

# Paradigms: The Inertia of Language

Marianne Brün

(1980)

*for and from Herbert Brün — M.B., 4/17/80*

WHEN Thomas S. Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962, his preface, introduction, and numerous traces in the body of the essay explicitly conveyed to the reader that the author thought he knew his readers, their general concept of science, of scientific questions, experiments, research, and of the universe in which their search for truth, consistency, and knowledge takes place. On the basis of this tacit assumption Kuhn explains his particular use of the word *paradigm* and develops a theory according to which, in any given period, some paradigms rule over all scientific endeavors, invisibly, unquestioned and tacitly agreed upon, and that radical change or progress, in any field of research, can only be registered and accepted if and when the presently ruling general notions of self-understood truth suddenly are revealed as being temporary assumptions and beliefs, respectable for their consistency, but incompatible with more recent and undeniable insights. In short: its greatest dynamic power is held by a paradigm while it is not called *paradigm*, but called facts, data, truth, nature, ethics, proper procedures, etc. As soon as a paradigm is called a *paradigm* (usually then referred to as a *mere* paradigm), its power collapses.

In Galileo's time any person of integrity, honesty, decency, who was healthy in mind and body, knew that the sun circles the earth and that the stars are affixed to a slowly rotating crystal sphere. The philosophers speculated among themselves about meaning, symbolisms, teachings, and proofs for the

existence of God, implied by these known and observable phenomena, but never questioned their universal truth. The scientists diligently did research, both analytical and synthetical, investigating the mechanics of the phenomena, and whether the stars were affixed with crystal screws, silver nails, or golden chains, and how the earth was held in its central place. It was a sin and crime, punished by law, church, and community vigilance, to ask and probe whether the known was true, whether philosophical thought and scientific research and problem-solving were based on all one could know.

Today's philosophers and scientists do not sneer with contempt at those times. They know that the people then acted in keeping and in consequential consistency with all those of their assumptions and beliefs which they had either accepted or declared to be indisputable truths, never to be tested and questioned. They never suspected that these obvious truths, which were their standards for all decision making and judgements of conduct and ideas, could be erroneous interpretations of accurate observations or accurate interpretations of faulty observations. The second aspect of the matter, which hovers with dampening effect on all philosophical and scientific endeavors, is the knowledge that we today can not tell, by definition, within which paradigm we are dwelling, thinking and acting, unless and until we are able to observe us and it from the outside, just as we recognize it and us from outside the times of Galileo.

There are in Kuhn's essay at least seventeen ex-

planations, definitions, and descriptions of the word *paradigm*, as he particularly would use it. Every chapter is another significant variation on that theme. This essay told me among other things that, if I wish to uncover the paradigm which conditions my thinking, I might have to take a leap, to observe with fresh attention the anomalies in my environment rather than only its predictable loops. Having learned this from him, I was surprised that Kuhn consented, for the second edition, to write an immense postscript answering his critics, reasoning, almost apologizing, for his leap, as if any leap out of a loop could ever appear reasonable. I leave him to his dilemma, and, collecting all aspects he mentions with respect to his central theme, I shall use the word *paradigm* whenever I wish to speak of any structural notion and concept which, underlying the development of discourse, is tacitly taken for granted by all participants in that discourse, taken to go without saying and left unquestioned, regardless of whether the discourse leads to an agreement or a disagreement on any issue.

The history of mankind is a composite of many, often simultaneous histories of different societies, which retroactively tell the stories of paradigms, their inception, flourishing, and collapse; and how there always has been a new paradigm waiting to substitute for the collapsed one. These stories do not, however, sufficiently emphasize a recurrent and ubiquitous phenomenon. They occasionally mention it as a deplorable exception, occasionally as a successful defense of eternal truth. This phenomenon is best described as the inertia of language.

The inertia of language is both a symptom and a dynamic force. As a symptom it reflects the slowness with which the news are disseminated that no longer should everything be taken for granted that for “time immemorial” has been taken for granted. As a friendly, almost poetic example, let me mention that our language still has the sun rise in the east and set in the west, although it has been known for 2000 years, scientifically proven 400 years ago, recently even admitted by the church, that it is our horizon which continuously rises in the west and dips in the east. No poet has yet taught language

how to express these events in consistency with present knowledge as well as language learned it from a previous, now obsolete, knowledge. With sunrise and sunset, language preserves and reflects the geocentric paradigm. Due to this inertia, language stores and offers for communicative usage many remnants of many obsolete paradigms.

