

WIKTOR PSKIT (ŁÓDŹ)

LANGUAGE IN THE WRITINGS OF NICOLÁS GÓMEZ DÁVILA

This paper is concerned with the concept of language expressed in Nicolás Gómez Dávila's scholia. Although Gómez Dávila does not explicitly present any theory of language, the present study attempts to juxtapose Gómez Dávila's remarks on language, scattered throughout his writings, with the current thinking in linguistic theory.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is to present, and to some degree reconstruct, the views of the Colombian thinker Nicolás Gómez Dávila on language. Although Gómez Dávila's ideas appear to be very original, they are relatively unknown, and as yet none of his works has been translated into English.

In his writings, which consist virtually entirely of short notes or aphorisms (scholia), the Colombian philosopher discusses a whole range of topics, such as society, culture, history, politics, religion, art, literature, philosophy, science and many more. Gómez Dávila is renowned as a reactionary and a radical critic of modernity, including modern science and philosophy. The present paper seeks to demonstrate how his views on language can be related to modern linguistics. The discussion of Gómez Dávila's aphorisms concerning language is preceded by the presentation of his life, work and views in general, because without this broader context an account of his 'philosophy' of language is impossible.

NICOLÁS GÓMEZ DÁVILA'S LIFE

Nicolás Gómez Dávila, a Colombian writer and philosopher (1913-1994), was born into an upper-class family in Bogotá. He was educated in Paris, where severe pneumonia forced him to stay at home for about two years. During this period he was educated by private tutors and developed a life-long love of clas-

sical literature. He returned to his homeland in 1930 and spent the rest of his life there, dying in 1994.

Gómez Dávila was known as a reclusive figure with a vast library of 30,000 volumes. He was one of the founders of the Los Andes University in Bogotá, but he never held an academic post and did nothing to promote his own works. Instead, he spent most of his life reading and writing in his library or in the company of a small circle of his friends.

His first book, *Notas I* (*Notas II* never appeared), published in 1954, was a collection of short notes and aphorisms. However, because the first edition consisted of merely 100 copies, most of which ended up as gifts to Gómez Dávila's friends, the work remained largely unknown.

His next publication was a small collection of essays, *Textos I* (again, there was never a *Textos II*), which appeared in 1959. This work presents Gómez Dávila's philosophical anthropology and philosophy of history. In *Textos I* Gómez Dávila makes it clear that he intends to create a "reactionary patchwork" – his solution to the problem of impossibility of representation of reality in terms of a philosophical system.

His most significant, and probably best known, later work is *Escolios a un texto implícito* (*Notes on the Margins of an Implicit Text*), five volumes of aphorisms published between 1978 and 1992.

Gómez Dávila's name remains very obscure, perhaps owing to the reclusiveness of his personality, the slimness of his output and the originality of his writing and ideas. At the end of his life, his works came to enjoy popularity in continental Europe, mainly in conservative circles, resulting in extensive translations of his work into Italian, German and Polish. But apart from selected aphorisms translated by those interested in his thought, which can be found on Internet websites and blogs, Gómez Dávila's works remain unavailable in English (Urbanek 2008a, 2008b, don-colacho.blogspot.com).

THE CONTENT OF NICOLÁS GÓMEZ DÁVILA'S WRITINGS

One of the main features of Gómez Dávila's work is his radical criticism of modernity in virtually all its instantiations and in the spirit of the 19th-century French counterrevolutionaries. Gómez Dávila strongly criticized not only left-wing, but also right-wing and conservative political practices, although his explicitly reactionary stance bears some resemblance to conservative viewpoints, as evidenced by his traditionalist Catholicism, belief in authority and order as well as unification of political and theological matters and dislike of modern ideologies such as democracy, liberalism and socialism. Another distinctive point in Gómez Dávila's thought is his sceptical anthropology and affirmation of hierar-

chical structures of order in domains like society, state and church. Gómez Dávila also strongly disapproved of anthropocentrism manifested in the idea of the sovereignty of the people, which, according to the Colombian thinker, entailed the deposition of God. Hence, his critical attitude to the Second Vatican Council, interpreted by Gómez Dávila as a problematic attempt to adapt the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church to the world. Another aspect of the Council that raised his doubts was the destruction of the Latin liturgy that took place in the years following the Council. The religious dimension of Gómez Dávila's thinking is also found in his belief that political errors are caused by theological errors, which gives rise to the label 'political theology' that is sometimes applied to his work (don-colacho.blogspot.com).

