I N T E R V I S T E

Conversation with Genoveva Martí

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Born in Barcelona, Spain, Genoveva Martí is ICREA Research Professor *at the* Universitat de Barcelona. *After getting her first degree in Barcelona, she moved to the United States, where she obtained a Ph.D. at* Stanford University *(1989). In subsequent years she taught at the Universities of* Washington, Seattle *and* California, Riverside *and was a* Reader *at the* London School of Economics and Political Science. *She has been in Barcelona since 2002 although during the academic year 2014-15 she was Professor of Philosophy at* Western University in Canada. *She has been the coordinator of the* LOGOS Research Group *(2005-2013) and she is a member of the* Committee *of the* Section on Philosophy, Theology and religious Studies *of* Academia Europaea. *She has published articles in the*

fields of philosophy of language and philosophy of logic, contributing also to a better understanding of 20th Century analytic philosophy.

The following conversation was held in Matera, Italy, during the final conference of the National Research Project Realism and Objectivity, *coordinated by the* University of Basilicata, *Italy (15-17 September, 2015).*

CF: The very conversation we are having now could be seen as a natural result of the establishment of a community of philosophers that works throughout the world, that aims to share information and to discuss it with no distinctions of nationality, cultural backgrounds and personal conditions. However, we cannot forget that the project of establishing such a community was just taking its first steps in continental Europe when you flew to Stanford, in 1982, to start your research path. At that time, I guess, very few philosophers from the Latin countries of Europe were strongly aware of the philosophical issues that were discussed in the United States. So I am curious to know... Did you leave Spain with sharp ideas about your projects, or rather was it the American philosophical environment to show you the way once you were already there?

GM: I was very lucky because the philosophy of language teachers that I had when I was doing my undergraduate degree in Barcelona, Juan Acero and Daniel Quesada, had already seen the importance of internationalization: they had already seen the fact that the discussion in philosophy is a global discussion. In fact Acero had been in Helsinki, working with Jaakko Hintikka, and Quesada had been first in Germany and then in the United States, at Stanford; so I was already taught by these people with a kind of sensitivity to certain issues in philosophy. However, at that time in Barcelona, or in Spain or in many other countries in continental Europe, there was no place where there would be a critical mass of people to educate new researchers, which is why it was almost a necessity to go away. Most of the people that were my teachers at the University of Barcelona during my degree had never published papers in peer-reviewed journals of prestige, nor had they published books with international impact, very few had moved from or to other universities. For me, arriving in the United States, after having been in a very endogamic atmosphere, was like a breath of fresh air.

CF: Then, at the beginning of the new Millennium, you returned to Europe, where you became a member and then the Coordinator of LOGOS, one of the leading research groups in Europe, connected with many other analogous institutions. Such an intellectual environment is, I guess, more similar to those you belonged to when you were in America than to the situation of Spain in the 80's. How did things change? Did senior fellows coming from overseas, like you, play the main role? And what about younger philosophers being part of the so-called ERASMUS generation? Indeed, the latter was the first generation taking Europe, and perhaps even the whole globe, as a common space of opportunities. The researchers belonging to this new wave – that is also better balanced across gender, let me emphasize it – seem to show remarkable skills in communication, self-management, and a broader understanding of the research trends going on. Did they play an important role in the change? And generally speaking, which are the facts and the decisions that, according to you, lie at the roots of the new situation?

GM: I cannot claim credit for the fact that LOGOS has become one of the leading research groups across Europe. There were people who founded it, my colleagues Manuel García-Carpintero and the latest Ramón Cirera: they were also taught by the same teachers and they also had that attitude. They didn't get their degrees in foreign universities, but they visited foreign universities; they had already started to create a network of researchers and they had a vocation, a desire of having an international impact. These were the people that started LOGOS. It's true that LOGOS grew a lot when I was coordinator of the group, but that was a concerted effort by all the people that were there, including the graduate students. The attitude that our research has to be measured with international standards is what I think makes the big difference. It made the big difference in LOGOS, and it makes it for many other excellent groups that exist now in the continent.

As regards your suggestion about the ERASMUS generation, I am not entirely sure that it played any role in that blooming of LOGOS, because the people who were there, the students who had got their education there when I arrived, already had this attitude, and they hadn't been taking advantage of the ERASMUS program. However, students that later on have taken Europe as a common ground – by following the idea that you can go from a country to another one – have taken as normal that need to internationalize; they have used the ERASMUS project to good effect and in that sense I think that it has been a really good program, not just in making people move, but also in making the psychological barriers among countries come down. I

think that it's something that has happened very slowly; when I arrived in Barcelona in 2002 it was already growing and I think it has had a very positive effect.

