

THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN THOUGHT ACCORDING TO GIAMBATTISTA VICO

A EVOLUÇÃO DA LINGUAGEM E O DESENVOLVIMENTO DO PENSAMENTO HUMANO PARA GIAMBATTISTA VICO

LA EVOLUCIÓN DEL LENGUAJE Y EL DESARROLLO DEL PENSAMIENTO HUMANO SEGÚN GIAMBATTISTA VICO

 <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2025.036-067>

Gabriel Augusto Miranda Setti¹

ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the relevance and importance of the thought of the Italian philosopher, historian, and jurist Giambattista Vico. This will be achieved through the study and understanding of his analysis of the historical development of language and human thought. To this end, the article discusses a central point in his theory: the three modes of communication among peoples, based on their languages. These are: the language of the gods, the heroic language, and the language of men. The first is not necessarily a spoken language, as it is closer to original sounds and grunts. The second is an intermediate stage of development still closely tied to heroic narratives. The third, that of men, already presents characteristics that most closely resemble a properly rational and developed language. In this context, poetic wisdom, which encompasses the first two types of language mentioned above—that of the gods and the heroic language—is the first expression of understanding reality, the origin of all future languages. This reflection concludes by highlighting the importance of understanding these languages as fundamental to the constitution of rational human thought itself.

Keywords: Vico. Philosophy of History. Language. Human Thought.

RESUMO

Presente artigo tem como objetivo principal apresentar a relevância e a importância do pensamento do filósofo, historiador e jurista italiano Giambattista Vico. Isso se dará a partir do estudo e compreensão da análise que este filósofo fez acerca do desenvolvimento histórico da linguagem e do pensamento humano. Para isso o artigo traz uma discussão central em sua teoria, que são os três modos de comunicação dos povos, a partir de suas linguagens. São elas: a linguagem dos deuses, a linguagem heróica e a linguagem dos homens. A primeira não se constitui necessariamente como uma linguagem falada, já que se aproxima dos sons e grunhidos originários. A segunda é uma fase intermediária de desenvolvimento ainda muito atrelada às narrativas heróicas. A terceira, a dos homens, já apresenta as características que mais se aproximam de uma linguagem propriamente racional e desenvolvida. Neste contexto, a sabedoria poética, que abarca os dois primeiros tipos de linguagem supracitadas, a dos deuses e a heróica, é essa primeira expressão de compreensão da realidade, originária de todas as futuras. Conclui-se a presente

¹ Professor. Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade Federal de Alagoas (UFAL).
E-mail: gabrielsetti@gmail.com

reflexão destacando a importância na compreensão dessas linguagens como fundamentais na constituição do próprio pensamento humano racional.

Palavras-chave: Vico. Filosofia da História. Linguagem. Pensamento Humano.

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar la relevancia e importancia del pensamiento del filósofo, historiador y jurista italiano Giambattista Vico. Esto se logrará mediante el estudio y la comprensión de su análisis del desarrollo histórico del lenguaje y el pensamiento humano. Para ello, el artículo aborda un punto central de su teoría: los tres modos de comunicación entre los pueblos, basados en sus lenguas. Estos son: la lengua de los dioses, la lengua heroica y la lengua de los hombres. La primera no es necesariamente una lengua hablada, ya que se asemeja más a sonidos y gruñidos primigenios. La segunda es una etapa intermedia de desarrollo, aún estrechamente vinculada a las narraciones heroicas. La tercera, la de los hombres, ya presenta características que se asemejan más a una lengua propiamente racional y desarrollada. En este contexto, la sabiduría poética, que abarca los dos primeros tipos de lengua mencionados —la de los dioses y la heroica—, es la primera expresión de la comprensión de la realidad, el origen de todas las lenguas futuras. Esta reflexión concluye destacando la importancia de comprender estas lenguas como fundamentales para la constitución del pensamiento humano racional.

Palabras clave: Vico. Filosofía de la Historia. Lenguaje. El Pensamiento Humano.

1 INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this article is to present some central ideas in the thought of the Italian philosopher, jurist and historian Giambattista Vico. In his most famous book, called "The New Science", he discusses important and relevant foundations of the philosophy of history.

In this sense, it is possible to say that this philosophical exercise is justified due to the importance of discussing such innovative ideas in the historical-social approach. Studying and understanding some fundamental ideas of this philosopher of colossal relevance can bring a huge contribution to the expansion of theoretical and philosophical knowledge. And, as it is an evolutionary discussion, it brings up a series of current issues.

The development of this study, as well as potential future adjacent research, has valuable theoretical contributions, which can extend to the branches of history, philosophy, philology and sociology, among others. In the practical field, studying and understanding this philosopher and his New Science can bring good references to help and understand the codification of new civilizing processes that are currently underway.

The use and development of Artificial Intelligence, as a "language" that feeds on human language, bringing fundamental issues such as respect for intellectual property and really what would be the limit of the use of AI. Is it possible to say limits for something that is so advanced, and apparently currently rooted in contemporary social structures?