The range of topics covered in Gómez Dávila's writings is quite large and includes philosophy, theology, literature, art, aesthetics, history, politics, to mention only those most frequently referred to.

In the scholia, Gómez Dávila demonstrates his appreciation of the metaphysical and the transcendental. At the same time his writing is truly existential, because for him philosophy is a way of life rather than just an intellectual exercise. Each of his short statements serves as an invitation to assimilate and live the truth, not just to discover it (Urbanek 2008b).

THE REACTIONARY CHARACTER OF NICOLÁS GÓMEZ DÁVILA'S WORK

Gómez Dávila is frequently labelled a reactionary thinker, and in a number of his annotations he writes about what being a reactionary means. His notion of reactionary in the first place refers to the way of thinking about the surrounding world and it goes beyond the traditionally recognized political right and left. This reactionary position should be distinguished from conservative or traditionalist stance. Gómez Dávila admits that it is not possible to reverse the course of history and return to the former state of affairs. Then, given the impossibility of the restoration of the old order, being a reactionary involves being the guardian of heritages (Gómez Dávila 1995).

An example of aspects of Gómez Dávila's thinking that make the labels 'traditionalist' or 'conservative' inappropriate is his explicit appreciation of philosophers such as Nietzsche or Heidegger, whose positions are very distant from Catholic conservatism.

According to the Colombian philosopher, realizing the futility of attempts to return to the past, or at least perceiving them as a form of utopia, does not entail approval of the current situation. Indeed, Gómez Dávila stresses his critical attitude towards contemporary ideals such as democracy, defined as "an anthropotheist religion" or "metaphysical perversion". The former definition involves

criticism of progress seen as human attempts to surpass God. The reactionary's duty is to oppose this kind of tendency, which forces him to be religious. However, what is required for this purpose is not taking any action, but merely preserving the values of the past (Urbanek 2008a, 2008b).

FORM OF WRITING

A very important aspect of Gómez Dávila's work is the very form of his writing: aphorisms, glosses, or annotations. There has been some debate over the reasons for this type of form adopted by the Colombian philosopher. In fact, Gómez Dávila himself explains his choice in *Notas* (Gómez Dávila 1954), where he juxtaposes the only two "tolerable" ways to write: a slow, meticulous, leisurely style, and a short, concise, elliptical style. For Gómez Dávila following the latter way is his *raison d'être* (Volpi 2008: 19). The resulting annotations appear to be like seeds that promise "infinite consequences" or like the peaks of ideas with massive mountains beneath (don-colacho.blogspot.com, Volpi 2008).

However, associating Gómez Dávila's form of writing with the concept of aphorism raises some doubts. Indeed, the Spanish title, *Escolios a un Texto Implícito*, indicates that they are intended to be notes on the margins of the books the author read. The Spanish term *escolio* derives from the Greek *scholion*, referring to explanatory notes made to a classic by a scholiast, i.e. an ancient or medieval commentator (*New Webster's Dictionary and Theasurus of the English Language*, 1995). Thus, most, if not all, Gómez Dávila's scholia should be treated as allusions to other works.

Some controversy also surrounds the alleged distinction between an aphorism and a scholion, discussed by authors analyzing Gómez Dávila's writing. As Urbanek (2008b: 10) argues, Gómez Dávila does not regard himself as an aphorist. An aphorism is supposed to stem from the experience of the surrounding world, whereas a scholium develops as a result of withdrawing from the world. While an aphorist seeks adventure in the world, a scholiast is isolated in his own cell.

NICOLÁS GÓMEZ DÁVILA'S SCEPTICISM

One of the major aspects of the Western civilization that Gómez Dávila rejects is the intellectual output of Enlightenment. In his opinion, Enlightenment ideas led humans astray in their effort to discover the truth, though certain elements of these ideas go back as far as 13th century. According to the Colombian,

the greatest truths are not attainable on rationalist or empirical grounds, but rather by means of religious rituals. At the same time, Gómez Dávila acknowledges that there is no system that enables embracing the whole universe in terms of concepts. This sort of scepticism is reflected in the very form of his writing as well as in the lack of systematic organization of his scholia.