CF: The main part of your research work has been dedicated to the philosophy of language and the philosophy of logic. According to an influential tradition from the 20ᵗʰ Century, these fields of enquiry can be seen as the starting point, perhaps the foundations of philosophy itself, because language and reasoning are the most basic tools that philosophers employ in their work. Do you believe that this traditional view is right? And are there any further reasons that motivate specifically your interest in language and logic?

GM: This is a very interesting issue, because the philosophy of language used to be the queen in analytic philosophy, and that was partly because of the idea that many fundamental problems in philosophy are problems that can be resolved by analyzing meaning. This is something that somehow has been lost. Things have changed: it's a fact that nowadays, when you look at the degrees in places such as Harvard, philosophy of language *as such* is practically not taught: it's always 'philosophy of language & philosophy of mind', 'philosophy of mind & language', 'language & cognition' and so on. I am one of the "die-hard" old people, not because I think that the majority of the fundamental problems of philosophy are problems about meaning: I don't think that that's correct. But I am truly a philosopher of language, not a philosopher of mind, because I do think that there is a host of extremely important issues that have to do with very basic questions about how our language connects to the world. I think that reflecting on those issues is important and useful for other questions that we might want to ask about our mind, how we think, reason and communicate.

CF: An important part of your work concerns some topics in the theory of reference. Namely, you have been involved in a detailed work of evaluation of the so-called referentialist turn, which started with Donnellan (1966), Kripke (1972), Putnam (1973), Perry (1977), Kaplan (1989) and others. According to these authors – let me summarize briefly the basic issues – proper names, demonstrative expressions like 'this' or indexicals like 'I' and 'here', together with names of kinds like 'tiger', designate a given object simply because they have been linked to that object by speakers. Accepting referentialism means setting aside a theoretical tradition (which can be attributed to Frege (1892) and Russell (1910))

according to which the definite descriptions that occur in association with a referential term (e.g. the expression 'the author of the Theaetetus' *that we may attach to the name 'Plato') are required in order for that term to play its role of referring to an object. The controversy between referentialists and descriptivists is still going on, but now we can start to make an evaluation of some basic results that appear to be relatively established – I start my own list, but then I will call for your contribution. At least, it seems clear that the early formulations of descriptivism must be improved in order to be consistent – and indeed they have been improved, although there is no general agreement about the results of such improvements. But also referentialist theories have been clarified: for instance, the link between the claim that a term is directly referential and the claim that is a rigid designator (it designates the same object in all possible worlds where that object exists) has been assessed and now it seems less obvious than before (this is due also to a contribution of your own: Martí (2003)). But there is much more that should go on the record… can you help me, please?*

GM: It is true that the debate is still going on, it is also true that both theories have had to adjust... So, for instance nowadays you have descriptivists that propose descriptions that include directly referential terms in the content of the description; direct reference theorists used to be very insensitive to issues of cognitive value, but now some of them have made contributions to the account of the cognitive value of language. You also mention that one of the distinctions that have been drawn in order to clarify what the theories are about is a distinction between a direct referential term and a rigid designator. A lot of my work consists in trying to clarify what the commitments of the theories are, more than trying to offer a certain theory of meaning. And speaking of clarifications, there is another clarification that for me is extremely important. When I wrote *The Essence of Genuine Reference* (Martí (1995)) my idea was to think exactly what it was that *direct reference* meant; in that paper I made a distinction between two ways in which people had been thinking about direct reference. On the one hand, the vast majority of people had been thinking in terms of truth-conditional contribution, contribution to propositions; and the idea was that a term is directly referential just in case the truth conditions of what is said by a sentence containing that term depend on the referent. There is however another way of thinking what direct reference is, and it is pre-truth-conditional: it's a way of characterizing direct reference that is based on the *mode* of connection between words and things. The question then becomes: is the relation direct, is the connection established by *fiat*, by convention? –

as Russell says, a name is just a sound that we simply decide to use for an object – or rather, is the connection established by some kind of mechanism that is associated with the expression as its meaning? Now, if you think the contrast between direct and non-direct reference in this way, then it can be seen that some terms that are classified as directly referential on the previous characterization – namely, the characterization that looks at the contribution to truth-conditional content – turn out not to be directly referential on the second way of thinking about direct reference: for instance, indexicals. Indexicals clearly are associated with a character rule: it's a descriptive rule that determines what the referent is in an occasion of use. Now, although we can still say that the contribution that a use of an indexical in a context makes to the truth conditional content is the referent, from the new perspective we should not say that indexicals are directly referential, because the reason 'I' refers to me when I say 'I' is not just that it ties to me just by convention: it's because I am the person who's speaking. That's a difference that I elaborated, and I think it's extremely important because it clarifies what the theory of direct reference is about. A lot of my work has been devoted to this kind of things: it is just clarifying the commitments of different theories.

