

Marxist Anthropology Through the Lens of the Philosophy of Language: Engels, Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao on the Origins of Humankind and Human Language

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Abstract

Marxist anthropology, as a kind of philosophical anthropology and an integral part of Marxist philosophy, seeks to find an answer to the question of its primary concern—what is humanity or human nature? From the Marxist perspective, human beings are distinguished from animals by making and using tools, and the creation of tools is closely related to the birth of language and consciousness. In this context, Marxist anthropology tries to trace the origin of humankind through tracing that of tools, language and consciousness. Consequently, it is endowed with a dimension of the philosophy of language. In his article “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man”, Engels proposed a hypothesis on the origins of humankind and human language, which constructed the framework of Marxist anthropology. This framework was subsequently adopted and developed by Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao, renowned philosophers in contemporary China and Vietnam, in establishing their own philosophical systems. This article, through illuminating and comparing Engels, Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao’s hypotheses on the origins of humankind and human language, aims to shed new light on Marxist anthropology through the lens of the philosophy of language. I believe that this exploration will profoundly inspire the Marxist philosophy of language, an emerging trend in the field of the philosophy of language.

Keywords: Friedrich Engels, Li Zehou, Tran Duc Thao, Marxist anthropology, philosophy of language, origins of language

Marksistična antropologija skozi prizmo filozofije jezika: Engels, Li Zehou in Tran Duc Thao o izvoru človeštva in človeškem jeziku

Izvleček

Marksistična antropologija, kot vrsta filozofske antropologije in sestavni del marksistične filozofije, išče odgovor na vprašanje, ki jo primarno zanima – kaj je človečnost oziroma človeška narava? Z marksističnega vidika se človek od živali loči po izdelavi in uporabi

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orodja, nastanek orodja pa je tesno povezan z rojstvom jezika in zavestjo. V tem kontekstu poskuša marksistična antropologija slediti izvoru človeštva z raziskovanjem izvora orodij, jezika in zavesti ter se zato ukvarja s filozofijo jezika. Engels je v svojem članku »Vloga dela pri preobrazbi opice v človeka« predlagal hipotezo o izvoru človeštva in človeškega jezika, ki je zgradila okvir marksistične antropologije. Potem sta pri vzpostavljanju svojih lastnih filozofskih sistemov ta okvir prevzela ter razvila Li Zehou in Tran Duc Thao, priznana filozofa sodobne Kitajske in Vietnama. Avtor članka si s pomočjo osvetlitve ter primerjave hipotez Engelsa, Li Zehouja in Tran Duc Thaota o izvoru človeštva in človeškega jezika prizadeva v novo luč postaviti marksistično antropologijo skozi prizmo filozofije jezika ter meni, da bo to globoko navdihnilo marksistično filozofijo jezika, ki se pojavlja kot nova smer na področju filozofije jezika.

Ključne besede: Friedrich Engels, Li Zehou, Tran Duc Thao, marksistična antropologija, filozofija jezika, izvor jezika

Introduction: Marxist Anthropology and Marxist Philosophy of Language

Marxist anthropology, as a kind of philosophical anthropology and an integral part of Marxist philosophy, seeks to find an answer to the question of its primary concern—what is humanity or human nature? According to the classical definition given by Aristotle, human beings are rational and political animals, as well as animals that use language.¹ This definition has been developed and challenged ever since, and especially in modern times.² Marxist anthropology, starting from the position of historical materialism, proposed a hypothesis of anthropogenesis that human beings evolved from apes in the process of cooperative collective labour that was featured by the making and using of tools. A human who is able to undertake such kind of labour could be labelled as a *homo faber* (Latin words, literally, man the maker). This term was initially introduced by Appius Claudius Caecus, referring to the capacity of man to control his own destiny. Over time, it became commonly associated with the capacity to make and use tools. Hence, from the perspective of Marxist anthropology, human beings are differentiated from animals by making and using tools, which simultaneously prepared the soil for the growth of human language. And only with the birth of language could human beings think rationally and participate in politics

1 In *The Politics*, Aristotle defined human beings as political animals and animals endowed with the power of speech (see *The Politics*, Book I), and in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, he asserted that every human being has a rational principle (see *The Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 13).

2 For example, Ernst Cassirer adapted Aristotle's definition and defined human beings as symbolic animals (language is the most important symbolic system employed by human beings), while Freud, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche paid special attention to the irrational nature of human beings.

and other public affairs. This scenario of human evolution was first depicted by Frederick Engels in his article “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man”, which constructed the framework of Marxist anthropology. In the years since, this framework has continuously been enriched and developed by many philosophers in their own ways. Among them, Li Zehou (李澤厚 1930–2021) and Tran Duc Thao (Trần Đức Thảo 1917–1993), renowned philosophers in contemporary China and Vietnam, have made the most significant and unique contributions, who endeavoured to trace the origin of humankind through tracing that of tools, language and consciousness. Regrettably, their endeavours have not received the attention they deserve.

As a kind of philosophical anthropology, Marxist anthropology seeks to propose a hypothesis of anthropogenesis, so to speak, more philosophically than scientifically, or in Li Zehou’s words, more “logically” (*luojishangde* 邏輯上的) than “chronologically” (*shijianshangde* 時間上的). That is to say, its primary concern is how to define the “human being” and to differentiate humanity from animality. Though Marxist anthropology never neglects the evidence from scientific (including genetic, biological, archaeological and the like) discoveries, it has to be, to a certain degree, independent or ahead of such evidence, since to date no final conclusion has been drawn from science on such matter. Therefore, what Marxist anthropology attempts to provide is essentially a hypothesis in a philosophical way, while continuously seeking validation the latest scientific discoveries.