Gómez Dávila's scepticism is also present in his treatment of notions like 'problem' and 'solution'. For him problems are more important than solutions, since modern world offers too many solutions, none of which have worked. The reason for the abundance of such unsatisfactory solutions is quite simple – humans are incapable of finding solutions to their problems, whose only solution is divine in nature. Problems should be lived out rather than solved (Urbanek 2008b, don-colacho.blogspot.com).

NICOLÁS GÓMEZ DÁVILA ON LANGUAGE

Gómez Dávila's scholia are not organized thematically, hence his ideas on language are scattered among other aphorisms. The discussion of selected scholia below is based on the translations from Spanish into English found on the Internet (don-colacho.blogspot.com) or, if English counterparts are not available, on the re-translation from the Polish version conducted by the present author.¹ Although the scholia in question are unordered and often full of paradox, they exhibit a large degree of consistency in thinking.

Being distrustful of philosophical systems and global systems as solutions to problems in general, Gómez Dávila does not put forward any theory of language. Still, some of his scholia are concerned with language and employ linguistic terminology. This is exemplified by his use of de Saussurean (1966) conceptual apparatus below:

- (1) The verbal sign in a communist country has an additional dimension. Apart from its dual signified-signifying nature, the entire sign is signifying with its special signified. (NE I PL, 76)

The metaphysical aspects of language, absent from most of linguistic theorizing, are present in Gómez Dávila's reflections, as in the following:

- (2) Words do not communicate, they remind. (ES, 49)

¹ The following abbreviations are adopted to refer to Gómez Dávila's works (or their translations) that quoted scholia come from: ES = Gómez Dávila (2001), NE I PL = Gómez Dávila (2008a), NE II PL = Gómez Dávila (2009), SE PL = Gómez Dávila (2008b). Each abbreviation is followed by a page number in the relevant work. Quotes from ES are English translations from the Spanish original from <http://don-colacho.blogspot.com/>, DOA 08-01-2011, whereas the other quotes are re-translations from Polish into English conducted by the present author.

- (3) The greatest verbal weight can only be achieved by means of simple words. (NE I PL, 99)

Gómez Dávila introduces the concept of ‘uchrony’ to account for the aspect of language system that does not lend itself to an analysis in terms of diachronic vs. synchronic opposition:

- (4) Apart from diachrony and synchrony, there is also ‘uchrony’, namely the state of the greatest economy, clarity and harmony potentially included in the phonological, morphological and syntactic inventory of a language understood as a definable whole. (NE I PL, 117)

The state of uchrony, recognized as a potentially attainable state of a language, might be indicative of the view of language as a dynamic entity. If economy, clarity and harmony are treated as aspects of culture, (4) emphasizes that language is a social fact.

In (5), another scholium is the reappraisal of the contribution of the human factor, again in its social dimension:

- (5) The richness of language depends on the number of intelligent people who, due to their talent, were able to record it in a way that resulted in the expansion of the meanings of words. (NE II PL, 13)

In the volumes of *Escolios*, one can also find references to the distinction between grammar/syntax and lexicon/vocabulary, a topic of heated debate in contemporary linguistics. In some of these aphorisms, such as (6) and (7) below, Gómez Dávila seems to recognize the role of grammar, or syntax and morphology, as the driving force in the structure of linguistic expressions, an idea that is close to the main line of thinking in generative linguistics:

- (6) The writer arranges for syntax to return to thought the simplicity which words take away. (*ES*, 33)
- (7) The universe is a useless dictionary for someone who does not provide his own grammar. (*ES*, 215)

Interestingly, (7) can be interpreted as the recognition of the individual character of grammar, and hence arguably an expression of the mentalist view of language.

Since the notion of change is one of those that Gómez Dávila devotes a lot of attention to, he refers to language change as well. However, his views in this respect are discordant with what most linguists of today would have to say about the topic. Basically, for Gómez Dávila language change is to a large extent language decay, as evidenced below:

- (8) When a language is undergoing corruption, its speakers believe it is being brought up to date. In the youthfulness of contemporary prose there are views of carcasses. (*ES*, 276)

Criticism of the corruption of language leads Gómez Dávila to an open defence of prescriptive grammar:

- (9) A language's attrition is faster, and the civilization that rests on it more fragile, when grammatical pedantry is forgotten. Civilizations are periods of standard grammar. (*ES*, 300)

