On the Origin of Language again: Ceci's Criticism of Trombetti

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Abstract: Alfredo Trombetti's *L'unità d'origine del linguaggio* was published in 1905, at a time when the glottogonic interest concerning the monogenesis or polygenesis of languages was waning. Trombetti's arguments were sharply rebutted by the Roman linguist Luigi Ceci on the journal *La Cultura* in 1907. Ceci not only criticised Trombetti's method as inadequate, but he found that Trombetti deliberately ignored that any matter of language is a matter of people. As Ceci stated, every language is at the end of an infinitely long evolutionary series and the unity is to be conceived not at the beginning, but at the end of evolution. Focussing on Ceci's criticism of Trombetti, this paper intends to pinpoint the reasons that contributed to the critical fortune of Trombetti's monogenetic theory, despite its indemonstrability on linguistic grounds.

Keywords: Linguistic historiography; Monogenesis of languages; Polygenesis of languages; Luigi Ceci; Alfredo Trombetti.

1. *Premise*

Luigi Ceci held the Chair of Comparative History of Classical Languages at the Sapienza University of Rome from 1892 to his death in 1927. Ceci's work, though discontinuous with regard to the questions he addressed (among which, for example, the study of the meaning and the role of dialogue in language and the social nature of language itself), is of special interest in the setting to the history of linguistic ideas in Italy in the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. His work includes the most significant aspects of Italian linguistics of those years, but also traces of original thought, in some instances against the prevailing beliefs[1].

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[1]   Cf. De Mauro (1979, 1994a, 1996; see also 1954); De Mauro-Dovetto (2005); Dovetto (1998; 2017).

More specifically, Ceci was perhaps the only Italian linguist of his time able to appreciate the philosophical background of the positions expressed by Croce without letting himself be seduced by them, but rather, openly criticising them. He caught Vossler's positive aspects, noting, however, the modest base of his theories. All the same, he never neglected the highly detailed check of linguistic data, the *philologeîn*. He was the only Italian (and with Saussure's death, among the very few in Europe) who was able to develop original reflection on the social, economic and cultural dimensions that condition the linguistic life of peoples and, through them, the life of languages, their functioning and their evolution.

In 1905 Alfredo Trombetti's *L'unità d'origine del linguaggio* was published in Bologna. In this work, Trombetti supported claims for the monogenesis of languages. Ceci presented detailed criticism of the work in six articles published in 1907 in the journal *La Cultura*, in which the difficult task that Trombetti believed he had accomplished, that is, reconciling the totality of the world's languages to a single origin, was emptied of demonstrative value by questioning the validity of the very premises of the work.

On the one hand, all glottogonic interest regarding the monogenesis or polygenesis of language had been waning for some time, although the anthropological interest in the monogenesis or polygenesis of human races was not. Instead, in the light of new research frontiers, language appeared as a slow formation in an incipient state of thought and of individual and collective consciousness («una formazione lenta in uno stato incipiente di pensiero e coscienza individuale e collettiva»; Ribezzo, 1916: 19) and the new interest in this slow and gradual formation, implying the work of many generations, had ended detracting value from previous glottogonic interests.

On the other hand, the transition from the non-documented protolanguage to the historical attested ancient languages known to us, that already appear as well-developed from the first manifestation of written monuments, had devalued the reconstruction of the original protolanguage reducing it to an entirely artificial procedure, a *scientific fiction*[2].

Given these premises, it would certainly have been a risk to expect to go beyond what Humboldt had already defined as a *Grenzlinie*,

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[2]   Cf. Schleicher (1861: 3; 1865: 47); Schmidt (1872: 31).

that is the boundary line that separates what is documented from what is merely postulated. In fact, in this way linguistic analysis would have to develop as a metaphysics of language, since present day language turned out to be only a poor legacy of the extremely old original language. The metaphysical, almost theological, investigation regarding an original language whose definition is lost in the mists of prehistory («la cui definizione si perde nel fascino della preistoria», Landucci, 1977: 52) was, therefore, transformed into a sort of phenomenological investigation. From this new perspective, that could ensure new scientific validity to the subject of empirical studies in glottology, an attempt was made to trace back those fundamental phases in the process of language learning on the part of every single individual that would have marked the evolutionary pathway of the language itself from the time of its first manifestation.