The hypothesis of anthropogenesis in Marxist anthropology, as we will see in this article, is closely related to that of the birth of tools, language and consciousness. Compared to Engels, Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao elaborated in much more detail on the important role that language had played in human evolution (with Thao paying more attention to the relationship between language and consciousness). This reveals a new approach to Marxist anthropology, namely, that of the philosophy of language. Hence, in this article, through illuminating and comparing Engels, Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao’s hypotheses on the origins of humankind and human language, I intend to shed new light on Marxist anthropology through the lens of the philosophy of language. I believe that this exploration will profoundly inspire the Marxist philosophy of language, an emerging trend in the field of the philosophy of language.

Why Should Philosophy Be Concerned with the Problem of Language Origins?

In the past, the philosophy of language (here used in its narrow sense, referring specifically to analytic philosophy)³ seldom paid attention to the problem of the origin of language. The so-called “linguistic turn” that occurred in the early 20th century in the West was precisely a turn to the approach of modern (or mathematical) logic invented by Gottlob Frege, rather than to that of modern linguistics. The findings in the latter field seem to have exerted quite a limited influence on the philosophy of language. However, Lin Yuanze 林遠澤 in his monograph *From Herder to Mead: The Classical German Philosophy of Language Towards the Communicative Community* (*Cong Hede dao Mide: Maixiang goutong gongtongti de Deguo gudian yuyan zhexue silu* 從赫德到米德：邁向溝通共同體的德國古典語言哲學思路) presented a different scenario of the development of philosophy of language in the West:

[It] started from the rhetorical tradition and the Christian logos-mysticism in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Progressing through Dante’s Humanism and Vico’s “new science” during the Renaissance, it eventually reached its peak in the classical German philosophy of language, spanning from Herder to Mead. (Lin 2019, 23)⁴

According to Lin, this path of development is characterized by its humanism, because “it laid its philosophical foundation on a communicative community that was established in language”. Furthermore, “precisely because it proceeded from investigations into the origin of language, it at the very beginning has led philosophy to a problem of philosophical anthropology, that is, ‘what is humanity?’” (ibid., 22–23) Having realized that exploring the origin of humankind could not be done without exploring that of human language, Lin traced the emergence of the “linguistic turn” in the West back to the 18th century when Johann G. Herder published the book *Treatise upon the Origin of Language* (ibid., 25). Therefore, Lin contended that “the problems how and for what purpose language was created are obviously the most fundamental problems that the philosophy of language should concern” (ibid., 43). Though creatively adopting a perspective of the philosophy

3 The “philosophy of language” is not a clearly defined term. In a narrow sense, it specifically refers to Anglo-American analytic philosophy, which brought about a revolution to the philosophy of the early 20th century, known as the “linguistic turn”; while in a broad sense, it also includes the ontological reflections on language in modern Continental philosophy; besides, in a much broader sense, it could be used to refer to all the philosophical debates and reflections on language in all the schools of thoughts in history.

4 All the translations of the citations from Chinese texts are provided by the author of this article.

of language to address the problem of human origins, Lin unfortunately failed to make a single reference to the philosophical anthropology of Marxism in that book, thereby overlooking its contribution to addressing the problems he raises.

Now I would like to stress again that, as mentioned above, the approach of philosophical anthropology is to some extent different from that of scientific (including genetic, biological, archaeological and the like) anthropology. As Li Zehou also noted:

The problem of whether making and using tools is prior to the birth of language or not should be treated more logically than chronologically, [since] it is precisely the special kind of human activity, namely labour, that gave birth to language, or rather, gave language (animals may also have) the meaning that exclusively belongs to human beings, not the other way round. (Li 2008a, 152)

In the above statement, Li distinguished two perspectives to look at the problem, i.e. “logically” and “chronologically”. The former takes a philosophical stance, while the latter takes a scientific one. To stress again, I am by no means declaring that these two perspectives are isolated from each other. On the contrary, they are interdependent. In Li’s view, we have to clarify exactly what we mean by language before we judge whether it appears before tool or not. The reason why Li gives priority to the logical perspective is that, for him, the birth of language is marked by obtaining “the meaning that exclusively belongs to human beings”⁵ from “the special kind of human activity, namely labour”, which is precisely the way that Li insists we should understand the concept of “human language”. That is to say, even if there were to exist some kind of language “chronologically” before the making and using of tools, it could not be regarded as real human language “logically”, due to its lack of “the meaning that exclusively belongs to human beings”, which should be obtained from human labour that entails the making and using of tools.

Not only Li Zehou’s philosophy, but also philosophical anthropology in general, would give priority to the logical perspective. Viewed from this angle, what we could see would be the human beings who use language and the use of language by human beings, rather than an isolated and abstract language. Therefore, exploring human language is actually exploring the human beings who use language. This is also the reason why the problem of the origins of language is closely related with that of the origins of humankind.

5 What Li means by “the meaning that exclusively belongs to human beings”, in my opinion, could be understood as human reason or human forms of knowledge. For Li, “the operational labour (*laodong caozuo* 勞動操作) of making and using tools shaped the specifically human forms of knowledge (logic, mathematics, dialectics and so on)” (Rošker 2020, 46).

