



# George Berkeley's language of vision and the occult tradition of linguistic Platonism Part I: Linguistic Platonism in the Renaissance

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## Abstract

This case study on the linguistic ideas of George Berkeley is designed to exemplify the clandestine intrusion of 'linguistic Platonism', i.e. occult conceptions of language, into linguistic theories of modern times. The assumption underlying the study is that occult linguistic thought has played an important role in the formation of all modern theories of language which argue for a cognitive function alongside, or instead of, a communicative function of language. Focusing on the historical emergence of linguistic Platonism in Renaissance esoteric traditions, part I will lay the foundations for a new interpretation of Berkeley's theory of language (part II), which will be presented in the following issue. Here I will argue that occult concepts of language are indeed amenable to serious historiographic study, widespread convictions to the contrary notwithstanding. I will suggest that the apparent contradictions and other theoretical inconsistencies in occult concepts of language vanish once we allow for the possibility that they can be allocated to two different kinds of language and to two theories of language. It is this double theory of language that provides the theoretical backbone of linguistic Platonism.

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## 1. Introduction: Foucault and Yates on the occult Renaissance

According to received scholarly wisdom, the linguistic ideas of the Renaissance Neoplatonic tradition, represented by writers such as the notorious Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486–1535), the Elizabethan magus John Dee (1527–1608), the Rosicrucian physician Robert Fludd (1574–1637) and, at its margins, the mystic Jakob Boehme (1575–1624), formed hardly more than a brief and dispensable interlude, an episode immaterial to the shaping of 17th and 18th century, or even modern, linguistic thought, by which it was soon superseded.<sup>1</sup> The modern *locus classicus* for such customary marginalization of a formerly powerful mode of linguistic thinking is Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1970).<sup>2</sup> Starting from the assumption that the then common view of writing and speaking subjects as sovereign authors of their cognitive and linguistic productions was fundamentally wrong, Foucault embarked on what he called an archaeological project that was destined to lay bare the (contingent, i.e., inherently meaningless) *epistèmes* or “discursive formations” of the modern mind. These were seen by Foucault as unconsciously constraining or governing and, at the same time, as making possible the cognitive practices of authors writing in a particular period. One of the most salient results of the archaeological enterprise was the alleged “rupture” that Foucault saw between each *epistème* and the following, a feature that is actually required for his construction to be coherent. Distinguishing three *epistèmes* in the post-medieval era, he claimed that the ‘deep grammar’ of the “Renaissance *epistème* of resemblance” or *analogy* was incompatible with both that of the “Classical age of representation” and that of “the Modern age of man” – so much so that a historical mediation in terms of a communication, translation, or transition between one ‘epistemological grammar’ and another, and hence the very possibility of a history of ideas, was ruled out.

<sup>1</sup> In a narrow sense, *Renaissance Neoplatonism*, often also referred to as *Renaissance hermeticism*, would exclude Boehme but comprise authors such as Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), Francesco Giorgi (1460–1540), Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), Francesco Patrizi (1529–1597), the Cambridge Platonists Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688) and Henry More (1614–1687), and Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680). In a broader sense, it includes authors who combined Neoplatonic leanings and an affiliation with the Cabbala, knowledge of which spread all over Europe with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. In this wider sense, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522), Guillaume Postel (1510–1581) and, in the 17th century, Francis Mercurius van Helmont (1614–1698), Christian Knorr van Rosenroth (1636–1689) and Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670) would likewise figure as Renaissance Neoplatonists. Bohemian theosophy has a different textual and historical background, as have other Renaissance esoteric traditions such as alchemy, Paracelsianism and Rosicrucianism. Diverse as all these traditions may be in some respects, they are sufficiently similar to be treated as constituting a relatively homogeneous field of thought. The latter is termed by Faivre (1994) *Renaissance esotericism*, while Copenhaver (1990) suggests the term *Occultism*. For reasons that will become obvious in the course of the discussion, I prefer to speak of *Renaissance Neoplatonism*. For the various strands of Renaissance esotericism/occultism/Neoplatonism, see Yates (1964, 1972), Shumaker (1979), Merkel and Debus (1988), Faivre (1994, 1998, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Published in 1966, the French original *Les mots et les choses* went through six editions in its first year and was instrumental in establishing Foucault's reputation as, alternatively, an intellectual giant, charlatan, or one of the greatest poets of the social sciences. Being largely obscure, inflated with cryptic rhetoric, at times uninformed or even plainly illogical, this otherwise inspiring book possessed some of the essential prerequisites for becoming and remaining an international bestseller. Ironically, the same opacity of style that was soon attacked by Foucault's critics was one of the hallmarks of Renaissance Neoplatonist writings, whose “discursive practices” *Les mots et les choses* identified as peculiar to the Renaissance “age of resemblance”. For further affinities between Foucault and the topic of this paper, see Section 4.

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