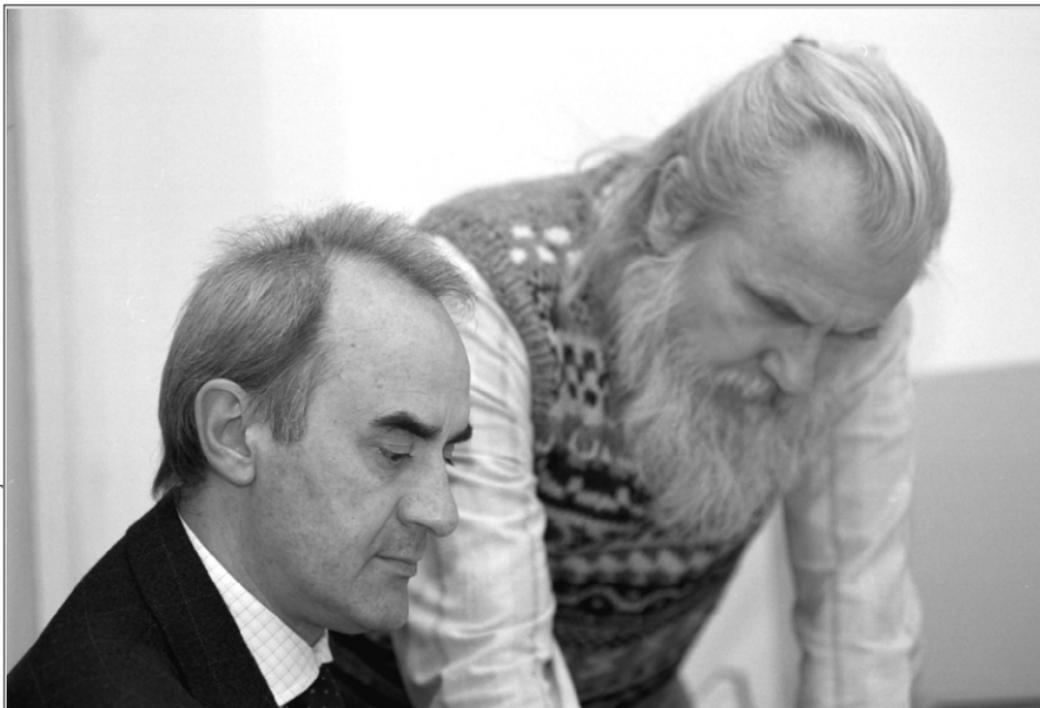


PHOTO: SLOBODAN POTIJ



*NIN'S EDITORIAL STUFF*

*Professor Miso Kulic and Dragan Jovanovic during the interview*

## REBELLION IN LANGUAGE PARADISE

A symposium dedicated to the philosophical work, ***Langauge Before Language***, by Professor Miso Kulic, was recently held in the *Vuk Foundation*<sup>1</sup>. No living philosopher here has ever been accorded such an honour.

When Kulic's book was published a year ago its author was soon being compared with world renowned philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger. Kulic refrains from commenting on such compliments, virtually unheard of in our milieu. He was, however, willing to discuss the ideas contained in this impressive work.

Professor Miso Kulic (born in Sarajevo, 1951) lives in Belgrade and teaches at the Philosophy Faculty in Novi Sad.

One could say that this interview had its beginnings as early as 1992 in Belgrade, in the well-known *Plavi jahac* (*Blue Rider*) bar and that it was completed last week in the *Sumatovac* restaurant.

*What are you, Professor Kulic? You are not a theologian, but certainly a philosopher, and you consider yourself to be a theogrammarian. What is theogrammar?*

The fact is that when the concept of theogrammar appears out of context it can at first seem to be a theological rather than

---

<sup>1</sup> *Interview with Professor Miso Kulic, published in Belgrade weekly "NIN", No 2065 of 24.1.2002*

philosophical concept. This work contains no such confusion: theogrammar is consistently taken to be a pre-theological concept, which is naturally also of significance for theology, but which is not theological in itself. In this earlier, pre-theological sense theogrammar leaves theology to one side, as the question of God can only be addressed once the question of language has been broached. In other words, theology cannot raise the question of God as long as it neglects the significance of the question of language. At the same time, by revealing the absolute meaning of the grammatical structure of language, theogrammar demonstrates that theology certainly recognized and understood the question of Language as God, particularly in the Judeo-Christian concept of the unity between God and man, and in the guilt of the first human beings and their fall from grace. Thus, we see Language as God not only in the gospel according to St John. Moreover, it cannot be taken as an exposition of the question of language unless we understand that the grammatical meaning of language has not only a philological sense, which sees language merely as a means of communication, but also an ontological sense. It's precisely because I consider that the first concept of the linguistic - as the absolute meaning of all meanings - was contained in the idea of God, and that this concept left its mark in the nominal sense in the most significant grammatical notions of subject, object and predicate, that I gave the name theogrammar to this perception of the basic grammatical structure of the meaning of human existence as a linguistic one.