Engels' Establishing of the Framework of Marxist Anthropology

In his famous article "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man", Engels proposed a hypothesis of anthropogenesis on the basis of historical materialism and Darwin's theory of evolution. In this hypothesis, he highly emphasized the decisive role of labour and language in human evolution (especially labour, since language is believed to be born from it). The greatest contribution of this text, in my opinion, might be that it established the earliest framework of Marxist anthropology. The main idea of this article could be encapsulated into four statements from it, which could also be construed as answers to the questions that philosophical anthropology concerns most.

The first question is: What is the nature of human beings? Engels' answer is: "In a sense, we have to say that labour created man himself" (Engels 1987, 452). That is, for Engels, the nature of human beings is moulded in the process of labour, so it is labour that essentially differentiates human beings from animals. Thus, here arises the second question: What is the nature of human labour? Engels' answer is: "Labour begins with the making of tools" (*ibid.*, 457). Engels takes the making (and I think he also means the using) of tools as the feature of human labour, which as we will see in the following is also the force that drives human evolution. So here follows the third question: Besides this (the labour featured by the making and using of tools), is there any other force that also drives human evolution? Engels' answer is: "First labour, after it and then with it speech—these were the two most essential stimuli under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man" (*ibid.*, 455). The second driving force that Engels listed is speech (or language), but it is obviously subordinate to labour. The fourth question naturally turns to language: What is the origin of language? Engels' answer is: "This explanation of the origin of language from and in the process of labour is the only correct one" (*ibid.*). Though Engels pointed out the origin of language, he did not elaborate on how language was born in that process. As he said, "Labour begins with the making of tools"; thus the explanation of the birth of language must be closely related with that of the birth of tools. Engels himself did not provide any explanation, but Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao did, which enriched and developed Engels' framework, as we will see in the following sections.

In order to better understand Engels' hypothesis on the origins of humankind and human language, I illustrate it with the following figure (see Figure 1).

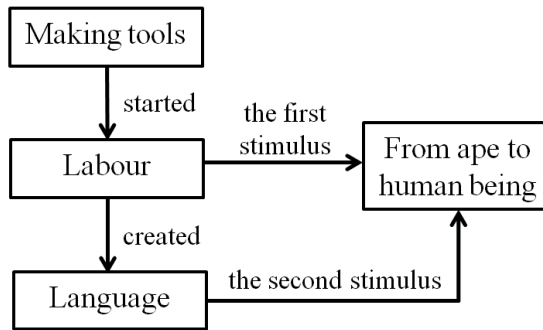


Figure 1: Engels' hypothesis on the origins of humankind and human language.

As Figure 1 shows, making tools played a decisive role in the process of human evolution, because it started real human labour, making it different from animal labour, which finally distinguished human beings from animals; and then, real human labour, which is featured by the making (as well as using) of tools, gave birth to real human language. And ever since then, labour and language combined, as two stimuli, continued to drive evolution from ape to human. However, another question may arise: If labour begins with the making of tools, as Engels hypothesizes, how does the activity of making tools begin? I think we could find a clue to this question in the same article. According to Engels, making tools is only possible on the condition that the hands of apes become free, no longer used for walking, but for labouring. As he put it:

Owing to their way of living which meant that the hands had different functions than the feet when climbing, these apes began to lose the habit of using their hands to walk and adopted a more and more erect posture. *This was the decisive step in the transition from ape to man. ...*

It stands to reason that if erect gait among our hairy ancestors became first the rule and then, in time, a necessity, other diverse functions must, in the meantime, have devolved upon the hands. Already among the apes there is some difference in the way the hands and the feet are employed. ...

But the decisive step had been taken, *the hand had become free* and could henceforth attain ever greater dexterity; the greater flexibility thus

acquired was inherited and increased from generation to generation.
(Engels 1987, 452–53)

Like Engels, Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao also emphasize the role that the hands played in human evolution, but in different ways. Engels never regards the using of hands as a direct stimulus to the birth of language. However, according to Li and Thao, it is the using of hands (especially gestures) in labour that gave birth to consciousness, and then, to language, both of which are closely related.

Engels' most important contribution to Marxist anthropology, as I mentioned earlier, lies in his formulation of its basic framework. However, being a framework it needs to be enriched and developed, because of its lack of details and ambiguities in arguments. For example, he did not explain in sufficient detail how labour begins with the making of tools, and how language is created in the process of labour. For another example, when he claimed that “the hand is not only the organ of labour, *it is also the product of labour*” (Engels 1987, 455), does this imply that labour is the cause of (and naturally occurs before) the freedom of the hands? If this is true, it seems to contradict another statement of his that “labour begins with the making of tools”, since tools can never be made without the help of the hands. That being so, I think labour should be regarded as the consequence, instead of the cause, of the freedom of the hands. In my opinion, the only possible way to explain away the paradox in Engels' statements above is to assume that the word “labour” he used in these statements has different connotations. This is exactly the way Li Zehou treated the problem, as we will see in the following section.

Li Zehou's Contribution: Classifying Labour into Two Levels

Li Zehou is one of the most influential and creative philosophers in contemporary China, who calls his philosophy—an inventive combination of Western (mainly from Kant and Marx) and traditional Chinese (mainly from Confucianism) philosophies—“anthropological ontology” (*renleixue bentilun* 人類學本體論) or “pragmatic philosophy of subjectality” (*zbutixing shijian zhexue* 主體性實踐哲學) (Li 2008a, 115). However, we may ask: Why does this kind of philosophy concern the problem of language? Li Zehou, as I have pointed out, never wrote any complete book or article with a major focus on language, but did remark on it in most of his works throughout his philosophical life. Moreover, these remarks, which are basically critiques on the philosophy of language and the “linguistic turn” in the West, constitute an integral part of Li's philosophy (see Yang 2020a; 2020b).