Because of this, studies on child language (*bambinesco*), or concerning the most *barbaric idioms* and the instinctive expressions of animals received a new impetus, with the scope of making *probable conjectures* on the state of the primitive utterances of man («congetture probabili sullo stato delle favelle primitive degli uomini», Merlo, 1885: 15).

The linguistic problem faced in the new perspective reacquired scientific validity and opened space for new research. Luigi Ceci, a Roman glottologist and the leader of the linguistic School that later, through Pagliaro, would come down to our time and to Tullio De Mauro, also operated in this newly established dimension.

As matter of fact, Ceci was also pushed towards this by his frequentation of contemporary sociological theories of language. On the other hand, on this route Ceci also appeared, in a certain sense, almost able to predict the new research directions towards which today's studies of the origins of language are oriented, where attention has now transferred from languages to language itself, to the anatomo-neurological preconditions necessary for its use and to language learning methods (cf. De Mauro, 1994b: 31-45).

2. *Ceci's criticism of Trombetti*

According to Ceci, Trombetti compared the roots of several languages without taking into any account the history of the corresponding linguistic groups, that is, the chronological compatibility of the

different languages, nor even their homogeneity from the point of view of their ideal collocation on a hypothetical genealogical tree. Moreover, perhaps influenced by Schmidt's *Wellentheorie*, Trombetti carried out his analysis for geographically contiguous groups, which are presumed to be related, thus extending to all the world's languages Schmidt's procedure, which had only been applied to languages that had already been widely demonstrated as having a common origin[3]. Actually, having voluntarily ignored phenomena like *expansion*, or the splitting off (*scindimenti*) and the possible mixing (*incrociamenti*) of peoples meant ignoring, as Ceci objected, the fundamental premise that reality is complex («le realtà son complesse», Ceci, 1907: 19). In so doing, Trombetti overlooked an entire bibliography that, starting from Ascoli's foundation of the ethnological criterion (ivi: 51), had united into a single research direction works like that of Leskien – in which the interruption of geographical continuity consequent to the separation of contiguous varieties would seem to be able to better solve problems of linguistic reconstruction – and of all the line of linguistic production at the turn of the century that considered language as an eminently social fact, and, especially, Meillet.

Trombetti's methodological approach appeared to his reviewer Ceci all the more inadequate, since the latter clearly admitted that Schmidt's theory had been abandoned because of the incontestable fact that languages of the same family, though having a common origin, appear to us as *historical individualities*. To Ceci, then, it seemed that Trombetti had voluntarily ignored the notion that every matter of language is a matter of people («ogni questione di lingua è questione di popoli», Ceci, 1907: 19), while, again according to Ceci, Schmidt's theory would certainly have been more profitably applied in the study of the propagation of loan words (*Lehnwörter*), or dialects, or in any case in the field of living languages.

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[3]   In his extensive comparative work Trombetti sought a connection between Indo-European and all the African languages, as he did not consider it appropriate to base his work on the affinity between Indo-European and Semitic, which had not been unanimously accepted by the scientific community. He found that connection in the Finno-Ugric languages. In this way he identified an extensive interrelationship that embraced the set of African languages, no longer only affine to Indo-European languages but also to those of Eurasia and Oceania. The languages of the Caucasus on the one hand and Basque on the other would have accounted for the affinity between the two large Hamito-Semitic and Euro-Asian groups (Trombetti, 1905: 1-6).

The truth, Ceci stressed, is that every language finds itself at the end of an infinitely long evolutionary series («è che ogni lingua si trova alla fine di una serie evolutiva infinitamente lunga» [*ibid.*]) and unity is not at the beginning, but at the end of the evolution («l'unità non è al principio, ma alla fine dell'evoluzione», Ceci, 1913-1914: 68), thereby radically contrasting Trombetti's theory.

More specifically, again according to Ceci, Trombetti had based his investigation on roots comparison, aiming at establishing a *Wurzelverwandtschaft* (cf. Trombetti, 1905: 50). The necessity that Trombetti had to face, i.e. to compare even the most typologically different languages, would actually have led him to put the comparison between grammatical structures in the background, whereas for Ceci,

In order to identify to which family a language belongs, the most important characteristic to be considered is not that of lexicon, but rather that of grammar, since peoples in reciprocal contact acquire and introduce a great many words of different origins into their vocabulary without, however, the essence of their language being destroyed.

