτιμιῶν καταπλήξαντες. Οὐ γὰρ ἦν ἐτέρω χρησθῆαι φαρμάκῳ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ συμφέροντος ἀμαθίαν ἢ τῶ φόβῳ τῆς ἀφωρισμένης ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου ζημίας (Porph. *Abst* 1.7-8 Nauck).

³⁸ See Verlinskij 2005: 65, 97.

³⁹ See on that point Tsouna 2021: 198.

⁴⁰ Giovacchini 2020: 50.

⁴¹ *Symbolon* is usually synonymous for *sunthèkè* which means any type of contract or convention (see Gusmani 2009); but in the Greek Epicurean corpus, we can notice that the use of *sunthèkè* is prominent, though *symbolon* is very rarely used; see also Asmis 2008: 142; if *symbolon* had a juridical meaning in *RS* 31, it would be a very remarkable exception in Epicurean vocabulary.

⁴² Di Mattei 2006.

⁴³ As has been stressed by Irwin 1982: 256 n. 15, the distinction between *semeion* and *symbolon* here does not overlap a nature vs convention distinction.

and dialectical), language can be a vehicle of the correct meaning and thus correctly express states of the soul and realities themselves.⁴⁴

In *RS* 31, there is a symbolism between what is right, according to nature, or naturally, and the usefulness immediately identified with the protection of oneself and of others (thus the social usefulness, which is: security); it is clear that what is right is not a sign of the usefulness – the relation would in fact function better in the other direction: when there is social utility, when one feels protected or in security in society, one can consider that there is justice. The explicit mention of a symbol invites us to understand it as a parallel relation; but, and this is the great difference with Aristotelianism, this symbolic relation would be at least partly natural or spontaneous and not strictly conventional.⁴⁵

“What is right according to nature” – which in the *RS* 37 is explicitly identified with a preconception – would thus play the role of an equivalent, in another dimension of existence, for what is useful. The preconception of what is right is what one handles in a social situation with respect to an individual stable feeling of security or insecurity (i.e., usefulness in the political sense). The notion of symbol insists on the referentiality of the preconception: it is not the thing, but it is not the affect or the sensation either; it is something else, which is linked to it, which can be put in common, and which relates to it by a natural link. Yet if what is right as a preconception can indeed play the role of starting point of political and legislative work, what exactly is the status and role of usefulness? Is usefulness a preconception? If it is the case, would what is right be then a preconception of a preconception?

There is something which could help us in Lucretius in that regard:

Moreover, if others had not also used words among themselves, where did the notion of usefulness come from, where was he given this first ability to know what he wanted to do and to see it in spirit? In the same way a single individual could not constrain many others, overcome them and keep them tamed, so that they would be willing to start learning the names of things.⁴⁶

Lucret. V 1046-1054

⁴⁴ Hudry 2011 does not accept the idea that language could have a logical syntactic structure, but as he establishes a strict distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic meanings, he nevertheless stresses the fact that it is the symbolic nature of language that makes him significant: “Non-linguistic meanings for Aristotle are mental contents, which are unable to be expressed by a conventional language, since language is never syntactic, but always meaningful by convention. Nevertheless, meaningful spoken sounds are correlated with mental contents, in the sense that the linguistic meanings of language are the conventional symbols of (non-linguistic) mental contents” (p. 275); see also Lo Piparo 2005 about the distinction between the Aristotelian notion of *symbolon* as a substitute for the natural *orthotēs* of words described in the *Cratylus*, in addition to its critique by Gusmani 2009, who insists on the specific technical signification of the Aristotelian *symbolon*.

⁴⁵ On that point, Polansky and Kuczewski 1990 and Giovacchini 2020: 44.

⁴⁶ Praeterea si non alii quoque vocibus usi | inter se fuerant, unde insita notities est | utilitatis est unde data est huic prima potestas, | quid vellet facere ut sciret animo que videret? | cogere item pluris unus victos que domare | non poterat, rerum ut perdiscere nomina vellent.