Vico's proposal in "New Science" is to seek to investigate the origins and foundations of human knowledge. From this he seeks this origin of thought in the development of men in the historical process.

It is from this historical development of men that, according to Vico, we can locate a first thought common to all men. Vico demonstrates that the first human thought, which in its beginning was a rude, small and obscure thought, is common to the origin of all civilizations.

It is called the "language of the gods", because it is still linked to natural phenomena, noises, grunts and whispers. Although it is a form of "language", it does not have the status of a spoken language per se, being a first expression of language much more crude and original.

The second type of language that he points out as intermediate is heroic language. This, although more developed than the first, is still linked to myths and divinities, being more developed and rational than the language of the gods and less than the third and last to be

explained in this work, the language of men itself, in all its complexity and load of historical and human development.

In this sense, the main objective of this article is to present and discuss the importance of Vico's theory about the development and evolution of human thought from language. For this, the fundamental characteristics of the three types of language brought by Vico in his work will be presented, as well as the importance of poetic wisdom as the first expression of human understanding of the world, present, according to the author himself, in practically all historically known civilizations.

2 DEVELOPMENT

The first thought about the world by men is defined by Vico as a very grotesque, small, crude thought, which is given by astonishment. This thought is somewhat deified, frightening and incipient about the knowledge of the reality that surrounds primitive man (when we speak of primitive man we mean that the first men who emerged, who for Vico were the ones who used an interpretation of the world still in a poetic way, were in a way the initiators of human thought).

This thought is closely linked to natural things and takes place in the process of interpreting the world of these men through the creation of the first deities that are cultivated from their relationship with natural phenomena such as fire, thunder and other natural phenomena.

In support of what has been said, one may recall the case cited by Vico in the text of the "Poetic Wisdom", where he introduces the question that "Jupiter" was the first human God for most nations, a God of thunder and lightning who manifested himself for each gentile nation.

Thus, when Vico speaks of a "God Jupiter", he points out that each nation in its genesis had a similar kind of divinity, which man discovered and interpreted in a frightened way, who saw in the noise of thunder the first form of divinity. It can be said then that apparently there were several "Jupiters" that constituted the first human thoughts about the divinities. These were supposedly the first forms of human interpretation about the nature that was around them, and were still a kind of initial thought, originating and linked to natural phenomena.

This first "mode" of human knowledge, this first way of expressing men's thought, which is given by astonishment, is "Poetic Wisdom". It is this poetic language that allows man his first expression of thought about the nature that surrounds him. This wisdom is a fabulous,

divinized and heroic wisdom, and, although it expounds ideas that are still apparently rude, small and obscure, it is the genesis of human thought. In it, Vico finds traces, from his studies and investigations, in practically all nations of humanity.

It is from this observation that it can be said that the first records of human events were by poets and theologians and almost always refer to the divinities. This primitive thought, despite being tied to the things of nature, already consists of the genesis of the first human thought.

To illustrate this issue of the poet theologians, I quote² Vico's text:

"But the poet-theologians, not being able to make use of the understanding, with a more sublime work, completely opposite, gave meaning and passions, as we have just seen, to bodies, and to vast bodies such as heaven, earth, and sea; and later, diminishing such vast fancies and reinvigorating abstractions, they were taken in their little signs." (VICO, 199, p.168)

"Poetic wisdom" is for Vico the first expression, even if fabulous and obscure, of the primitive mind, which seeks to organize the human experience in history. From there, Vico points out that this first mode of knowledge occurs concomitantly with the production of the first primitive language, which is already a language used and shared by several individuals.

When Giambattista Vico highlights a primitive "speech" he does not mean exactly what can be instinctively thought of as the specifically spoken language, but rather a first form of shared language. In the early days, this language is often made at first only by signs. However, this first linguistic expression could already be understood by the individuals in the group.

It is in the process of developing this "language" that "poetic wisdom" happens. This is because Vico believes in the progress of this language and in the purification of the concept shared by men. It should be noted that all this is due to the historical civilizing process of humanity and human civilizations.

In this sense, it is possible to affirm that for the philosopher Giambattista Vico, "Poetic Metaphysics" can then be equivalent to the history of human ideas, which develops in the historical process and is intimately linked to the progress of language among men.

² This quotation is found in the text of Vico's "New Science", in the part of "Poetic Wisdom", page 168.

It is from the progress of language that Vico will seek the origin of human thought and, for this reason, we will highlight here the three types of language that he defines in the "Scienzia Nuova" as follows:

"... three languages were spoken, corresponding in number and order to the three ages that had elapsed before them in the world: of the gods, of heroes, and of men; and they said that the first language was hieroglyphic, that is, sacred or divine; the second, symbolic, or by signs, that is, by heroic enterprises; the third epistolary to communicate to those distant from each other the vulgar needs of their lives" (VICO, 199, p.182)

Vico presents three types of languages to demonstrate the process of historical purification of the development of human thought. Thus, for this philosopher, the first type of language elaborated by men was the language of the "gods". This, as mentioned earlier, is a very incipient type of language. It is even a practically 'mute' and "non-articulate" mode of communication, made by signals, moans, grunts and noises.