It is easy to encounter peoples with different individual syntax, but peoples that speak languages which have the same syntactic structure must have the same way of thinking, almost, let's say, the same cerebral formation [and may, therefore, be considered, without any doubt, in a kinship relationship, FMD][4] (Ceci, 1911-1912: 6).

Search for a common structure, therefore, against common roots. Although the former type apparently includes the latter, we are actually dealing with different procedures that are applied to different situations and that, above all, address different ends.

In fact, in Ceci's eyes, the former type, common structure, would reject what we call *pregrammatical theory*, that is, the theory, based on the criterion of shared roots, that searches for the forms of very ancient words of the language, the so-called pre-grammar. This, in the works of Cuny (who took up Trombetti's approach) is defined

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[4]   «Il carattere che ha più valore per stabilire la famiglia a cui una lingua appartenga, non è quello del lessico, ma sì quello della grammatica, poiché i popoli nel contatto reciproco, acquistano ed introducono nel loro vocabolario moltissime parole d'origine differente senza che perciò l'essenza della lingua venga distrutta.

Popoli con sintassi diverse individuali è cosa facile incontrare, ma quei popoli che parlino lingue aventi la stessa struttura sintattica, debbono avere il medesimo modo di pensare, quasi, per così dire, la medesima formazione cerebrale [e possono essere pertanto considerati, senza alcun dubbio, in rapporto di parentela]».

as a real, though extremely ancient, language phase, in which at first sight, but only at first sight, the grammatical system would appear different to that which we usually mean by the word grammar («una fase reale, per quanto estremamente antica della lingua, nella quale a prima vista, ma a prima vista soltanto, il sistema grammaticale sembrava diverso da ciò che intendiamo di solito col nome di grammatica», Heilmann, 1949: 70). Heilmann illustrates this point better:

> 'Pregrammar' is a theory about the formation of those most ancient words that are the roots; it is a method for carrying out their analyses. In it, considerable space is taken up by a vast and complex game of prefixes, infixes, suffixes, old "empty words" crystalized around an originating "full word", around the semantic "base" as true morphemes later linked in a single phonetic complex that constitutes the root revealed by analysis of the inflected word, that is, the "enlarged" root. It is clear therefore that […] one may claim to have reached a valid demonstration of kinship, like that founded on the identity of inflections, when one demonstrates the semantic and phonetic correspondence of the elements constituting the root[5] (Heilmann, 1949: 70-71).

This is Trombetti's theory.

Ceci firmly opposed this theory, as for him every linguistic family discloses to us another peculiar linguistic world which is in itself unique, and for this reason irreducible to kinship with other linguistic worlds and types (Ceci, 1907: 121-2), that is, a world constituted, in the first instance, on its specific *grammatical structure.*

For Ceci, therefore, comparison necessarily stopped before the comparison between languages having different structures. He would never have imagined to question through some form of scientifically valid comparison the radical break that he posed, for example, between inflected and agglutinative languages and monosyllabic languages. As already seen, he supported the theory that in order to account for linguistic interference between two languages a preexisting affinity between these languages has to be presupposed.

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[5]   «La 'pregrammatica' è una teoria della formazione di quelle antichissime parole che sono le radici; è un metodo per condurne l'analisi. In essa ha largo posto un vasto e complesso gioco di prefissi, infissi e suffissi, antiche "parole vuote" cristallizzatesi intorno alla "parola piena" originaria, alla "base" semantica come veri morfemi legati in seguito in un solo complesso fonetico che costituisce la radice rivelata dall'analisi della parola flessa, la radice cioè "allargata". È chiaro quindi che […] si può ammettere d'aver raggiunta una dimostrazione di parentela valida quanto quella fondata sulla identità delle flessioni, qualora si dimostri la corrispondenza semantica e fonetica degli elementi costitutivi della radice».

Here it is clear, however, that Ceci conceived this structural affinity more in the typological sense than in the genetic sense.

