MICHEL BRÉAL (1832–1915), A FORGOTTEN PRECURSOR OF ENUNCIATION AND SUBJECTIVITY

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ABSTRACT: The paper compares what Michel Bréal originally wrote in 1897 with what Emile Benveniste wrote half a century later about enunciation. It is shown that several oft-repeated ideas of Benveniste actually already exist in Bréal's book: *Essai de sémantique*. The comparison of Benveniste (1966 & 1974) with Bréal (1897) sheds light on the real contribution of Benveniste to enunciation theories. It can be noted that Benveniste did not develop some ideas of Bréal, which can be found in Bally and under the pen of more recent enunciation theorists like Kerbrat-Orecchioni.
KEYWORDS: Enunciation; Benveniste; Bréal; Structuralism; Deictic; Subjectivity.

1. ENUNCIATION THEORIES IN A FRENCH PERSPECTIVE

In general French linguists who work on speech-act issues and enunciation theories ("théories de l'énonciation") emphatically assert their differences with structuralism, the generative-transformational school or socio-linguistics, which they tend to reject and criticize more or less pointedly. They usually relate their theories to the works authored by Emile Benveniste (1902-1976) and they do not accept the intellectual heritage of Saussure and of other structuralists like Trubetzkoy or Martinet. Quite typically a book recently translated in Portuguese, Paveau-Sarfati (2003:166-175), which offers a general overview of several linguistic theories, presents Benveniste as the supposed initiator of enunciation theories in France. The same kind of point of view is developed in Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980). This is indeed what the traditional historiography teaches on the emergence of enunciation theories in France. Paveau-Sarfati (2003:168) adds that these theories developed in the second half of the 20th century, foremost after the 1970s, and can be traced back to scholars of the early 20th: they cite Bally, a Swiss who nevertheless had strong links to Saussure and contributed to

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writing the *Cours de linguistique générale*, or to Bakhtin, a Russian linguist who probably remained completely independent of any influence from Western Europe. These scholars are quite ironically called "the forgotten origins" of enunciation theories. In this paper I will try to underline that in fact several ideas developed by enunciation theories in the second half of the 20th century can already be found in Bréal's *Essai de sémantique* published at the end of the 19th century in 1897. The chapter XXV of the book called "L'élément subjectif" (The Subjective Element) deals with the expression of subjectivity in the fabric, vocabulary and grammar of languages. The word *subjective* is not to be understood as the opposite of *objective* but as referring to the way human speakers, acting as *subjects*, are involved and reflected in their linguistic utterances. This situation appears to have remained barely detected or acknowledged so far and this will be the main thread of the present paper.

2. THE STRUCTURALIST PARADIGM

Contemporary linguistics was long dominated by comparative studies and the quest for Proto-Indo-European as a reconstructed proto-language, or "Ursprache", and a fancied homeland, or "Urheimat". This period lasted throughout the 19th century until the arrival of Ferdinand de Saussure who initiated the transition from historical and comparative linguistics toward a period dedicated to synchronic and descriptive tasks during which structuralism became the prevailing paradigm. Generally speaking structuralists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean shared a number of features. On the whole the focus was not on the speakers nor on speech or speech-acts, but rather on the languages which were theorized as a system or a structure and on the linguistic primary "data", which speakers produce, say or write. In both cases, language would seem to be existing in a universe parallel to that of the speakers. Languages were dealt with as a kind of disembodied, impersonal and immanent code. As a typical consequence of this approach Martinet, one of the prominent representatives of French structuralism, defined language(s) as "instrument(s) de communication" (instrument(s) of communication) as if language(s) were existing independently of speakers and could be put on the desk of the linguist and observed with a magnifying glass. It is possible that by so doing linguists were trying to achieve the goal of acquiring a recognized scientific status, which could compare with so-called "hard" sciences like mathematics or physics. To some extent structuralism may have overdone the goal of appearing as little literary as possible and as much scientific as possible. It can be noted that structuralism brilliantly succeeded in becoming a programmatic model, as is described in Saussure (2006:XXVIII):

"Saussure continues to be considered as one of the founding fathers of modern linguistics. Above all, the *Cours de linguistique générale* is one of the canonical texts of twentieth century thought, having become one of the key works for a movement that became known as structuralism. [...] A generation of thinkers in a range of disciplines recognize their heavy debt to the *Cours*: Lévi-Strauss for anthropology, Barthes for literary criticism and cultural analysis, Althusser for marxist political thought, Lacan for psychoanalysis, to name but a few. [...] Due to Saussure, linguistics became for many thinkers the *science-pilote*, the model for all semiological systems within the humanities and social sciences."