Giambattista Vico considered that, although this first language is practically not given by articulated speech, it can be considered as a kind of language because it is already configured as a first form of communication and human expression.

The second form of language that he makes explicit is the "heroic language", which is a form of language that is already more developed and more articulated and that operates with some signs in the communication between men. The "heroic language" is a language that is still intermediate in which mute and articulate resources are mixed, but which already demonstrates a considerable advance in relation to the language of the "gods" or "divine" language, which is practically a "mute" language.

The third type of language explained by Vico is the "language of men". It already takes place in a third moment of the development and progress of human language in history. The "language of men" is already an almost totally articulated and very little mute language, which is no longer expressed impregnated with the things of nature, but which manifests itself as a greater development of human thought.

It is in this development of human language in the history of humanity that Vico locates the progress of human thought itself, since the development of language is intrinsically linked to the development of human thought. Heroic language is in this context the first form of interpretation of the world by man, and although at the beginning of the construction of this language it was not yet made exclusively by speech, this does not imply that it is not a first form of language and interpretation of the world by man.

Vico based himself on the knowledge of the origins of human thought from the examination of human language, considering that it is at the center of man's development in history. It is for this reason that Vico is able to point to a "New Science" that allows the study and analysis of a human "universal history".

It is a fact that this development of language, which is well outlined by Vico in the text of the "Poetic Wisdom", took place in practically all societies. For this reason it is possible to observe in this process of development the historical progress of language. And, of course, it becomes possible to locate something common to all human nations.

Therefore, the importance of poetic wisdom to understand the development of human thought must be understood, since this type of wisdom is the first form of interpretation of the world by man. Poetic wisdom is the first speech, the first expression, the first knowledge of the world that surrounds man elaborated by himself.

Poetic wisdom is a divine wisdom, based on astonishment, on fright, small and rude, but it is a wisdom, and a wisdom that is found in the genesis of all human thought, regardless of time and place. When we speak independently of time and place, we mean that this type of thinking is common to all men, all nations, in its origin, whether of the Indians of America, of the ancients such as the Persians, of the Chinese or of the Europeans.

Vico thus assumes an important position with regard to the philosophy of history, as he promotes an innovative reading that takes into account the development of human thought based on the study of the progress of human language and its different moments throughout history.

Based on this analysis, this philosopher will investigate the genesis of human language and the passage from a simpler and cruder language to a more elaborate, more elaborate language.

It is from the development of human language that, according to Vico, one can seek elements to understand the development of human thought itself. It seeks, from language, a history of the development and improvement of human thought about the recognition and communication with the world and its peers.

The proposal to build a new science that would be able to encompass founding characteristics of practically all nations based on the study of language development is an ambitious project that leaves open questions. Future studies will be responsible for additional analyses to the present study, which is so relevant to understand the development of rational thought.

3 CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that Vico's thought stands out for the universality to be achieved in the study of the philosophy of history. It is located in the peculiarities of each nation, in the particular history of each civilization, of each people.

He sought to find the true and universal history of nations from themselves, and considers that the first men, those of poetical wisdom, represented the infancy of humanity, of the world. As history developed, it would reach more advanced stages of knowledge of the world. This knowledge, when improved, would take place at a stage of greater "old age" in the world, in which more elaborate and profound knowledge, such as philosophy itself, would finally be capable.

The objective of this article was to present in an introductory way some ideas of this relevant Italian philosopher, who through this differentiated reading of historical development through language leaves several other future questions to be developed. It is clear that the present study is of paramount importance in presenting this discussion as a viable option for understanding human development.

In any case, the process of continuous polishing of these innovative ideas should be done in future studies and reflections. For now, the objective of reflecting on the theme is taken into account, even knowing the momentary limitations. It is believed that some foundations are laid for future discussions, on related topics, such as the development of "artificial language" among others.

REFERENCES

Vico, G. (1999). *A ciência nova* (M. Lucchesi, Trad.). Record. (Trabalho original publicado ca. 1725–1744)

Vico, G. B. (1911–1941). *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1708). In F. Nicolini (Ed.), *Opere di G. B. Vico*. Laterza.

Vico, G. B. (1988). *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae Latinae originibus eruenda libri tres* (L. M. Palmer, Trad.). Cornell University Press. (Trabalho original publicado em 1710)

Vico, G. B. (1993). *On humanistic education* (G. A. Pinton & A. W. Shippee, Trads.). Cornell University Press. (Trabalho original publicado em 1777 como *Institutiones oratoriae*)

Vico, G. B. (1984). *Institutiones oratoriae (The art of rhetoric)* (G. Pinton & A. W. Shippee, Trads.). Editions Rodopi B.V. (Trabalho original publicado em 1777)

Vico, G. B. (2002). *The first new science* (L. Pompa, Trad.). Cambridge University Press.
(Trabalho original publicado em 1725)

Vico, G. B. (1968). *The new science of Giambattista Vico* (T. G. Bergin & M. H. Fisch, Trads.)
(2a ed.). Cornell University Press. (Trabalho original publicado em 1744)