But for those who, like Trombetti, aimed rather at reaching linguistic phases believed to be preinflection, the criterion of morphological identity – which is reliable only when working within a given linguistic context – was inadequate, so other types of evidence became necessary. Of these, the only one that proved to be practicable was that of the root analysis, the fundamental premise of which was expressed in two main points: acceptance of the evolution theory of language and decomposition of the word into simple and concrete elements (cf. Heilmann, 1949: 65).

Root analysis is based on the assumption that a root existed at a time prior to the formation of the word. This contradicted those who believed the root to be an abstraction; it was thus widely exploited and only a few scholars fled from the audacious conclusions towards which the theorists, like Trombetti, were pushing, the so-called enlargement of the roots (*allargamento delle radici*). For these latter scholars, in particular, the root acquired a real existence and was raised to the range of a concrete and very old element, having survived the evolution of languages, becoming a minimal element necessary for proving the common origin of two or more languages.

Ceci's criticism was harsh. In the viewpoint of an adversary of this theory, as was Ceci, Trombetti had even crumbled (*sminuzzato*) some languages on the basis of structures of other languages, chopping up (*tagliuzzando*) the words above and beyond the Indo-European morphological skeleton («al di sopra e al di fuori della ossatura morfologica dell'indo-europeo», Ceci, 1907: 88) in his attempt to gather passing analogies.

For example, according to Trombetti the ie. **duo* would be derived from **de* 'this' plus **uo* 'that', as Ceci reports (1907: 88), and, obviously, this arbitrary decomposition could not please Ceci, although some years before he also dealt with para-etymological explanations. It should not be forgotten, in fact, how Ceci had interpreted this procedure in a radically opposite direction, that is, he had reflected on the linguistic action of a few extraordinary figures (such as ancient Roman jurists, or Dante for the Italian language) aimed essentially at adequately improving their own technical language in the changed social situation, and had instead overlooked – but also voluntarily ignored – that decomposition of the word

into 'primary elements' to which the scholars had recurred in the hope to resolve the problems of origins. Trombetti and his work on monogenesis was, instead, placed on this level.

On the other hand, Ceci, following Delbrück, for whom the root was not a reality, but rather an *ideales Bedeutungscentrum*, believed that the root was a mere methodological abstraction, a creation of our imagination, since the originating language, from the time we have some testimony, would have already reached a level of inflection:

[…] and will there then have been a period in which only the root existed? And if so, was this a root or a word? This is the important point. Let us take the example of the root of to bear: *bher; Sanscrit *bharami*, Greek φέρω, Latin *fero*, Gothic *beram* [*scil* bairan] here not only is there the idea of to bear, but also bearer etc. But if one thinks that speech was in roots, one would consider the language too philosophical to have such general ideas […]. Therefore ours is only a reconstruction[6] (Ceci, 1912-1913: 13).

And – so objects Ceci – even when everything in a word that may have been produced by processes of language formation is removed, who guarantees that what remains of the word has always been so? Rather, he believes it more plausible that even considered in such a way the root is, in reality, nothing other than the result of mutations of the true root (cf. Ceci, 1892-1893, I: 5).

In this brief recapitulation of Ceci's critique of Trombetti's theses we may therefore infer that Ceci moderately accepted the pregrammatical theory (but not also the theory of the enlargement of the roots): in fact, though Ceci considers the root, methodologically, as a significant, not further reducible, phonetic nucleus (ivi: 12-13), at the same time he sustains that nothing stops us from supposing that this same root is, in reality, the arrival point of a previous aggregation of different constituents. Neither is it necessarily indivisible, therefore, nor necessarily composite: but for Ceci, deep down, these were, in any case, all hypotheses that lost validity because of the complete lack of objective verifiability and that for

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[6]   «e ci sarà stato poi un periodo in cui esisteva solo la radice? E se pure, era questa una radice o una parola? Questo è il punto importante. Prendiamo ad esempio la radice di portare: *bher; sanscrito *bharami*, greco φέρω, latino *fero*, gotico *beram*: qui non solo c'è l'idea di portare, ma di portatore ecc. Ma se si pensasse che si parlava per radici, si stimerebbe la lingua troppo filosofica da avere idee così generali […]. Dunque la nostra è solo una ricostruzione».

this reason verged on metaphysical stuffs (*metafisicheria*).