Li Zehou once wrote: “What has been haunting me for decades is the question of ‘how to move beyond language’, or rather, ‘how to escape from the prison-house of language’” (Li and Liu 2012, 1), and he reiterated this idea on many occasions (see, for example, Li and Liu 2012, 164; Li and Liu 2011, 78, 107; Li 2008a, 37; 2008b, 18; Li and Liu 2009, 25). Maintaining a Marxist view of practice as its foundation, Li’s philosophy, which he nicknamed “the philosophy of eating (*chifan zhhexue* 吃飯哲學)”, naturally seeks to “move beyond language” and goes back to the material base for the subsistence of human beings, as he asserted that the starting point of his philosophy is practice (*wei* 為) rather than words (*yan* 言) (Li and Liu 2012, 35). For this reason, in dealing with the problem of the origin of language he inevitably insists on the priority of practice over language (Li 2007, 71; 2008a, 3, 220; Li and Liu, 2011, 7; 2012, 3–4). Li absorbed Engels’ philosophical anthropology, and enriched it with more details and new ideas, which are mainly embodied in his following statement. For convenience in comparing his view with Engels’, I also illustrate the following statement with a figure (see Figure 2).

The apes’ using and accidental making of tools in the long process of “primitive labour” (the primordial form of practice) gave birth to consciousness and language; and thereafter the primitives started the intentional, goal-oriented and language-involved activity of using and making tools. Therefore, the progression of “primitive labour—consciousness and language—human labour” could be taken as a thread running through the whole process of the evolution from ape to human being. (Li 2008a, 220–21)

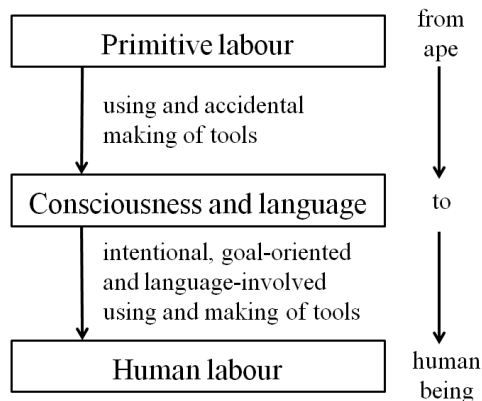


Figure 2: Li Zehou’s hypothesis on the origins of humankind and human language.

Comparing Figures 1 and 2, we may easily see that, like Engels, Li Zehou also considers labour (which features the making and using of tools) and language (which is born from labour) as two stimuli that drive the evolution from ape to human being. However, Li adapted and enriched Engels' theory in the following three aspects: First, he classified labour into two levels: primitive and human. Second, he distinguished two stages of the making of tools: an accidental stage and an intentional, goal-oriented and language-involved stage. Third, he counted consciousness as another force that also drives human evolution together with language. Among these aspects, the first should be seen as the central one, because it provides a frame of reference on which Li classified tools and language, which are also thought to be developed from the primitive to the human level in the process of labour. Tools at the primitive level are named by Li "natural tools" (*tianran gongju* 天然工具), which, according to his ideas, have to go through several stages before finally developed into real tools:

starting from the using of natural tools, to action thinking (*dongzuo siwei* 動作思維) and primitive language (*yuanshi yuyan* 原始語言) (from which consciousness arises), and then, through an inference from the result (to achieve a goal like getting food) to the cause (tools and the using of tools), finally acquiring the capacity of representing an object [in mind] (*mudi biaoxiang* 目的表象) (which marks the creation of [real] tools). (Li 2008a, 198)

It is noteworthy that what Li means by "tool" in the context of "the apes' using and accidental making of tools" are not real tools in the Marxist sense. They are just some natural materials like stones or twigs, picked directly and accidentally from nature. They are actually "instruments" in Marx's terminology,⁶ and called by Li "natural tools" on other occasions. Besides, what Li means by "accidental making" refers to the making that is not intentional or goal-oriented, without an image of the finished object (i.e. the representation of the object) in mind beforehand. It relies on "action thinking", which means thinking and acting are performed simultaneously, adjustments being made in the process of practice according to specific situations. Natural tools are thus made, which are different from real tools in that they are not made with the representation of an object in mind beforehand. The representation of an object marks the birth of consciousness (whose relationship with language will be expounded in detail in the following section), and distinguishes human labour from animal labour, as Marx said, "what distinguishes the

6 According to Marx, "an instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the labourer interposes between himself and the subject of his labour, and which serves as the conductor of his activity. He makes use of the mechanical, physical, and chemical properties of some substances in order to make other substances subservient to his aims" (Marx 1996, 189).

worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality” (Marx 1996, 188).

In conclusion, according to Li, language and consciousness were born from the using and accidental making of natural tools at the stage of primitive labour, which made the representation of an intended object possible; and only on such a condition were real tools created, which finally turned primitive labour into human labour. In other words, human labour is characterized by “the intentional, goal-oriented and language-involved activity of making and using tools”. Furthermore, what is also noteworthy here is that the language appearing in the middle of Figure 2 placed by the side of consciousness actually refers to the primitive language. It has very simple form and ambiguous meanings, because it “blends the declarative, imperative and referential functions of a language (for example, by using the so called “sentence-words”); besides, it reflects both the objective facts (by its declarative and referential functions) and the subjective requirements (by its imperative and expressive functions)” (Li 2011, 204). In primitive language, words and sentences are not assigned specific functions, as natural tools are in primitive labour. However, with their functions being gradually defined, primitive language would be transformed into human language, and natural tools into real tools.