Here, Lucretius is making a *reductio ad absurdum*. Lucretius indeed argues that if we were to consider a linguistic educator of humanity – a *nomothetos* – we would have to suppose in him a special notion of usefulness, which would lead to two questions: where would it come from, and why would it not come to others as well? It seems to me perhaps an indication that the usefulness, insofar as it is common to all and absolutely spontaneous, is prior to any preconception⁴⁷ – and that it is why the feeling of usefulness is at the principle of absolutely all technological inventions, including and especially those that are common to all human communities.

Let us draw from this an initial, important conclusion: there is indeed in any referential mechanism implying a preconception something beside or beyond the preconception itself, which roots it in the spontaneous, and such is the meaning of what is right according to “nature”: what happens by itself, what is not mediated by something else; semantic processuality here means the dynamic and variable relation between an affect or a sensation – punctual and immediate, what is seized at the same time as it is felt, thought, spoken – and preconceptions.

Usefulness in itself is an affect or a sensation, what I feel when something gives me comfort, relief, pleasure. What will become a true concept, what will be fixed in a preconception, like what is right or any meaningful word, are structures, categories, or regular types taught by experience and shareable, but which must permanently be actualized by confrontation with a subjective affect of the useful.

In *RS* 31 and 37, what is right is shareable by means of laws whose role is to share this preconception with all, including those who do not understand it; the role of the law is to pool and fix usefulness in common institutions, to build what is useful for all in conformity with what is useful for each. The role of the preconception is to verify for oneself the conformity of the useful for all (the law) and of the useful for each (the personal feeling of usefulness); the fact that this verification is not once and for all is clearly expressed by the *RS* 37.⁴⁸ This flexibility of the preconception justifies in return the use of the symbol to designate the relation of affect and preconception: it is indeed a system of provisional equivalence, the difficulty lying in the capacity to update the equivalence as it goes along.⁴⁹

The preconception of what is right is then the personal, lucid, and actual relation between the feeling of what is useful (preservation and security) and the political concepts set up to provide this usefulness to the greatest number. What is right is what satisfies the need within the social group. However, it turns out that not everyone equally understands what is right. The law then acts as the punctual embodiment, the fixing of this preconception once it has been validated by a community. There is thus a double mediation which takes place in the legislative technology: a

⁴⁷ *Contra* Everson 1994.

⁴⁸ See Giovacchini 2020: 42-43.

⁴⁹ Gensini-Vitali 2018: 124 proposes an interpretation of Epicurean naturalism, where “natural” is an equivalent for the active relation between words and preconceptions.

symbolic mediation between the feeling of usefulness and the prenotation of what is right, and a technological mediation between the legislation of a community and the prenotation of what is right.⁵⁰

More generally, we can consider that for any technology, and in particular for linguistic technology, we will have individual preconceptions which are effective and up-to-date relationships between needs (feeling of usefulness) and concepts or inventions shared by artifacts (the law is an artifact, language another one).⁵¹ To speak is to provide for our need for communication by using words. Preconceptions alone, without technological mediation, would probably validate the truth of the speech itself but not necessarily its understandability to others. If my preconception of gods is great but I associate it with a word that nobody takes in this sense here and now, my language is not empty but it is not understandable. And in the linguistic pooling the preconception can only play this role if it is the same for everyone. So we have the same double mediation in the case of language as in the case of justice: symbolic mediation between affect and prenotation and technological mediation between prenotation and spoken and shared language. Thus we understand that the preconception does not come to fill language, but that language is to share the preconceptions, to share knowledge and information. We do not need language to think, but we do need it to be with others and share our thoughts⁵².

I see an example of this processual semantics in an excerpt from Demetrius Lacon which outlines the different meanings of “by nature”:

It is said that man has “naturally” an aptitude to feed himself, since it is not unhealthy; “naturally” he bears pain, since it is necessary; “naturally” he looks for virtue, since it is useful; and “by nature” took place the first utterances of the words we say...⁵³

It is clear here that meaning is always contextualized and that the important thing is not to fix a meaning in itself but a meaning in relation to other meanings and in relation with a speaker. We can also perhaps use this reading grid to refine the understanding of the famous passage of Plutarch’s *Adv. Col.* (= 7), which seems to

⁵⁰ Taking into account this double mediation should perhaps alleviate the gap which has been seen and well described by Atherton 2005 and Reinhardt 2008, both in the Lucretian and Epicurean narrative about the origin of language, between the first moment of “vocalization” and the second moment of real linguistic communication.