The only achievement that Ceci recognised in Trombetti was his support to the existence of relationships between all the world's languages. But while Trombetti had interpreted these relationships from a historical viewpoint by aiming at demonstrating the fundamental affinity of all languages, for Ceci the same relationships could demonstrate nothing more than the possibility of the existence of analogous phenomena among the various non-interrelated languages (cf. Ceci, 1911-1912, *Appendice*: 8-10). And with this Ceci seems to mean that everything belongs to the fortuitous coincidences of grammar, to the effects of *allgemein menschlich*.

3. *Ceci's conception of language*

Having excluded the possibility of reconstructing the original language, other pathways, however, remained open for facing the problem of origins: the first, Humboldtian, was that which considered the transcendental origin of language, a product originating in the daily act of dialogue; while the second transformed the genetic viewpoint into a phenomenological approach and tried to find the answers to the problem of the origins by investigating phenomena like child language acquisition and the characteristics of language in less evolved peoples.

On his part, in various occasions, Ceci considered language as a dialogue, as a linguistic interrelation that necessarily takes place between two people, a speaker and a listener, and he explicitly declared that the life of the language is based on this concept (1913-1914: 43). The sources of his dialogic concept of language take us back to Humboldt.

Some years previously Ceci had written that we speak to communicate our thoughts, our feelings to others («noi parliamo per comunicare agli altri il nostro pensiero, i nostri sentimenti», 1908: 722). By its very dialogic nature, language would demonstrate the sociability of man, his living, thinking and speaking to others[7]. And again:

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[7]   Cf. Humboldt (1999/1836-1839: 56-57): «In appearance, however, language develops only socially, and man understands himself only once he has tested the intelligibility of his words by trial upon others [...] All speaking, from the simplest kind onwards, is an attachment of what is individually felt to the common nature of mankind».

there is a speaker and there is the listener («vi è un parlante e vi
è l'ascoltante», *ibid.*). For Ceci therefore, as already in Humboldt,
language as dialogue is the very expression of intersubjectivity. For
Humboldt this is the objectivation of the subject and the overcoming
of the traditional monologic model of knowledge; in fact, it is here
that the I, through dialogue with the You, forms itself and in doing
so gives form to the material of the phenomenic world[8]. However,
in Ceci any development that involves a more extensive presenta-
tion and philosophical scheme of the intersubjectivity of language
is clearly lacking. That is, Humboldt's formulation of the dialogic
relationship presupposes that only in the reply of the You does the I
recognise the world thus formed, and itself as I, in this way overcom-
ing the limitation imposed by its own individuality, leaving the self
through the dialogue, that is, objectivising in intersubjectivity. Ceci's
formulation, instead, counterposes a speaker and a listener, the first
taken as the creative individual element and the second as the 'reac-
tive' element to the first, represented by one or more individuals, as a
passive springboard to the creative liberty of the speaker[9], according
to a model much closer to sociological theories of language.

According to Ceci, in fact, for language to take place, speaker and
listener must feel the same relationship between the 'phonetic nuclei'
the former emits and the thought («sentono un eguale rapporto fra i
nuclei fonetici che il primo emette ed il pensiero», Ceci, 1908-1809:
9), namely, they have the same feeling of the relationship between
an idea and the articulated phonemes («il medesimo sentimento del
rapporto che c'è fra un'idea e i fonemi articolati», ivi: 31).

Therefore, if the Humboldtian influence now appears more nu-
anced and marginal, at the same time the contribution of different
and later concepts on the nature of language, intended as a means
of communication at the disposition of the individual in society, be-
comes more evident. Among these Hermann Paul's (and neogram-
matical) concept of language seen as something that exists only in the
single individual, whereas reciprocal comprehension and knowledge
itself of the linguistic processes was guaranteed by the constitutional
uniformity of all the individuals (and therefore of all the linguistic
processes), had a clear influence on Ceci's thought. In addition to

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[8]   Cf. Di Cesare (1991: XXXVI-XXXVII).
[9]   Cf. Ceci (1908-1809: 31-32; 1913-1914: 52-54).

that, he attributed a fundamental role to the concept of language as a fundamentally dialogical and communicative act, according to which linguistic communication between the speaker and the listener would be guaranteed by the implicit presupposition, on the part of the listener, that the same psychic processes also occur in the speaker.