In spite of this lasting success which reached its highest point during the 1960s structuralism came to be criticized by other approaches which gave speakers or speech a reaffirmed importance as a central and unavoidable parameter in the study of language(s). This feature is quite obvious on the American side of the Atlantic with Chomsky and the much touted emphasis laid on the competence and creativity of the speaker(s) in complete contrast with the "anti-mentalist" approaches once inspired by Bloomfield. This situation is no less true on the European side as will appear below.

3. ENUNCIATIVE THEORIES AS A REACTION AGAINST THE STRUCTURALIST PARADIGM

One of the first theoretical challenges to the structuralist paradigm came from Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980:6-8). She criticized the over-emphasis on the language as a code and the lack of interest for speech as a human and interpersonal activity. On the whole her criticism can be summarized in one word: structuralism is *reductionist*. There is much more to say about the ways language unfolds in concrete speech acts between speakers: this is precisely what enunciative theories want to study. Another clear statement of what enunciative theories do not want to be can be found in Maingueneau (1999:9):

"La linguistique structurale semble s'être intéressée avant tout à l'établissement d'un inventaire systématique des unités distinctives réparties sur plusieurs niveaux hiérarchisés, tandis que la grammaire générative apparaissait à beaucoup comme une algèbre syntaxique soucieuse seulement d'énumérer les séquences de morphèmes qui sont grammaticales."[2]

More explicitly enunciative theories primarily focus on the following points, which characterize what can be called *subjectivity* in general:

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[2] "Structural linguistics seemed to be interested above all in establishing a systematic inventory of distinctive units on several hierarchical levels, while generative grammar appeared to many people as a syntactical algebra only focused on strings of morphemes that are grammatical."

- the way speakers imprint traces of their existence in their utterances,
- the act of saying something rather than the meaning of what is said,
- a number of linguistic items that make sense only in reference to the circumstances in which a given utterance is made: for example, *here*, *now*, etc.
- the way speakers embed their own personal assessment of their messages within them, with adverbs like *hopefully*.

Before we proceed to comparing what Bréal said or did not say on these issues in the coming paragraphs it is interesting to present this pre-Saussurian linguist.

4. MICHEL BRÉAL

Michel Jules Alfred Bréal (1832–1915) was French, although born at Landau in Germany of French-Jewish parents, circumstances that may explain a lasting lack of interest for a person who played such a major role in initiating French linguistics, as will be discussed below. After studying at Weissenburg, Metz and Paris, he entered the *École Normale Supérieure* (Rue d'Ulm in Paris) in 1852. A few years later in 1857 he went to Berlin, where he studied Sanskrit under Franz Bopp and Albrecht Weber. Quite logically in 1864 he became professor of comparative grammar at the *Collège de France* and, being a French-German bilingual, translated Bopp's *Comparative Grammar* (1866–1874) into French. He published quite a large number of books on many topics relative to linguistics, pedagogy, etymology, mythology, etc. in a sometimes academic or sometimes polemical tone. He was also a prominent member of the *Société de Linguistique de Paris* and a faithful supporter of Saussure, who somewhat ungratefully had a friendly relationship only with Meillet.

He can be credited for coining the word 'sémantique' [semantics] which appears in the title of one of his works: *Essai de Sémantique* (*science des significations*) published in 1897. As will appear below, this book is not just important for being a treatise of semantics. It also contains several key ideas which can be found in the groundwork of Benveniste's "théorie de l'énonciation" [enunciation theory] half a century later, in the 1950s and 60s. On the whole Bréal can be described as pre-structuralist: synchronic and diachronic issues are more or less put on the same footing in the *Essai*. This feature is typical of the 19th century but at the same time the *Essai* contains a number of insights which came to the foreground only several decades later when the influence of structuralism began to wane. To some extent the title is a disservice because its contents show it to be an embryonic *Course in General Linguistics*.