*And so theogrammar is a philosophical notion?*

Yes, theogrammar takes language as the absolute which came first i.e. by revealing language as the thing which precedes,

theogrammar shows us the only real foundation upon which we stand. Theogrammar broaches the issue of the perplexing nature of man's existence by revealing it in the grammatical sense of language. Theogrammar is therefore not only a pre-theological but also pre-philosophical notion. It says that the grammatical sense of language embraces the whole of theology and ontology, and also what goes beyond both theology and ontology.

*If I understand you correctly, it's only through the question of language that we can understand the meaning of human existence?*

Not every question concerning language can throw light on our way to an understanding of the meaning of language. In fact, there's only one question through which language reveals its most wonderful and mysterious meaning - which we all possess - and we only reach it when we understand that we can only pose the question of language by means of language. A journey into language is only possible by means of language, since without language we would not even know that we were making such a journey. This fact immediately shows that we cannot escape language or put it somewhere beyond ourselves, because if this were possible we would be left without language and so without any meaning, as there is no meaning which can have meaning for man if not communicated to him through linguistic sense. No meaning can appear without a linguistic meaning, which is why we see it as an absolute. Thus, it's only here that we can start on the road to grasping the mysterious meaning because we immediately see that our existence cannot be aware of itself outside the sense of language.

In other words, the mysterious meaning of human existence lies in the meaning of his linguistic existence.

*What is the essence of the philosophical turnabout that in your opinion the question of language has undergone in respect of its traditional understanding?*

If we approach the question of language like this we have to abandon the customary perception of thought as something different from language because thought, customarily seen as the future creator of language, is basically non-linguistic. However, the trouble with this explanation is that we cannot think anything if not thinking in a language, and therefore cannot set aside the fact that the very notion of thinking is vested with a linguistic sense. In other words, language is not only language when interpreted by a particular language in which we talk or write, but also in the sense of that preceding language which contains our thought, even before we learn any particular language. Language in this sense, which is inside thought itself, is never seen as language and only appears to be non-linguistic. No one first learns to speak or write their mother tongue and then subsequently begins to think. Rather, birth gives man the ability to think, and then he learns his mother tongue. Thus we see that the very notion of thought cannot be derived from a mysterious antecedent possessed by language for the purpose of thinking, and thus for understanding the whole of our existence.

*Is this close to Heidegger's position on understanding thought and language?*

Heidegger does mention the linguistic foundation of our being, but in my view he never linked the consequences of this view

with the concept of thought. Thus not even Heidegger goes beyond the traditional view of understanding language merely as speech. Language for him is just the "home of the human being", not the human being as such. To Heidegger the human being is not the same as the home where the human being lives. And so the human being constantly fights to get somewhere outside of language, even though without language he could never even be seen as a being.

*What, in your opinion, is "Adam's and Eve's theogrammatical rebellion" against God?*

We're talking here about the enigmatic structure of the concurrence of the grammatical and logical meanings of language. Anything you say always has, directly or implicitly, a subject, object and predicate, and therefore grammatical, i.e. linguistic sense. Take the sentence: "The moon sleeps in the adjoining room#". It has grammatical but not logical sense because our experience tells us it's not true. Thus we see that the grammatical meaning of language does not know any truth or untruth, because in it, as in the image of the Judeo-Christian god, everything merely *exists*, or is. And when it is said that something *does not exist* it still exists because it exists in the sense of telling. Only our logical sense knows truth because it does not accept that every grammatical truth *is* always also its truth. In other words, logical linguistic sense, by doubting, as in the case of Adam and Eve, rises up against its own Creator, that is, against grammatical linguistic sense. At the same time, we see that logical sense cannot be expressed without the grammatical meaning of language, i.e. man is always expressed by God, as Judeo-Christian theology would say. Thus, we're immediately faced by that mysterious question: how is it possible for the meaning of our

language to contain simultaneously two mutually opposing linguistic meanings the grammatical and logical, divine and human?