⁵¹ For the link between origin of language and *utilitas*, as well as a discussion about the respective dimension of *need* and *usefulness* in *utilitas*, see, for example, Atherton 2005 and Tsouna 2021.

⁵² This semantic capacity to plastically adapt language to a situation or an audience is probably directly correlated to the Epicurean conception of voluntary movement and, in particular, of voluntary mental movement. An examination of this aspect would take us far from the subject of this article, but it deserves to be developed. See Masi 2007 and 2015, Maso 2015.

⁵³ Dem. Lac. *Op. inc.* (*PHerc* 1012) col. XXXVII Puglia (source: Trismegistos 59506, see <https://papyri.info/dclp/59506>) — φύσει γὰρ λέγεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος ποριστικός εἶναι |τρο| φῆς|, ἐπειδήπερ ἀδιαστρό|φως, φύσει δὲ πόνων εἶ-|ναι δεκτικός, ἐπειδὴ κα-|τ{ατ}ηναγκασμένως, φύ-|σει δὲ τὴν ἀρετὴν διώ-|κειν, ἐπεὶ συμφερόντως, φύσει δὲ τὰς πρώτας τῶν | ὀνομάτων ἀναφωνήσεις| γεγονέναι λέγομεν...

attribute to the Epicureans a very naive direct semantics. I am struck by the fact that what is really aimed at is above all the political – and in this case religious – consequence of this semantics.⁵⁴ If Epicurean semantics did not affect social interactions – because the designations of the gods imply beliefs that have practical consequences, for example – it would not be subject to this virulent criticism. More precisely, the criticism of Epicurean semantics is that it has practical consequences, because it constructs meaning from a reference that is both collective (shared by all) and rooted in the personal affects and beliefs of individuals.

This processual semantics presupposes two mediations, which are highlighted in a three-stage description of the linguistic invention; these three stages correspond to different levels of intellection within a given social group; for if language as well as law are first of all techniques implying progressive sharing and pooling, not everyone masters these techniques equally.

- The first stage is a spontaneous or natural stage: each individual at their level can produce meaningful sounds in accordance with their preconceptions.
- The second stage is a collective step of conventional mapping to fix the referentiality of each preconception.
- The third stage is a stage of refinement and complexity that will involve experts and specialists.

Mackey⁵⁵ suggests that the third stage in *Hrdt.* 75 is specifically that of philosophical language, and he raises a very good question about the meaning of the phrase *sunorwmēna pragmata*: is it about what is seen by thought, or is it about what has not yet been seen? Does this stage describe the conventional invention of new words more suitable to describe realities already known, or does it suppose that some individuals, endowed with a finer sensitivity, will perceive realities that others do not and thus create new words to describe them, the meaning of which they alone would finally grasp? Another question, related to the previous one: is this a stage of linguistic invention (are new words created?) or of reusing words that already exist in new meanings? Mackey assumes, probably rightly, that it is indeed a matter of reusing words, as it seems to be explained in an excerpt from *On poems* by Philodemus.

As far as legal technology is concerned, there are also three stages, perfectly described by Hermarchus, but which are described not in a chronological but in a genealogical way, in order to explain retrospectively the different understandings of the laws by different social groups, classified according to their capacity to deal with the symbolic mediation and the technological mediation:

⁵⁴ This passage should be read in conjunction with Lucret. II 643-660; on the difficult question of the materialist use of divine antonomasia, see Gigandet 1998: 337ff.

⁵⁵ See Mackey 2015.

- those who understand and can update the preconception at any time; this is the highest level, these individuals have accessed both mediations and are capable of creativity – they can shape the law’s evolution to adapt it to the modifications urged by the preconceptions;
- those who have frozen the preconception once and for all, who can deal with technological mediation (they believe that the law expresses what is right and useful for everyone), but not with symbolic mediation (they cannot update their preconceptions);
- those who have no relevant preconceptions at all and are thus subjected to their individual affective point of view; for them, no symbolic mediation is possible, but the *pharmakon of fear* acts to oppose their affect with another affect and to rectify it.