These positions are less metaphysicalizing (*metafisicheggianti*) and are therefore closer to Ceci's views, which are developed on the basis of the concrete nature of language within the most empirical of possible theories.

The Humboldtian subject is certainly already a concrete, historical individual set in the community, and not pure transcendental subjectivity, but for Humboldt the essence of language lies in something that transcends the phenomenic human being and that may seem an obstacle to the empirical research about historical-natural language. In fact, in reaction to this apparent contradiction in Humboldt[10], Steinthal transferred the linguistic problem from the sphere of metaphysics to that of psychology, thereby renouncing any speculative ambition and proceeding to the mere fixing and setting out of the facts in the context of an empiricist theory[11].

According to Ceci, instead, and from a materialist viewpoint, the reduction of the Humboldtian model should not have taken the direction of psychology, following Steinthal, nor the direction of aesthetics, as the idealists would be inclined, nor the direction of the social sciences (intended in the most generic way), but only the direction of *Glottology* or historical Linguistics (Ceci, 1908: 727-728).

All that apart, however, Humboldt's influence on Ceci's concept of the essential dialogic nature of language remains undeniable, as it already emerges from one of Ceci's first writings of greater scope (Ceci, 1892), in which he stresses how, while the word is given in the moment of articulation and hearing, the thought is almost an uninterrupted interior language («il pensiero è quasi un linguaggio interiore non interrotto», ivi: X). Therefore, beyond the phenomenic aspect of the language that develops socially in a relationship of consonance between the speaker and the listeners, for Ceci

[10]   "Apparent", since Humboldt resolved it brilliantly in his project of language conceived as the synthesis of philosophical-transcendental thinking and linguistic-empirical research (cf. Di Cesare, 1991: XLIV).

[11]   Cf. Formigari (1990: 225-249) and Poggi (1977: 546-560).

language remained the necessary condition of thought in the single individual, even within the closed realm of his own isolation[12].

Ceci's vision of language as dialogue, that presupposes a speaker and one or more listeners, that is, a speaking subject and a community in which the former is immersed, shows us how the study of Humboldt, but also and above all the contemporary sociological theories of language, had greatly influenced his thought.

In the end, recalling how Ceci located the most remote origins of language in the individual mind, we may observe also how, for Ceci, the individual use that the single speaking subject makes of the language is a creative use, though limited to the necessity of reciprocal comprehension with other members that use the same language, transmitted by tradition: each language change has its origin in the individual act, even though, as Ceci put it, the word becomes language when it is accepted by the community («la parola diventa linguaggio quando è accettata dalla comunità», Ceci, 1911-1912: 53). On the other hand, language, which starts from the individual use, is at the same time its tool, if the individual act, in order to be accepted by the community, must conform to the now fixed nature of the language, now fixed («conforme alla natura della lingua, ormai fissata», ivi: 23). This creative, individual, non-linguistic act is, moreover, generally unconscious (Ceci, 1913-1914: 13)[13], in the sense that it lays outside the control and the intention of the individual[14]; actually, where we find traces of conscious activity of the mind, this occurs not because the people want it, but because the people are naturally taken towards it («questo avviene non perché il popolo voglia, ma perché *naturalmente* vi è portato», Ceci, 1896: 38, italics by author). There is no space, therefore, for the will, in the Bréalian sense, that is, an active force and a constructive force together, that substitutes both the idea of a blind force operating in the facts of language and the subjectivity of the single individuals; moreover, it carries out a close

[12]   Cf. Humboldt (1999/1836-1839: 56-57).
[13]   Ceci believed that having «determined the fact that language is created and employed without human activity operating directly» (Ceci, 1896: 38) was a great achievement of the new linguistic research.
[14]   The theme of the subject's unawareness of his own intellectual capacity also recurs in Bréal, but what dominates in Bréal is the consideration of language as a response of man's free choice to his needs, that is, as a manifestation that is directly dependent on human will (cf. Martone, 1990: XXXIII and Aarsleff, 1984/1982: 415).

up role of elaboration and institutionalisation of linguistic facts[15].