As soon, however, as its offer of such remnants, such outdated golden words of wisdom, worship, and eternal value, is accepted by us and used in argumentative discourse for the description and solution of our problems today, for our teachings, our protests, our critical comments and proposals—as soon as we thus accept its offer, language turns into an unstoppable avalanche of such force of inertia that neither thought nor action can keep clear of it. The old anti-scholastic, anti-dogmatic sentence “actions speak louder than words” has long since been transformed into a self-deprecating dismissal of language, directed at itself, but is eagerly used by every speaker who wishes to promote and justify unspeakable actions taken to discredit or to silence speech whenever it might serve thought, ideas, reflections.

In human society language is so powerful that only violence (and that is *not* language) can stop it. Where its power fails to serve my desires, it would be a mistake to blame such failure on the weakness of language. Rather I should blame the weakness of my relation to language. If I fail to notice that I think and speak, under the influence of language, in patterns and constructs accumulated and preserved in the junkyards of long since vanished paradigms, then this shows my lack of consciousness with regard to just that power with which language can quickly make me spokesman for ideologies, in which everybody is almost always “right” at the “wrong” time. I recognize ideologists when I hear their speaking and read their writing. Their convincing language was already convincing before they use it. It could be used, just as well, for the presentation of other contents, other ideologies. The language of ideology insists that its statements are what it calls *true*, namely not only consistent with one another but also with the ruling paradigm of supporting evidence, logic, and all the taken for granted premises. At the same time, this

language shows and deplores the untenability of its consistencies and how the observed evidence is a betrayal of its believed premises. To get out of this absurd dilemma, the convincing second-hand language proposes to provide the good old premises with more desirable consequences. Hostile to any critique of this language, its speakers accuse those wishing to investigate language of “playing with words” or “indulging in mere semantics”, of elitist tendencies and of contempt for communication. They believe in the power of language but fail to recognize it. The language of the ideologists and their friends, followers, and believers carries, at the expense of the intended messages, many unintended messages, but also the indignant sentences “I didn’t say that! That’s not what I mean! You know what I mean!” or simply and thoughtlessly “you know”; in addition that language offers a lot of initial withdrawals, such as “It seems to me...; It appears that...; It has been said...; The truth of the matter is, of course...; My personal own opinion is...;” and many more, all of which hint at unquestioned assumptions with regard to unquestioned notions such as subjectivity (to be apologetically conceded), objectivity (that’s where true judgement beckons), truth (helplessly delivered to integrity).

The list is too long for me to continue it much further. I wish, however, to emphasize a distinction that I draw between ideologists and ideologies. Ideologies are the traces left by ideologists. The stuff of which ideologies are made may originally have been old or new ideas, ingeniously designed propositions or the pipedreams of a moron, they may have been notions I should like to share or to oppose: regardless of content and potential, both become corrupted by ideologists. The accumulated language of bygone times, powerful, familiar, and obsolete, uses the ideologists and makes them its speakers. Through them it thwarts those specific human attempts which we call ideas and which, rebellious against all that is, would engender new thought and new procedures.

The dilemma is that neither insight nor good intention, not even syntactic and grammatical care, will protect me from becoming an ideologist as long as I am unable or unwilling to create the suitable

language which speaks as I think and not louder than my thoughts.

This is a problem for everybody, and I shall try now to briefly describe some of the obstacles to its easy solution.

If I learn, gradually or suddenly, that there is far more human misery and suffering in the world than fairy tales and schools have let me know; that there are thousands of explanations why misery cannot be avoided for every proposition suggesting how to prevent it; if, in addition, I notice that these observations increasingly disturb and haunt me, so that I begin to look with growing contempt on the once (and secretly still) loved treasures of culture, ethics, morals, beliefs and values, as they, taken for granted, provide safe conduct and sanctuary for every brutality, violence, negligence and malice that can costume itself in their name; then, finally, feeling helpless and desperate, I begin looking around for help and hope and find that for a long time already people have collected their wits and their wants and assembled, in small and large groups, in order to find, to generate, to inveigle, to teach, if need be, to force various solutions of those problems, which these groups call unnecessary human suffering inflicted by human beings on human beings, and which others call fate or simply bad luck. So I attempt to join the problem solvers, I read their writings, listen to their speaking, study their theories, projects and strategies, contribute to the discussions in small and large circles, educating and preparing myself for the day of change: the day when, at last, the universal paradigm, in whose invisible and unquestioned embrace human misery can accurately be named a somehow excusable and certainly always expected commonplace, will stand exposed and rejected, to be replaced by one that I (from my present outlook) would prefer or (a radical change in social consciousness) by none.