Because of the unfortunate title the book seems to be more specialized - and potentially obsolete - than it really is. I suspect that most French linguists have not read it and do not even imagine that it contains a number of distinctly modern features.

On a different and less intellectual note Bréal can also be credited for proposing to his friend Pierre de Coubertin the introduction of the marathon race in the first modern Olympics in Athens in 1896.

5. EMILE BENVENISTE AND THE ISSUE OF SUBJECTIVITY

As mentioned before, Benveniste is usually considered the initiator of enunciation issues in France and his approach is described in the compilation of articles published in Benveniste (1966 & 1974). These are the words and key assertions that we will compare between Benveniste (1966:225-266) & (1974:43-88) and Bréal (1897:254-265). Quite intriguingly Chapter XXI in Benveniste (1966:258) is titled "De la subjectivité dans le langage" (About Subjectivity in Language) whereas Chapter XXV in Bréal (1897:254) is titled "L'élément subjectif" (The Subjective Element), and subtitled "Comment est-il mêlé au discours" (How it is intertwined with speech). The parallels go much beyond lexical similarities in the titles. Many ideas that Benveniste repeatedly developed in his works are already in Bréal. It is unclear to which extent Benveniste rediscovered them on his own or drew them directly from Bréal.

A first point is the sharp distinction made between the first and second persons and the third person. The traditional presentation of grammatical paradigms in columns and tables has blurred the basic fact that the third person does not function like the two other persons from a semantic, formal and more generally linguistic and enunciative way. It is an important discovery with many typological and descriptive consequences that this dichotomy between the pair "I, me ~ you" on the one hand versus "he, she, it" on the other hand should be recognized. Even though Benveniste has discoursed at length on this point, he is certainly not the first linguist to have had a clear understanding of this issue. Let us compare Benveniste (1966:232) and Bréal (1897:264) on the second person:

> EB: "La définition de la 2e personne comme étant la personne à laquelle la première s'adresse convient sans doute à son emploi le plus ordinaire. [...] Ainsi toute *personne* qu'on se représente est de la forme « tu », tout particulièrement - mais non nécessairement - la personne interpellée."

> MB: "la seconde personne n'a d'autre raison d'être que de se trouver interpellée par la première."[3]

It can be noted that both excerpts resort to the rather rare verb "interpeller" (to talk to, to call out to). This lexical peculiarity in two sentences dealing with the same topic tends to show that Benveniste did read Bréal. Otherwise it is an extraordinary chance coincidence. Now Benveniste (1966:228) and Bréal (1897:264) on the third person:

> EB: "La « 3ème personne » n'est pas une « personne »; c'est même la forme verbale qui a pour fonction d'exprimer la non-personne."
> MB: "On peut donc dire que la troisième personne seule représente la portion objective du langage."[4]

In other words Bréal already asserts the idea that the "subjective" status of the third person is completely different from that of the first and second one. Ultimately the dichotomy between the pair "I, me ~ you" and "he, she, it" is sketched in *Peri syntaxeos* of the Greek grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus, even though this work of the 2nd century AD obviously does not deal with such issues as enunciation or subjectivity. The idea that language(s), utterances and human speakers are so strongly intertwined leads both authors to the conclusion that language is not just an instrument of communication, which would have a somehow objective or abstract descriptive potential but that language is consubstantial with mankind. Here again it is telling to compare Benveniste (1966:259) in the chapter "De la subjectivité dans le langage" (About Subjectivity in Language) with Bréal (1897:264) in the chapter "L'élément subjectif" (The Subjective Element):

> EB: "C'est dans et par le langage que l'homme se constitue comme *sujet* ; parce que le langage seul fonde en réalité, dans *sa* réalité qui est celle de l'être, le concept « égo ». La « subjectivité » dont nous traitons ici est la capacité du locuteur à se poser comme « sujet »."
> MB "L'homme est si loin de considérer le monde en observateur désintéressé, qu'on peut trouver, au contraire, que la part qu'il s'est faite à lui-même dans le langage est tout à fait disproportionnée. Sur trois personnes du verbe, il y en a une qu'il se réserve absolument (celle qu'on est convenu d'appeler la première). De cette façon déjà il s'oppose à l'univers."[5]

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[3] EB: "The definition of the second person as being the person whom the first talks to certainly fits its most ordinary use. [...] Thus any person one thinks of takes the form *you*, especially - but not necessarily - the person spoken to [interpellée]." MB: "The second person has no other reason for existing than to be spoken to [interpellée] by the first."