Deeply rooted in Ceci remains the conviction that language is actually the product of a long human conquest, an inheritance that would be slowly enriched and modified according with the evolutions undergone by peoples that have exclusive possession of it:

[…] the history of language is intimately connected to the history of the very people it is spoken by. Rude and uncultured in its start, as the people speaking it were rude and uncultured; in its origins language spread and developed following the intellectual and social fortunes of those people. The more complex the intellectual world of the people became, correspondingly the language itself becomes more varied, rich and complex; and when the people proceed along the path of civilization, creating cities, states, and nations, they come into contact with nearby peoples, and from their civilizations they draw new life and vigour to their own, the language unravels becomes varied, is enriched and in this way adapts to all the new needs of the civilization[16] (Ceci, 1892-1893, III: 3-4).

According to Ceci, the history of language would proceed at the same rate as the intellectual and social history its speakers[17]. At the beginning each word was a very lively and brilliant image, each noun an animated being, each verb a physical action («ogni parola era una vivissima e brillantissima immagine, ogni sostantivo un essere animato, ogni verbo un atto fisico», Ceci, 1880: 7); over time, subsequently, expressions of concrete reality would be followed by the formation of abstract concepts, which moved from the particular to the general, to *general ideas*. This represented, therefore, an achievement of both highly developed thought and language (cf. Ceci, 1911-1912: 47)[18].

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[15]   Cf. Martone (1990: LI-LII).

[16]   «la storia della lingua è intimamente connessa con la storia dello stesso popolo, dal quale è parlata. Rozza e incolta nei suoi inizi, come rozzo e incolto è il popolo, che la parla; nelle sue origini la lingua si dispiega e s'innalza seguendo appunto le vicissitudini intellettuali e sociali dello stesso popolo. Quanto più il mondo intellettuale del popolo si fa complesso, tanto più corrispondentemente la lingua si fa varia, ricca, complessa essa stessa; e quando il popolo procede innanzi sul cammino della civiltà, e costituitosi in città, in istato, in nazione viene in contatto coi popoli vicini, e dalle civiltà di questi trae nuova vita e vigore alla propria, la lingua si snoda, si fa varia, s'arricchisce adattandosi per tal modo a tutti i nuovi bisogni, a tutte le esigenze nuove della civiltà».

[17]   A theme dear to Bréal, also repeated in *De la forme et de la fonction des mots* (1866), repr. in *Mélanges de mythologie et de linguistique* (1878: 243-266), often quoted by Ceci.

[18]   On this point Ceci also made reference to analogous theories by Curtius and Hirt (Ceci, 1907: 51). Cf. also Wundt (1987/1912: 452-454) for whom the concrete and abstract content represented two different and successive levels of the development of linguistic thought.

It is not the wealth of the grammatical forms that constitutes the real wealth of a language, that would show its spiritual and cultural value, but rather the number of meanings that a word possesses («il numero di accezioni che una parola possiede», ivi: 5-6). According to Ceci, thanks to the capacity of the intellect to complete the information suggested by language, the wealth of the latter could not, in fact, reside in a wealth of forms, as much as in a wealth of possible formations.

Conclusions

Ceci's solid linguistic reasoning in setting out the indemonstrability of Trombetti's monogenetic theory, shared the misfortune that touched the linguistic theories of the glottologist Ceci, who supported a sociological concept of the life of a language, an audacious claim for the period in which he produced it. On the other hand, the longevity, in the history of ideas, of an ideological point of view deeply rooted in the anthropological perspective which Trombetti's expression belonged to, has meant that, paradoxically, the fortune of the latter has decidedly disfavoured that of Ceci, head of the Roman School of linguistics.

Recent studies of linguistic historiography (among which mainly those of Graffi on the origin of language and of languages[19] and those of De Mauro on Ceci) have opened interesting new perspectives on the debate, and in particular De Mauro's research has once more proven the rightness of Ceci's theories, if not otherwise, at least on a linguistic basis.

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[19]   I refer to a conference given by Graffi at the "Incontri linguistici del lunedì Tullio De Mauro" in February 2016, *Monogenesi o poligenesi delle lingue: idee vecchie e (forse) nuove*, see now Graffi (2019).

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