If we now apply this scheme to philosophical language itself, understood as a particular application of the general technology of communication that is language: its accuracy thus always depends on both the intelligence of the speaker and the intelligence of the addressee; it supposes not the univocal recourse to fixed preconceptions, but the almost plastic capacity to modify the symbolic mediation as we understand it – to play with signifiers as well as with meanings. Hence, for example, the overabundant use of metaphor in Epicurean texts, which imitates the flexibility of the relation of preconception to affect, as well as the use of varied discourses.⁵⁶

We can then understand that technical or philosophical language does not take the place of ordinary language, but that it is a reformulation of it; and that therefore the work on words consists in operating transfers (giving a new conception a name which already existed but did not apply to it, for example), that is to say, in constantly rebuilding and updating the symbolic mediation (from affect to preconceptions) then the technological mediation (from preconceptions to language), in order to make right associations between words and preconceptions, associations that will never be unique nor definitive because the associations between preconceptions and affects will never be themselves. The language is a flexible signifying technique that allows us to associate – in an original way when it is necessary – perceived, felt, or inferred realities with expressions of common language, through the intermediate symbolic way of preconceptions.

⁵⁶ I believe Epicureans don’t use metaphors in a poetical way, but as useful devices to make them understood in some technical contexts where usual vocabulary can not be efficient; it is really similar to what Davidson explains in Davidson 1978: ‘My disagreement is with the explanation of how metaphor works its wonders. To anticipate: I depend on the distinction between what words mean and what they are used to do. I think metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use. It is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences and depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of those words and hence on the ordinary meanings of the sentences they comprise.’ (p. 33)

CONCLUSION: A PRAGMATIC AND POLITICAL THEORY OF LANGUAGE

This reading invites a different approach to the question of the Epicurean theory of language, coming back to the purpose of the semantic hypotheses expressed in the few sources at our disposal; these objectives are always ethical and political and, more particularly, educational: the correct language indeed does not serve so much to think, nor to understand, but to transmit and socialize knowledge; as several testimonies make us aware, if everybody had a correct use of the preconceptions or a totally isolated life, we would not need language more than laws. Society constitutes a first response to the needs of humanity lost in nature, and it gives rise to a new need for communication.

What is the language of philosophy? Is it the language of thought? This question permeates Epicurean pedagogy,⁵⁷ which constantly reformulates and tries to solve the difficulty of transmitting discursively (with *logos*) what is experienced empirically (through sensation). It is an obsession that runs through the whole Epicurean corpus. It appears that this pedagogical obsession is based on a political conception of philosophy defined as emancipatory – and that Epicureans must confront the question of the possible intellectual inequality of individuals.⁵⁸ There is a tension between a popular vocation for Epicurean philosophy and elements of permanent elitism based on a taxonomy of human beings, the consequences of which are important for Epicurean noetics. In this context, language is in itself a tool of education and transmission, and the open question is whether it is able to overcome this difficulty – or not. This is also an internal paradox of the Greek notion of *technè* which supposes both an expertise, a talent, or at least a superior experience for the one who masters it, which opposes it to *tribè* or, more simply, to chance.⁵⁹ Yet the survival of humanity supposes that technical skills are necessarily – at least in part or for the most crucial of them – equally distributed to all so that something like a society is possible.

At the end of this overly long journey, here are some provisional conclusions that I think I can suggest. If we link language to preconceptions in a univocal way, we have to attribute to the Epicureans a naive and problematic semantics – which I think is unnecessary. On the contrary, we can understand this relation of language to prenotions as a dynamic relationship and understand meaning as a never-ending process. For this relationship, meaning is the provisional and partial trace in a given context and situation of interlocution. This allows us to reflect on Epicurean anthropology and on the relationship not only between humankind and nature but also between people within societies, as well as on the possibilities of emancipation offered to them by philosophical language.

⁵⁷ The best synthesis about the influence of pedagogical purposes on Epicurus' writing is MacGillivray 2015.

⁵⁸ See Giovacchini 2020.

⁵⁹ See Tsouna 2021: 194, Morel 2016: 16–19.

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