[4] EB: "The third person is not a person; it is even the verb form used to express the non-person." MB: "One can thus state that only the third person represents the objective part of language."

[5] EB: "It is through language that man establishes himself as *subject*, because only language creates in reality, in his reality of [human] being, the concept of « Ego ». The « subjectivity dealt with here is the capacity of the speaker to position himself as a « subject »." MB: "Man is so far away from observing the world disinterestedly that one may even find that the share he took for himself in language is out of proportion. On the three persons of

The issue here is not "how to do things with words", as J.L Austin put it, but about being a person, a subject, with the words "I" and "you", about being, about being a human being. And this feature of the human condition, which Benveniste often described, is already stated in Bréal, maybe for the first time in these words. It would take some more bibliographical work to determine if Bréal is indeed the first or not. In my opinion it is hard to compare Benveniste (1966 & 1974) and Bréal (1897) without thinking that Benveniste must have heard of or read the *Essai de sémantique* at least once and that a significant part of his ideas are taken and reworded from that book. Quite mysteriously Benveniste never mentions Bréal as a potential source of inspiration.

6. WAS BRÉAL AN IMPOSSIBLE FATHER FIGURE?

As far as the history of French linguistics is concerned Bréal appears enigmatic. He initiated about everything: from the *Société de Linguistique de Paris* to the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* to supporting Saussure. At the same time his name hardly appears anywhere in past and present-day literature and teachings, and it would seem that he nearly never was there. His modernity and legacy cannot be doubted. Here another excerpt showing Bréal's (1897:180) approach of synchrony, which sounds fairly structuralist: "pour montrer comment les différentes parties d'une langue sont dans une dépendance mutuelle"[6]. Benveniste mentions Bréal only once in his *Problèmes de linguistique générale*. In his eulogy of Saussure Benveniste (1966:35) textually contrasts Saussure presented as being "maître Saussure" (Master) with Bréal "un tuteur bienveillant" (a benevolent guardian) and Meillet "linguiste". From that presentation it would seem that Bréal is a kind of *deus otiosus*: having launched linguistics in France he no longer has any contemporary scientific significance. As mentioned before Bréal was born in Germany in a Jewish family. One is left to wonder if this was not too unpalatable in the hypernationalistic and warmonging climate of the IIIrd Republic in France, which trained two generations from 1870 to 1918 into winning back Alsace at all costs and was torn about the *Dreyfus Affair*. It would seem that it was impossible to refer to Bréal at that time and that this situation has become a kind of involuntarily acquired characteristic

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the verb, there is one which he reserves for himself absolutely (the one conventionally called the first). In so doing he already contrasts himself from the universe."

[6] "in order to show to which extent the differents parts of a language are mutually interdependent"

among French linguists. In all cases Benveniste (1974:216) does not refer to Bréal and even seems to deny the existence of any legitimate precursor:

> "La méfiance [à l'égard de l'étude des significations] subsiste, et, reconnaissons-le, elle est justifiée dans une certaine mesure par le caractère vague, flou et même inconsistant des notions qu'on rencontre dans les ouvrages, d'esprit assez traditionnel en général, qui sont consacrés à ce qu'on appelle la sémantique."[7]

It is hard to say if Benveniste would lump Bréal (1897) into that category if asked. The dismissal of preceding works is in all cases rather severe. In retrospect Bréal would appear to be an impossible father figure while Benveniste is the recognized initiator of enunciation theories in France. There is in fact some irony in that situation. Because Benveniste himself was born in Syria in a family with Sephardic Jewish roots. This origin seems to be completely forgotten (or taboo?) to the point that even the wikipedia article on Benveniste in Hebrew does not mention his Jewish ancestry. Among most spoken languages only the Russian site seems to be aware of that feature (as of mid-February 2011).