As noted above, Li Zehou also enriched Engel’s framework of Marxist anthropology by counting consciousness as a second driving force besides language for human evolution. Thus, we may ask: How is consciousness born? And how is its birth related to the birth of language? Li has not provided any answer to the second question, while to the first his answer is simply as follows:

The move of the hands that are using tools always badly needs the attention from the eyes. ... Such attention paid to the hands signifies the budding of the consciousness that one is being engaged in an activity. That is to say, one begins to form a simple representation or even a memory of the labour (or practice) he or she is engaged in. (Li 2011, 196)

The reason why consciousness arises from the attention to the hands, to be more exact, is that such attention enables one to separate the subject (of labour) from the object (of labour), which prepares the soil for the growth of consciousness. However, such separation can never occur only within one person, but must take place among persons, because “I” can never be discovered only from my doing something, but from my being not “others”. Therefore, Li’s explanation is insufficient and even seems problematic. Now let us turn to Tran Duc Thao, a remarkable but long neglected contemporary Vietnamese philosopher, who treated the above two questions in much more detail.

Tran Duc Thao's Contribution: Clarifying the Relationship Between Language and Consciousness

Tran Duc Thao, as the most famous philosopher in contemporary Vietnam, is often placed on a par with György Lukács, the eminent Hungarian Marxist philosopher (Ruan and Ruan 2011, 63). Initially influenced by Husserl's phenomenology, Thao studied under Merleau-Ponty at the École Normale Supérieure for many years. After that, he turned to Marxism, and made his debut on the stage of philosophy in 1951 with his first monograph *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* (hereinafter *PDM*). This book, as an attempt to address the problems raised by phenomenology itself through the lens of Marxism, soon acquired a wide readership once published, which made Tran Duc Thao a prominent name in phenomenological circles at that time. In 1973, Thao's monograph *Investigations into the Origin of Language and Consciousness* (hereinafter *IOLC*), the most important work of his later period, was published in France. Unfortunately, since his return to Vietnam in 1951, he endured prolonged political persecution from the authorities. Due to his long absence from the philosophical community, Thao's name has become unfamiliar to the new generation of philosophers, and thus his new book did not receive the attention it deserved.

We may wonder why Tran Duc Thao in his later period was preoccupied with the problem of the origins of language and consciousness. Thao himself did not give any explanation, but we have reason to believe that it may have been in order to address the problems left over from his early career. As he wrote in the preface to *PDM*, a book that marks his turn from phenomenology to Marxism, "Marxism appears to us as the only conceivable solution to problems raised by phenomenology itself" (Trần 1986, xxi). As D'Alonzo pointed out,

To Thao, the phenomenological approach to the study of consciousness had not been radical enough because Husserl failed to understand the natural origins of consciousness. According to Thao, the evolution of species and then the development of human society offer a solid basis to understand the actual nature of consciousness. (D'Alonzo 2018, 47)

Therefore, in the second part of *PDM* Thao attempted to provide a materialistic interpretation to the origin of consciousness. This is also the reason why he wrote *IOLC*, because for Thao "the easiest way to understand the formation of consciousness is by beginning with the study of the symbolic skills we can observe among mammals" (ibid.). Therefore, Thao attempted to trace the origins of these symbolic skills (namely language, including both gestural and verbal forms) and

explore what role they had played in the process of human evolution, in order to figure out how human beings are differentiated from other mammals by these special symbolic skills they use.

By doing so, Thao linked the problem of the origins of consciousness to that of the origins of language, and further, as we will see in the following, to that of the origins of tools. He wrote at the very beginning of *IOLC*: “Consciousness must first of all be studied in its ‘immediate reality’: language understood naturally in its general sense as gestural and verbal language” (Trân 1984, 4). In declaring this, Thao was echoing Marx and Engels’ idea put forward in *The German Ideology* that “*language* is the immediate actuality of thought” (Marx and Engels 1975, 446). Through an investigation into the origins of language and consciousness in a practical, social and historical context, Thao also proposed a hypothesis of anthropogenesis, which enriched Engels’ and Li Zehou’s theories in many respects, especially making clear the relationship between language and consciousness.

Like Engels and Li Zehou, Tran Duc Thao also regarded labour, as well as language (which is thought to be born from labour), as the primary force that drives human evolution. In addition, he also emphasized the role that the hands played in the process of this evolution, but his focus was on how the indicative gesture stimulated the birth of language and consciousness. Both Li and Thao held that consciousness arose from the separation of subject from object, which occurred in the process of labour. For Li, this separation is realized through the attention paid to the hands that are using tools. Thao must have agreed with Li on this point, since he explained more clearly that “consciousness appears identically as *consciousness of the object* and *consciousness of self*” (Trân 1984, 11). Though both of them arrived at the same conclusion, Thao traced the origin of consciousness a step further than Li did. Like Li, Thao also stressed the importance of gestural language, but he did not take this kind of language as the source of consciousness, because he thought that it already contained a set of symbolic sign structures. Therefore, Thao traced the origin of consciousness back to the primitive form of gestural language, that is, the indicative gestures adopted by prehuman workers in their collective labour. For a better understanding of Tran Duc Thao’s hypothesis on the origins of humankind and human language, I also illustrate it with a figure (see Figure 3).