*Nietzsche said: we will never liberate ourselves from God because we have grammar.*

Grammatical and logical senses are fundamentally mutually opposed precisely because in the grammatical sense of language everything exists and makes sense, even if it does not have logical sense, because everything always has its linguistic grammatical sense. The grammatical sense of language does not know anything that is meaningless, but the logical sense of language is different because it does not believe that its meaning is the same as the absolute grammatical meaning. Thus logical sense faces an enigma: where did it get that divine grammatical meaning of language in which everything has sense, and what is that enigma of its existence which makes it possible for it to express its logical sense of resistance to grammatical sense only by means of grammatical sense? I believe Nietzsche had something similar in mind when he wrote: *we will never liberate ourselves from God because we have grammar*, though unfortunately he never developed or explained this more fully. This is also the starting point for the search for answers to the questions concerning the meaning of imagination and art, that is, the linguistic-grammatical structure of their meaning, because, as in the case of grammar, they always only have their own sense.

*And so what is the theogrammatical sin of Adam and Eve?*

I like to see Adam as the theological description of the abstract ontological meaning possessed by grammatical cases. And

what are cases? They cause a word to fall outside its given basic *nominal* meaning i.e. they change the word's initial meaning. Cases are therefore when a word falls outside its meaning into a meaning which the word does not basically possess. This linguistic sin that is constantly being committed by cases is also a reflection of Adam's theological sin, because Adam, who by expressing doubt goes outside his one God-given meaning, also distorts his own unique God-given sense of himself. Adam's guilt is that he distorts his one divine sense, and this takes him from paradise to an earth of sin and guilt. In other words, Adam falls out of the grammatical meaning of language into its logical meaning. It is interesting to note that the Romans called the changes of cases declensions. The word *declino* means *slanting, awry*. Henceforth, Adam could only search for the meaning of his life on the slopes of case endings, though he was never able to grasp his own given sense in any declension. Thus Adam is constantly present in every sense of our language because language would lose all meaning for us if we did not have those sinful case endings. They show us where something is, what it is from, where it is, with whom it is, but at the same time, in spite of the doubtless logical orientation produced by cases, the question arises as to the sense of that orientation. Namely, it seems quite illogical that the grammatical meaning of language, which is the only way to express our logical meaning, only finds its definition in something simultaneous. We cannot simultaneously be of something and by something, but in the grammatical sense of language - and just look at the structure of meaning a little more closely there is no real time difference but only simultaneity. Thus we see that the grammatical structure of linguistic meaning is the same as the theological structure, because in both instances we come up against the mysterious meaning of the simultaneity of our definition, a definition which is based in the logic of non-simultaneity.

In **Language Before Language** you freely compare prepositions with angels.

Certainly, to do so is merely to raise the question of grammatical meaning as onto-theological meaning. Cases are in essence specifically defined dwelling places for prepositions, because these marvellous linguistic entities called prepositions are precisely what give logical sense to language, but their peculiarity derives from their absolute abstraction. These are words without gender, number, case and tense. They act only as some sort of bodiless entities which, like stars in the night sky, shed light on the path of each linguistic traveller, a reliable orientation in the mysterious heaven of sense. Linguistic sense could not exist without them, and thus the question arises: what are those words without which no word can have the sense that it is a word? Prepositions communicate to each word where it is situated, who it's with, next to what...and are in their linguistic sense the same as theological angels, as angelos means messenger.

*Can your philosophical standpoint be termed "the theogrammar of Judeo-Christianity"? And is your theogrammar in fact a radical criticism of the Judeo-Christian view of the world? Or is it an attempt to defend Christianity?*

No, I could not define my philosophical standpoint so simply and say it is the theogrammar of Judeo-Christianity because the explanation of the basis of human existence as linguistic which I undertook in **Language Before Language** only partly pertains to Judeo-Christianity. This explanation does, though, in one respect certainly amount to a criticism of Judeo-Christianity, particularly where the elimination of divine language from human language is

concerned: the theology of Judeo-Christianity does not see that in grammar, i.e. in the sense in which it differentiates the three functions of language - subject, object and predicate we already have the full meaning which it describes to us as the meaning which God has for that theology. On the other hand, Judeo-Christianity does still embody that infinitely important idea of God as Language, even though it's only to be found explicitly stated in John's gospel. Thus, the philosophical standpoint in **Language Before Language** is neither a criticism nor defence of Judeo-Christianity. Rather, by exploring the simultaneity of the grammatical and logical structure of language, it attempts to point towards a reliable position from which the meaning of human existence as a linguistic one can be more clearly understood.