7. THE ISSUE OF DEIXIS AND DEICTICS

Even though I am here suggesting that Benveniste got inspiration in Bréal's *Essai* without mentioning the name of his precursor, and maybe without having any opportunity to do so, there are distinctly new contributions in his own works. Needless to emphasize that it would make no sense to claim that Benveniste just plagiarized Bréal: there are unique and original features in the synthesis proposed by Benveniste on enunciation and this is precisely what is most interesting to underline. Bréal was a man of the 19th century whereas Benveniste can be described as a structuralist or at least was trained in an environment thoroughly influenced by structuralism. From that point of view the emphasis on the possibilities that languages offer as interactive systems is striking. In all cases it must be acknowledged that Bréal never stated - as Benveniste did - that there exists a specific phenomenon called *enunciation* that can become a full-fledged field in the study of language(s). In general Benveniste tends to be more wordy than Bréal but in that case Benveniste (1974:80) is especially terse and his definition can be considered a canonical description of what

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[7] "The mistrust [against the study of meanings]" remains, and, let us acknowledge it, it is justified to some extent by the vague, fussy and even inconsistent nature of the notions that can be encountered in the works, of generally rather traditional mindset, that are dedicated to what is called semantics."

enunciation is about: "L'énonciation est cette mise en fonctionnement de la langue par un acte individuel d'utilisation."[8]

It can also be added that what Benveniste came to call "l'appareil formel de l'énonciation" [the formal apparatus of enunciation]: *I*, *you*, *this*, *that*, *here*, *now*, etc., which involves hic-et-nunc deixis, does not exist in Bréal (1897). This feature is typical of the Benveniste's structuralist approach of enunciation. The terms *deixis* or *deictic* are absent even though Bréal (1897:231) actually talks about: "un de ces nombreux pronoms qui servaient à accompagner un geste dans l'espace"[9]. This is a classical description of what demonstrative pronouns are about. It is a specific feature of Benveniste's theory that these deictics have come to be clearly distinguished from anaphorics, which have textual references, and that a large set of words, belonging to different parts of speech such as pronouns, adverbs or even phrases, such as *last week*, has been identified as playing a particular role in language. Similar ideas have been developed by Jakobson (1963:178) out of the original concept of *shifter* first proposed by Jespersen (1922:123). But it must be noted that Jespersen's approach included quite a large number of lexical items, such as *home*, *mom, dad* and even *enemy*, whereas on the contrary Jakobson is extremely restrictive and includes only grammatical pronouns. In fact Jakobson's approach is not properly enunciative but derives from the "semantic" oddities of personal pronouns which seem to acquire a new "meaning" each time they are used, as was noted by Husserl or Peirce. It is the typological features of these units rather than their enunciative features that Jakobson takes into account, contrary to what Benveniste does.

8. AXIOLOGY AND MODALITY

In the modeling of language and speech described in Benveniste (1974:99), a double opposition is described. The first opposition is betwen "I, me" and "you": it is called "une structure d'allocution personnelle qui est exclusivement interhumaine"[10]. The second opposition is the dichotomy between the pair "I, me ~ you" and "he, she, it": it is said to "effectue[r] l'opération de la référence et fonde[r] la possibilité du discours sur quelque chose, sur le monde, sur ce qui n'est pas l'allocution"[11]. Benveniste concludes: "Nous avons là le

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[8] "Enunciation is this coming into service of language that is created by an individual instance of use."
[9] "one of these numerous pronouns which were used to come with a gesture in the air."
[10] "a structure of interpersonal address which is specifically human"
[11] "to enact the operation of reference and to create the possibility of speaking about something, on the world, on what is not the interpersonal address"

fondement sur lequel repose le double système relationnel de la langue."[12] Subjectivity is encoded by the pair "I, me" and "you" while reference is encoded by the third person "he, she, it". Subjectivity according to Benveniste is enunciative subjectivity. But this modeling of language is in my opinion incomplete. There is another layer of subjectivity: axiologic subjectivity, the implicit or explicit value judgment(s) that the speaker states about the reference. Axiologic subjectivity is especially what Bréal (1897:254) has in mind in Chapter XXV "L'élément subjectif" (The Subjective Element) which begins with the following paragraph:

> "S'il est vrai, comme on l'a prétendu quelquefois, que le langage soit un drame où les mots figurent comme acteurs et où l'agencement grammatical reproduit les mouvements des personnages, il faut au moins corriger cette comparaison par une circonstance spéciale : l'imprésario intervient fréquemment dans l'action pour y mêler ses réflexions et son sentiment personnel."[13]