All analysis of state and facts and processes tries to show something to everybody, which, without the analysis, would not be seen by everybody. All analysis, together with speculation and experiment, is, therefore, a small or large step toward the exposure of the unseen but ruling paradigm. My analysis, skilled and guided by study, con-

cern, and anti-ideological care, leads me to conjecture what our most powerful, contemporary, ruling paradigm might be. My conjecture is that we all live, speak, and act, perceive, judge, and decide under the unquestioned, untouchable, and firmly established guidance of an image which I call “the reward-oriented hierarchy”. By calling it so, I may be able to show that particular dynamic property of language which, undetected, blocks creative, and thus political, thought processes.

Living organisms, including human beings, have to obey some natural laws in order to maintain their continued existence as living organisms. I use the word *need* whenever I wish to speak of conditions which must be met continuously and unconditionally if living organisms are to be able and to be motivated to maintain themselves, their identities, their existence. The conditions must be met continuously, because the conditions continue in consequence of having been met. (The living need food in order to be hungry again.) The conditions must be met unconditionally, because without the conditions called *needs* having been met no other conditions exist. (The dead can’t be social.)

It is, thus, not open to choice or dispute: the satisfaction of needs is the premise for any form of life. In particular: the satisfaction of all human needs is the premise for any human society. And every society would have to understand that in its social conceptual image of itself the satisfaction of all human needs must be accomplished *before and so that* the purpose of society can be envisioned. The purpose of society is the development of ever more satisfactory means of production of the necessities that will meet the needs; the development and use of the freedom from need for the enjoyment of diversity and difference; the appreciation and the application of ideas which provide new answers to old questions; the invitation and implementation of inventions which provide new procedures for the solution of old and recurrent problems. The purpose of society is, thus, the justifiedly hopeful pursuit of all those alternative paths of consequences which, be they ever so audacious, unheard of, unspeakable, do not interfere with their indispensable premise: the satisfaction of all human needs.

We do not live in such a human society. The history of our society began when people discovered that the premise can be treated, through actions and words, as a consequence. Under this treatment our society has developed an image of itself, according to which the satisfaction of needs has to be deserved and earned, so that it be understood as a reward. Ever since then, and up to the present day, we live in a reward-oriented hierarchy. In cooperation with natural circumstances and by fostering cultures and civilizations in which economies and language supported one another, it became possible to hide the old natural premise behind the new artificial one. The premise of the reward-oriented hierarchy states that the necessities for the satisfaction of human needs are scarce. This scarcity poses individual and social problems, in particular, problems of production and distribution. Finally, the premise declares that the problems of scarcity can not be solved before individual and social problems are solved. Thus is generated, consistent with this premise, a large body of consequences, resulting in apparently consistent and reasonable criteria for the planning of economics and the teaching of language. There were times when human ingenuity and technology indeed could not yet procure the necessities to meet all human needs of all human beings. These times are past. Our present knowledge and technology could remove that scarcity and replace it with abundance. The times of scarcity as a dictate of nature are over, but its economics and language not only linger on, but even have grown more powerful. Under these economics, scarcity is maintained and used for temporary solutions of individual and social problems. Language, at the same time, declares scarcity a standard for value and motivation. In mutual support, economics and language internalize the reward-oriented hierarchy in order to maintain and justify only those actions, morals, ethics, religions, ideas, thoughts and inventions, which are consistent with the premise of the reward-oriented hierarchy.

This process has been so successful that it is almost impossible, today, to discuss it. We live in a reward-oriented hierarchy and we also speak its language. Its language is consistent with its premise.

If we want to discuss the premise, we also must discuss its language. It is the communicative language and it will convey thoughts which are consistent with its accumulated past. If we wish to convey thoughts that are to show that the reward-oriented hierarchy is not the only possible human society, certainly not the most desirable human society, then its language can not help us, unless we teach it to experiment with itself in order to discover how it labors under the paradigm it ought to expose, and how it could, if changed, continually renewed and cared for, become consistent and communicative with other premises, long forgotten ones and some never heard of. In particular: can we find the language whose grammar, syntax, and sentence structure would make it consistent with the premise that all human needs have to be satisfied first, *before and so that* individual and social problems can and will be identified and solved?

Karl Marx wrote in *Wage Labour and Capital*:

“Capital does not consist in accumulated labour serving living labour as a means for new production. It consists in living labour serving accumulated labour as a means of maintaining and multiplying the exchange value of the latter.”