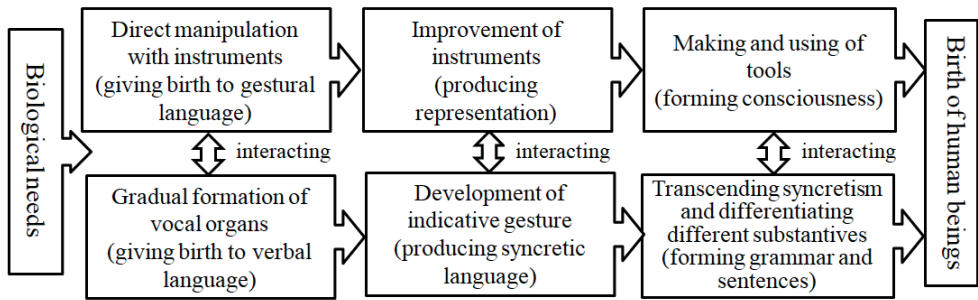


Figure 3: Tran Duc Thao's hypothesis on the origins of humankind and human language.

In short, according to Thao, primitive workers created the earliest forms (both gestural and verbal) of language in the process of labour in order to meet their basic biological needs. After that, through the interactive development of gestural and verbal language, consciousness and tools emerged as two pivotal driving forces in the process of human evolution. Like Li Zehou, Tran Duc Thao also placed his hypothesis on a materialistic basis, namely the need to meet biological needs such as food, clothing, housing and other necessities. Furthermore, he also attempted to trace the development from instrument to tool, dividing it into five stages: (1) the natural instrument; (2) the prepared instrument; (3) the elaborated instrument; (4) the produced instrument; and (5) the tool (Trần 1984, 47). The difference between an instrument and a tool, in short, is that an instrument is intentionally made (or more exactly, in Thao's words, "prepared", "elaborated" and "produced") to be a tool. According to Thao, at the very beginning of labour prehuman workers had already mastered the skills of employing instruments, which is regarded by him as a kind of "adaptive labour" or "direct manipulation", because it is precisely like an act of groping, performed merely through trial and error, without the medium of concept or representation. At this stage, the capacity of representing an object has not been developed yet, and it is not required for making or using an instrument, because instrument as natural object is always taken by a worker as an extended limb, rather than something existing outside the body that should be recognized through the representation of its image. As Marx said, "Thus Nature becomes one of the organs of his activity, one that he annexes to his own bodily organs, adding stature to himself in spite of the Bible" (Marx 1996, 189). Later, in order to achieve more efficient cooperation in acts of labour, gestural language appeared. Almost at the same time, and for the same purpose, when "men in the making arrived at the point where *they had something to say to each other*" (Engels 1987, 455), their vocal organs were gradually evolved so as to be suitable for speaking, and then, verbal language appeared.

With the increasing frequency of employing instruments in labour increasing, the existence of the outside world is perceived; and subsequently, the consciousness of the subject as opposed to the object arises. According to Thao, the dichotomy between subject and object is derived from the using of indicative gesture, which is the initial form of gestural language. On the one hand, since indicating is a gesture pointing to something outside of “me”, it must be accompanied by the consciousness of “externality”; in addition, the gesture of pointing at something with a finger presupposes the existence of an object, so it must be accompanied by the consciousness of “this here”. As a result, the consciousness of the object is established in this kind of gesture. As Thao concluded: “In short, the meaning of the indicative gesture in no way refers to any other sign. It uniquely and directly refers to *the thing itself* in its external existence as independent of the subject, in other words in its *material existence*” (Trần 1984, 34). On the other hand, the consciousness of the subject (namely the self) also arises from the indicative gesture. As Thao pointed out, “The indicative gesture to oneself naturally derives from the gesture we use in pointing things out to others. ... In the case of the indicative gesture to oneself, we have only one subject, both guiding and guided” (ibid., 7). That is to say, “I” can point out an object not only for others, but also for “myself”; in addition, “I” can also point at “myself” as an object. In a word, as Marx and Engels put it, “consciousness [*das Bewusstsein*] can never be anything else than conscious being [*das bewusste Sein*]” (Marx and Engels 1975, 36). Therefore, being conscious of the object implies the existence of the external world, while being conscious of the subject implies the existence of the “self” as opposed to the external world.

As stated in the foregoing, consciousness arises from the separation of subject from object. However, it can never occur only within one person, but among persons. As such, consciousness seems most unlikely to arise only from one person’s attention paid to his or her own hands, as Li Zehou hypothesized. Though both Li and Thao established their hypotheses on the same grounds, namely that productive labour, in which the attention of the eyes is paid to the hands (Li’s hypothesis), and the indicative gesture is frequently adopted (Thao’s hypothesis), Thao is different from Li in that he focuses on “the relation of reciprocity” among workers. To better explain this relation, Thao envisaged a scenario of collective labour, where prehuman workers, for the sake of better cooperation, are trying to communicate with each other by pointing things out to others:

In the activity of collective labour, the workers point out to each other the object of their common efforts. Each is thus, alternatively, or even simultaneously, the giver and the receiver of the indication, both the one who guides and is guided. The workers see each other reciprocally in this

double function. In other words, each sees in the other a being similar to himself, making the same gesture or rather he sees the other as *another self*. (Trân 1984, 8)

The indicative gesture, according to Thao, still has an original form, that is, “a guidance act at a distance, [which] implies, in fact, at least two subjects, one guiding and the other guided, separated by a certain distance” (ibid., 7). This original indicative gesture enables the workers to “see themselves in the others ‘as in a mirror’” (ibid., 8); thus, the “self” is established from being separated from “others”. As Marx put it: “Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind. And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his Pauline personality, becomes to Peter the type of the *genus homo*” (Marx 1996, 63). Thao’s intention of depicting such a scenario of collective labour is to reveal “the relation of reciprocity” among people, which, as the basis of communicative practice, makes the cooperation in collective labour possible. Communicative practice and productive practice constitute two interwoven dimensions of social practice; and “to Thao, social practice is the most decisive factor in the evolution of language” (D’Alonzo 2018, 55).