The "intervention" of the speaker is not of *enunciative* nature as in Benveniste's definition cited above. Typically Bréal (1897:255) thinks of "une quantité d'adverbes, d'adjectifs, [...] [qui] sont des réflexions ou des appréciations du narrateur"[14]. That language includes axiologic subjectivity is not novel. This feature has been studied by philosophy and grammar since the Middle Ages. Bally (1942:3) also redefined *modus* and *dictum* to take into account this kind of subjectivity under the term *modus*. More interestingly Bréal (1897:254-5) states that axiologic subjectivity is embedded in language(s): "Ce côté subjectif est représenté: 1° par des mots ou des membres de phrase; 2° par des formes grammaticales; 3° par le plan général de nos langues."[15]

This means that a purely linguistic investigation of all the means available to the speakers to express axiologic subjectivity is possible. The lexical side is fairly obvious and has already been thoroughly studied, for example by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980) as regards adjectives in particular. As shown in Bréal (1897) the linguistic means to express this kind of subjectivity include more than just lexical items but also verb moods, especially the optative. Benveniste has not written much on axiologic subjectivity. The Chapter XIII (1974:177-193) dedicated to French auxiliaries develops the original idea that in addition to temporal

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[12] "We have here the groundwork upon which the two layers of systemic relationships of any language are built."
[13] "If it is true, as has been sometimes claimed, that language is a theater where words appear as actors and grammatical structure reproduces the movements of the characters, this comparison must nevertheless be emended by a particular circumstance: the impresario frequently intervenes into the play to add his reflections and personal feelings."
[14] "a huge number of adverbs, adjectives, [...] which are reflections or appreciations of the speaker"
[15] "This [axiologic] subjective side is represented: 1) by words or phrase members, 2) grammatical forms, 3) by the general organization of our languages."

auxiliaries (for Past) and diathetic auxiliaries (for Passive) French has two auxiliaries of modality: *pouvoir* (may) for possibility and *devoir* (should) for necessity. It would seem that in Benveniste's approach these items are not just lexemes with a meaning but that they are morphemes involved in a linguistic phenomenon of a particular kind, that has not been studied so far. It is also interesting to note that not infrequently axiologic subjectivity can evolve toward temporal objectivity: completely as in the case of Latin Future, derived from Proto-Indo-European Subjunctive, or partially as in the case of English Future, in connection with *will* and *shall*, with semantic undertones that are not completely lost depending on the English dialects. It would seem that the diachronic and typological features of these phenomena are nearly a blank page.

9. CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

In the paper I have tried to show that a number of ideas about subjectivity in language(s) which have come to the fore after structuralism lost its central position and which would apparently be novel have in fact been developed or sketched earlier by pre-structuralist linguists and especially in Bréal's *Essai de sémantique* (1897). It is possible that the title of Bréal's book somehow hides the fact that his purpose is "practical" and about "the evolution of human speech" as is stated in the introduction (1897:2): human *speech*, not human language. This purpose seems to have been overlooked. At the same time it cannot be denied of course that Benveniste's theory of enunciation represents a new and original synthesis. It can also be noted that Benveniste did not develop all aspects of subjectivity and that he hardly ever dealt with axiology and its formal expression in languages. Parallel to Benveniste's formal apparatus of enunciation a new field of investigation could deal with the *apparatus of axiologic subjectivity*. From a descriptive or typological point of view not much has been done so far on this heuristic program.

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RESUMO: Este artigo compara o que Michel Bréal originalmente escreveu em 1897 com o que Emile Benveniste escreveu meio século depois sobre enunciação. Mostramos que muitas das ideias tão conhecidas de Benveniste na verdade já haviam aparecido no livro de Bréal, *Essai de sémantique*. A comparação de Benveniste (1966 e 1974) com Bréal (1897) lança luz sobre a real contribuição de Benveniste para as teorias enunciativas. Não podemos deixar de apontar o fato de que Benveniste não desenvolveu algumas ideias de Bréal, que podem ser encontradas em Bally e nos escritos de teóricos da enunciação mais recentes, como Kerbrat-Orecchioni.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Enunciação; Benveniste; Bréal; Estruturalismo; Dêixis; Subjetividade.