Controversially, from the point of view of modern linguistics, Gómez Dávila argues for the qualitative assessment of language change:

- (10) The continuity of diachronic changes does not mean that particular synchronic states of languages do not exhibit different quality. Languages improve and deteriorate. (*SE PL*, 95)
- (11) The pragmatic effectiveness of language is steady diachronically, but only some of its synchronic states are beautiful. (*NE I PL*, 79)

Moreover, the corruption of language has characteristic symptoms:

- (12) The loss of clarity is the first symptom of the decline of a language. (*SE PL*, 65)
- (13) The decline of languages begins with the contamination of vocabulary, the complexity of sentences, and monotony of syntax. (*NE II PL*, 149)

Gómez Dávila does not explain the notions such as 'contamination of vocabulary', 'complexity of sentences' or 'monotony of syntax', which makes them open to a variety of interpretations.

Gómez Dávila's appreciation of classical Greek and Latin derives from his claim that they are unaffected by at least some aspects of language change:

- (14) The classical languages have an educational value, because they are not affected by the vulgarity, by means of which modernity ruins living languages. (*NE I PL*, 163)

Furthermore, Greek and Latin manage to preserve certain valuable aspects of the past:

- (15) Greek and Latin educate because they convey the view of the world which opposes the current view. (*NE II PL*, 136)

The view in (15) is possibly interpretable as an indication of linguistic relativism, understood as a position according to which a language reflects the way of thinking of its speakers.

The role of literature in the historical development of language is observed in the following:

- (16) Some examples of prose do not seem to be stages in the history of a language: they appear to be the timeless crystallizations of the language. (*SE PL*, 46)

Another linguistic topic that Gómez Dávila deals with is translation. His position concerning translation seems to support the untranslatability hypothesis, or

perhaps even the linguistic relativity hypothesis, which is expressed in (17) and (18):

- (17) We encounter many people who claim that they have read a book, just because they have got familiar with its translation. (NE I PL, 35)
- (18) The writer invites us to understand his language, not to translate it into the language of our equivalencies. (*ES*, 269)

Gómez Dávila's preoccupation with language style, noticeable in the very form of his own writing, is expressed in a number of aphorisms too:

- (19) Nothing is sufficiently important for the way in which it is written to be unimportant. (SE PL, 53)
- (20) When a text is allowed to take a rest, redundant words tend to come off it. (NE II PL, 18)
- (21) Whoever stuffs his text full of idiomatic expressions creates linguistic folklore for literary tourists. (*ES*, 386)

The Colombian thinker also notes that the creativity of language, one of the design features of language, has its limitations from the aesthetic point of view:

- (22) In every language, the number of aesthetically valuable combinations seems to be exhausted after several centuries. (NE I PL, 62)

A pragmatic aspect of language is commented upon in the following, somewhat ironic, statement:

- (23) The fewer adjectives there are, the more difficult it is to lie. (NE I PL, 27)

Gómez Dávila also remarks on issues pertaining to the domain of semiotics, again being critical of translation:

- (24) A symbol which can be translated is devoid of meaning, because it should express the ultimate experience. (SE PL, 40)

As can be observed above, some of Gómez Dávila's ideas concerning language correspond to selected views in the history of linguistics. Although many of Gómez Dávila's statements presented above would be rejected by modern linguists, probably as the so-called 'language myths' or instances of 'folk linguistics', it seems that it would be wrong to leave Gómez Dávila's line of thinking about language unnoticed. His ideas, which are only somewhat superficially presented above, definitely deserve a further more detailed analysis.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that most of Gómez Dávila's ideas on language are foreign to current trends in linguistics and philosophy of language. Indeed, many of them would probably be labelled 'unscientific', or at least unmotivated on scientific grounds. But Gómez Dávila himself does not intend his writing to be scientific in terms of contemporary science. The aim of this paper was, however, to point to the existence of an entirely different way of thinking about a number of issues that linguists or philosophers are concerned with – a way of thinking that originates from outside of science. It is important to note that Gómez Dávila's work received considerable attention in certain academic circles only in late 20th and early 21st centuries.

An obvious disadvantage of the discussion of Gómez Dávila's scholia referring to language is that much of it is based on speculation over possible interpretations of his ideas, many of which seem to be quite ambiguous.

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INTERNET SOURCE

<http://don-colacho.blogspot.com/>, DOA 08-01-2011