According to Thao, after the birth of gestural language, and under its influence, verbal language appears almost simultaneously, since indicative gesture, the initial form of gestural language, is actually a guidance act at a distance, and the distance has to be finally bridged by a vocal form of language. As Thao put it, “In reality the guidance movement does not consist in simply tracing a direction, it has essentially the function of a *call*. ... [Thus, gradually,] as a call, it is naturally completed by the normal form of a call, the vocal form” (Trân 1984, 9). Li Zehou distinguished human language from animal language by “the meaning that exclusively belongs to human beings” obtained from “the special kind of human activity, namely labour” (Li 2008a, 152). However, Li did not clearly define such meaning and explain how it is obtained from human labour. In my view, such meaning must be characterized by the capacity of representing, or “pointing at” (in Thao’s words), an object, as the role that indicative gesture plays, but in a vocal form. According to Thao, the representation of an object in mind signifies the awareness of “this here”, namely, recognizing the existence of an object, which makes human labour an intentional and goal-oriented activity. As Marx pointed out: “The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity” (Marx 1975, 276).

The capacity of representation also makes the creation of tools possible, because a tool is differentiated from an instrument in that the former “must be determined

in its *total shape*” (Trần 1984, 46). In other words, before making a tool there should exist a finished and complete image of the tool that we are going to make in our mind beforehand. In addition, Thao thinks that transforming an instrument into a tool also requires

the use of a second instrument to act on the raw material [, ... but it] is only possible at the moment when the preparation of the instrument occurs *in the absence of the biological object*, which is replaced by its simple *representation*. In fact, in such a situation, the raw material as object of the need to transform it into an instrument, becomes dominant in the dynamic field of perception, which allows it to attract a third object as an intermediary. (Trần 1984, 39)

As shown in Figure 3, labour is stimulated by biological needs, and thus so is the labour of transforming an instrument into a tool, in which a second instrument needs to be inserted as an intermediary. Hence it would become the object of labour, while the biological object has to be suspended temporarily in some way. It, is only possible, according to Thao, when the capacity of representation is acquired, because it enables biological needs to be suspended in the form of its simple representation.

By means of representation, the indicative gesture got developed, which simultaneously led the verbal language to maturity. A developed indicative gesture, as a linguistic sign, according to Thao, produces an image whose content usually includes three key elements: (1) the object (i.e. the “this here”), (2) the motion, and (3) the form (Trần 1984, 50). Thao provided an example of the goodbye gesture: The image of this gesture implies (1) the person going away (the object), which is “produced by the tension of the hand and of the look toward the person going away”; (2) going away (the motion of the object), which “is projected by the agitation of the outstretched hand”; and (3) distancing (the form of the motion), “which results from the projection of the alternating form of the motion of raising and lowering of hand” (ibid.). Thao encapsulated the composition of the image of a developed indicative gesture into the following formula:

the “this here” (T) in a motion (M) in some form (F), or: TMF. Such a formula, which we may call a *formula of developed indication*, contains a certain number of possible transformations which will allow us to understand the *polysemy* of the word which reinforces the gesture. (Trần 1984, 50)

Once the fundamental formula TMF and its variants (i.e. TFM, MFT, MTF, FTM and FMT), as linguistic signs, are linked to the sounds, real human verbal language will come into being, which will no longer be any inarticulate murmurs and shouts, but become what Saussure calls “articulated speech”⁷ (de Saussure 2011, 10, 113). The budding verbal language, according to Thao, is a kind of “syncretic language”, composed of “functional sentences”, which, as combinations of TMF and its variants, are quite simple and ambiguous, like an instrument, whose function has not been clearly defined. The syncretism of functional sentences would certainly lead to misunderstandings in communication, so they have to be clarified with additional gestures, which would enrich the original semiotic structure, and eventually get syncretism transcended. Only when “each linguistic term is a member, an *articulus* in which an idea is fixed in a sound and a sound becomes the sign of an idea” (ibid., 113), as Saussure said, could ideas be clearly expressed. Therefore, Saussure takes articulation as the nature of human language: “We can say that what is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas” (ibid., 10).

Concluding Remarks: Marxist Philosophy of Language as a New Trend

Although Engels, Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao were not professional linguists, as philosophers, they treated language in a philosophical way, and creatively integrated the problem of language into their own philosophical systems. Their treatment of language through the lens of Marxist anthropology, in my opinion, will profoundly inspire the Marxist philosophy of language, an emerging field in the philosophy of language. Hence, in the conclusion of this article, I would like to give some remarks on why and how the Marxist philosophy of language, with Marxist anthropology as its basis, would contribute to the development of the philosophy of language in the 21st century.