*Surely **Language Before Language** is today, in the era of post-modernism, including philosophical post-modernism, an attempt to build a new post-modern metaphysical school of thought. Or are you, in fact, returning to the good old metaphysics which existed so contentedly from Aristotel to Hegel, and even Heidegger, if you want?*

Post-modernism is not a single idea, but one can certainly say that it does not like metaphysics. So from that point of your assertion that we are talking here about post-modern metaphysical thinking is very interesting. My philosophy is without doubt metaphysics, speculation, and I consider it the only spiritual form in which philosophy is philosophy. Philosophy has only ever been metaphysics, the seeking of reality not in part but in its entirety. Hence the paradox: that what is truly and universally human should be sought in metaphysical, speculative thought which only exists as a pure abstraction and which therefore seems to the uninitiated a cold and insensitive world without people. This is why post-modern thinking is

not something in which I find philosophical thought because I cannot find philosophy in it anywhere. On the other hand, an understanding of the meaning of language as something non-subjective, which is a theme running through post-modernism, is not too far away from **Language Before Language**. Nevertheless, I think the two cannot be brought together. We're merely pointing up that the view of subjectivity or non-subjectivity does not make that basic difference which post-modernism might like to insert between itself and metaphysics. Post-modernism basically sees language as a subject in the same way as metaphysics did: it does not see it differently but only as speech. But as soon as language is taken only as speech, the fundamental sense in which we recognize our existence must immediately disappear because it is not evident that we would not have the meaning of language even if we did not know any spoken language. Understanding language only as speech can probably only be of value to philology, but of no value in the matter of understanding the meaning of language. A criticism of modern philosophy - if that philosophy is metaphysics - from the perspective of **Language Before Language** would be based, in my opinion, on something else, i.e. the failure to notice that western metaphysics, not only with Heidegger, placed the question of the human being outside the structure of the meaning of language and unjustifiably posed it as the single most important question of thought.

*Is it then strange that philosophy has raised the question of its own survival? After all, Gadamer stated on his 100th birthday that European philosophy had been Americanized.*

Philosophy is human destiny itself and not something on whose destiny a philosophical view or philosophical orientation can decide. This is so because man's need for abstraction is insatiable,

even when not in the form of philosophy but, let us say, art or religion, and so it is man's destiny. Because abstraction is the destiny we cannot avoid, we can never avoid our need for philosophy. I believe that Gadamer meant something similar when he said that in spite of everything he was not worried about the fate of philosophy because as soon as the question of dying arises we have the beginnings of philosophy. But Gadamer correctly warns that reducing philosophy to some kind of technical thinking does not make us happy. I would add that it is also true that giving any silly metaphor the significance of philosophy also amounts to an attempt to destroy philosophy because every such attempt also aims to present philosophy as something which is unnecessary and superfluous to our lives. Without a philosophical element in him no man can be a man because he would have nothing on which he could draw for meaning in his life. The fate of philosophy is thus the same as the destiny of human meaning. Thus, in every serious question concerning philosophy we can always see that we are dealing with the very meaning of human existence.

*Gadamer also said that the spirituality of the 21st century should be sought on the Sarajevo-Rostock axis?*

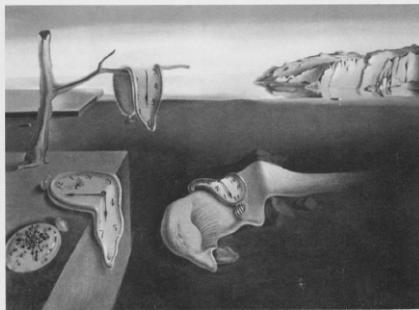
Perhaps because the peripheral parts of south-eastern Europe, all former communist countries, are societies where the most dramatic redefinition of their foundations is taking place. These societies are re-evaluating their own life story, not only in the material-economic sense but also the spiritual sense. This is probably why Gadamer expects a vigorous philosophical answer to come from this post-communist region.

*The interview was given by **Dragan Jovanovi}***

*(Translated from the Serbian by **Gregor McGregor**)*

# JEZIK PRIJE JEZIKA

*Mišo Kulić*



*Naslovna strana prvog izdanja filozofskog dela Mi{e Kuli}a,  
Kalekom, Beograd 2000.*