My application of this sentence structure:

Communication does not consist in accumulated language serving living language as a means for new thinking. It consists in living language serving accumulated language as a means of maintaining and multiplying the communicative value of the latter.

Neither living labour nor living language can be liberated from serving accumulated labour and accumulated language by workers, writers, speakers, thinkers, who fail to identify and to recognize that service. The conjecture that the reward-oriented hierarchy may indeed be the underlying paradigm of our social process, can be supported by the observation, that its language is used even by those workers, writers, speakers, and thinkers, who object to its manifestations in the structure and system of our present-day society. One can sooner find an agreement to the statement: “we live in a reward-oriented hierarchy” than to the statement: “the language we use, either to defend or to criticize the obvious reward-oriented hierarchy we live

in, is consistent with and affirmative of the secret reward-oriented hierarchy which, as an unquestioned paradigm, rules our language and thus at least part of our thinking.

Marx wrote an analysis of capitalist economy with the purpose of showing that an accurate analysis exposes the contradictions which a capitalist oriented society suffers from, or punishes, or even perpetuates. If a Marxist writer agrees with that analysis and that purpose, then she agrees that what Marx wrote was, and is, as far as it goes, true. It *was* true in that it described and analyzed what then was the case, and it *is* true, in that the contradictions are still in evidence. But the truth that there *are* contradictions is not revolutionary. The contradictions themselves, however, are revolutionary, in that they generate those antagonisms which the system can not resolve without disintegrating. If the Marxist now writes: “only the truth is revolutionary!” then she inadvertently speaks the language of the reward-oriented hierarchy (which she opposes) where “the truth” has a higher status than contradictions, where “the truth” is consistent with the premise, while the resolution of antagonism is not. It is not revolutionary to encourage the exploited, under the pretext of communication, to trust and use and follow the language of the exploiter. It would certainly be more to the point, although possibly less communicative, if the writer or speaker would show and explain how the term “the truth” is nearly always used in order to obscure the view of the consistency of a statement or theory with some premise that ought to be discussed, but instead, under the spell of “the truth”, remains taken for granted. So that the relationships between some frequently used words be clarified and also be available to paradigms other than the reward-oriented hierarchy, I use the word “truth” whenever I wish to speak of the *time* during which the intent and content of a person’s statement can *not* and will *not* be accidentally in conflict or accidentally in contradiction with the intent and content of any other statement which this person would make in response to any situation, question, or statement presented. *The time*: because I refer to the passing presence of a relational event rather than to the value of timeless forms in formal-

ized logics. *Not*: because, were I to write “only” instead, I should use the words “knowledge and error” instead of the word “truth”; and were I to write “not only” instead, I should use the word “belief” instead of “truth” and instead of the words “knowledge and error”.

The accumulated language of past and present paradigms denies us that time. Our writers and speakers must at last recognize its incompetence and become the creative artists who compose language, so that it teach its writers and speakers how to be thoughtfully and carefully *inconsistent* with undesirable premises, to be *incompatible* with the morals, the religions, the armed forces, the arguments of the reward-oriented hierarchy.

It is a symptom of a reward-oriented hierarchy that it educates and conditions people so that people demand communicative language not only where it helps to maintain the system, but also where it can not help in changing it.

Communicative language is accumulated language based on obsolete and present paradigms and can not speak for those of us who think and dream in another paradigm.

There may be occasions where communicative language is tolerable. Whenever only criticism, reporting, and complaint is intended, communicative language will do. It always can accurately tell what

*is*.

It breaks down and turns traitor as soon as its premises are asked to support a consequence they can not support.

Far too many political writers and speakers, carried away by concern, commiseration, inherited and learned discipline, and particularly by the desire to be understood, to be convincing, have rendered their powerful and necessary communications indistinguishable from one another and from the other.

So that language may not become a fossilized fetish, let it be praised for the thoughts it expresses, but ruthlessly criticized for the ideas it fails to articulate. Language is not the standard against which thinking is to be measured; on the contrary: language is to be measured by a standard it barely reaches, if ever, namely the imagery of human doubt and human desire.

To measure language, with imagery as a standard, is the function of art in society. The arts are a measuring meta-language about the language that is found wanting. If the imagery succeeds in containing, anticommunicatively, for later, the simulation, the structural analogy to that which was found wanting, then, who knows, it may tell us or someone some day with breathtaking eloquence and in then simple terms what we, today, almost speechlessly have wanted so much.