As early as in the 1970s, the Marxist philosophy of language, as a new trend in this stream of philosophy, has already been referred to in the book *Main Trends in Philosophy*, compiled by Paul Ricoeur. As a new approach, it was thought to have offered a challenge to the traditional philosophy of language (namely the analytic philosophy):

7 Saussure defines “articulated speech” like this: “In Latin, *articulus* means a member, part, or subdivision of a sequence; applied to speech, articulation designates either the subdivision of a spoken chain into syllables or the subdivision of the chain of meanings into significant units” (de Saussure 2011, 10).

An earlier bias against the philosophically relevant achievements of linguistics has gone, but Marxism continues to reject any tendency to set up language as an absolute; in this it is resolutely opposed to logical positivism and any reduction of philosophy to “linguistic analysis”. For Marxist philosophy, the genuinely philosophical problems are those of *Weltanschauung*; the relationship of matter and consciousness, and man’s place in the world. (Ricoeur 1979, 260)

The positive effect that Marxism would bring about with regard to the traditional philosophy of language, in my opinion, must be the deconstruction of the language-centered ontology resulting from the “linguistic turn” that occurred in the early 20th century in the West. “The essence of Marxist philosophy lies in this,” said Li Zehou, “that is, to take life and practice as something more fundamental than language, and to take the practice of using and making tools as the foundation of social life and the root of human’s existence” (Li 2008a, 233). Jean-Jacques Lecercle, in his book *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, a pivotal work on this issue, listed six theses and attempted to construct a framework for this field:

Main thesis: language is a form of *praxis*. First positive thesis: language is a historical phenomenon. Second positive thesis: language is a social phenomenon. Third positive thesis: language is a material phenomenon. Fourth positive thesis: language is a political phenomenon. Concluding thesis: language is the site of subjectivation through interpellation. (Lecercle 2006, 139)

What Lecercle intended to highlight in this framework was the ideological aspect of human language. It sounds plausible to define humans as social or political animals, yet we should never neglect the foundation on which we are able to give such a definition, that is, the fact that human beings are differentiated from animals by making and using tools. This should be the most fundamental dimension of *praxis*, but Lecercle did not include it in his framework, and *a fortiori*, he did not touch upon the problem of language origins which is closely related to the creation of tools. Therefore, the framework that Lecercle formulated seems to be an incomplete one, since the abovementioned aspects were left aside.

As we can see from the foregoing discussion, the intention of Engels, Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao’s tracing of the origin of language is actually to trace that of humankind. Therefore, the core concern of their philosophical anthropology goes beyond an isolated and abstract language, but falls upon the human beings who use language and the use of language by human beings. However, a question may arise here: After we “move beyond language”, as Li advocated, where

shall we go? Li's answer is "to return back towards life" (Li 2009, 28; 2011, 107). This opinion would most likely win the approval of Engels and Thao, for both advocated "the language of real life", a notion put forward by Marx and Engels in *German Ideology*, with the conviction that language is deeply rooted in the material activity and the material intercourse among humans (see D'Alonzo 2018). Li's conceptualization of "life", however, is much broader, which "refers to the activities in the mundane world, including the trivia of daily life like eating, sleeping and socializing, rather than the religious life in pursuit of a super-mundane world" (Yang 2020a, 3). The practice of daily life definitely includes the social practice (both productive and communicative ones), which constitutes its material base, but it is never limited to this. It should include all the activities of our daily life. By the same token, though language is born from social practice, it still continues getting itself enriched in all the activities of daily life. For this reason, Li goes a step further than Engels and Thao by unfolding the panorama of the development of language, from its birth to its maturity. The birth of language, as the result of social practice, could be explained within Li's "techno-social formation" (*gongyi-shehui jiegou* 工藝-社會結構), with an emphasis on the "tool as root" (*gongju bentu* 工具本體) among other "roots" (*bentu* 本體) in his philosophy; while the maturation of language, which occurs in our everyday experience, could be explained within his "cultural-psychological formation" (*wenhua-xinli jiegou* 文化-心理結構), with an emphasis on the "emotion as root" (*qing bentu* 情本體).⁸

Li Zehou's advocating of "returning back towards life" echoes later Wittgenstein in some respects, as the latter asserted that the focus of philosophy should return to "ordinary language" and daily life. It is notable that Li referred to Wittgenstein (especially the later one) many times in his works (see, for example, Li 2007, 70-71; 2008a, 124, 127, 219-20, 232-33; Liu and Li 2010, 63; Li and Liu 2012, 3), praising his opinions that "language games" could be regarded as the "forms of life" and language should be explored in its daily use, because Li thinks these opinions perfectly reveal the fact that there must exist something more fundamental than language (Li 2008a, 233; Liu and Li 2010, 63). Therefore, as Li asserted, "My philosophy sets out exactly from where Wittgenstein's philosophy ends" (Li 2008a, 127). The comparison between Li Zehou and Wittgenstein is

8 The "techno-social formation" (*gongyi-shehui jiegou* 工藝-社會結構) and the "cultural-psychological formation" (*wenhua-xinli jiegou* 文化-心理結構) constitute respectively the external and the internal aspect of the "subjectivity" (*zbutixing* 主體性), a cardinal notion of Li Zehou's philosophy. The "tool as root" (*gongju bentu* 工具本體) and the "emotion as root" (*qing bentu* 情本體) are known as the "pair of core roots" (*shuang bentu* 雙本體). The reason why Li picks them out among other "roots" (*bentu* 本體), in my opinion, is for highlighting the importance of them, because they well embody the two most important factors that distinguish human beings from animals.

a very interesting and valuable topic, to which very little attention has been paid to date, although it is one that is too huge to be dealt with in great depth in the current article.

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