CF: In the general presentation of descriptivism that you provide in Martí (2012) you emphasize that such a view has some basic appeal because it seems to provide an easier explanation of what happens when we learn to use names, when we refer to objects that are spatially and temporally far from us, when we employ different names to refer to the same thing, when there is no reference for a given term. Nevertheless it seems clear that, according to you, descriptivism is to be rejected. So, are we ready to complete the referentialist turn? Or are there still any questions that descriptivism seems to answer better than referentialism.

GM: As you said, descriptivism is attractive, partly because, for instance, we don't acquire expressions in a *vacuum*: we acquire expressions because we want to talk about things, and it's because we think that we know something about these things and we want to learn more, we want to say things about that thing, *etc*. So, descriptivism seems to give you an explanation of why you are talking about a thing: you know you have all this information that selects it. But it's utopic to think that that's the way it works. First of all because, as Kripke and Putnam have demonstrated, people often don't have information that selects one thing: you have the cases in which all a person can say about Cicero is just that he was a famous

orator – but there are many famous orators, and still the person is talking about Cicero when they use the name 'Cicero'. Other times you attach to a name information that selects one thing, but you're really talking about another one, like when people attach to 'Columbus' 'the first westerner to set foot on the New Continent'... Well, probably it was not Columbus, but you're still talking about Columbus. So, descriptivism does not give us the answer about how we refer. Why is it attractive? It is because it seems to give us an explanation of the cognitive side of language: we have a certain knowledge, we want to acquire more. There is a series of issues that are extremely important and have to do with the cognitive aspects of language, for which it's tempting to think that descriptivism gives a better understanding. For instance, how is it possible that you accept: «Hesperus is Hesperus» but do not accept: «Hesperus is Phosphorus»? People would say: «It's because you have two different descriptions attached to each name!». Well... Careful! The idea that there's something different going on in your mind when you use 'Hesperus' and you use 'Phosphorus' is correct; but I do not think that all that has to be explained in terms of attaching a definite description. Maybe you're using 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' in the same way you're using 'Cicero': without a description that really manages to select one single thing. If we liberate ourselves from this idea that we are going to explain cognitive aspects of language by appeal to a definite description, then it seems that we can give even more complete and richer explanations. What is going on in your mind doesn't have to be just that you have a description: you can have images, you can have memories; you can have all kinds of things that are not descriptive. And all that explains why you react differently to sentences that contain 'Hesperus' and sentences that contain 'Phosphorus'.

CF: Perhaps we could put things in the following way: descriptivism and referentialism are the natural outcomes of two different attitudes towards language. On the one hand, the descriptivist account was generated by some philosophers' aim to provide a language that has no ambiguities and can be a reliable tool for scientific work (either by supplementing natural language with artificial tools like in Frege (1879), or by requiring that expressions of natural language be somehow rephrased, like in Russell (1905)). Such a general aim seems to fit with the idea that the introduction of a new term is to be granted by a specification of its meaning, in order to prevent any misunderstandings (of course, this picture fits better for general terms, but it might be adapted to singular terms). On the other hand, referentialism could be seen as the result of philosophers' interest in human

language as it is: that means trying to take into account the basic data about language use, no matter if such use shows ambiguities and involves simple acts such as just pointing to an object and call it, say, 'Cicero'. Do you find any plausibility in the picture I tried to sketch?

GM: I think that you are only partly right in what you say... Let me explain why. On the one hand, it seems to me that you are right that Frege and Russell, the first contemporary philosophers of language, the first people who turned to the semantics of natural language, were still logicians: they are guided by the idea of the perfect language, the language of the *Conceptual Notation* or the language of logical form; and it's also true that Kripke, Donnellan and the proponents of new theories of reference many times start arguing in terms of considerations that have to do with how we really use expressions, so they would say: «Look, Frege and Russell said that names work like this, the abbreviations of definite descriptions; but they don't work like this, because *this* is what people do». On the other hand, I think also that there is something that we should not forget. I don't think that Kripke and Putnam are thinking of the role of the semanticist as that of simply articulating the use and putting it in order, giving an account that just describes the actual use of language. I think they are engaged in something that has to be seen from the following perspective: descriptivism says that the connection between language and the world, between an expression and that which the expression applies to *always* has to be mediated by some attributive material, by something like a definite description... It cannot happen in any other way: words can connect with things only via a definite description. I think that what Kripke and Donnellan were interested in is showing that the connection does not *have* to happen like that. Of course, in order to argue for that, they look at actual cases like proper names and they say: «See? Names don't work the way descriptivists predict»; but what they're interested in is the general project of actually criticizing a conception of how the connection between language and the world has to be established. So, if it turned out that we lived in a community that all of a sudden decides to use names always descriptively, this would not prove that Kripke and Donnellan were wrong, because the important thing is about the *possibility*, what is possible in terms of the referential relation.

CF: Now, let's return to the issue about the role of data about language use, from a new perspective. A new methodological approach called «experimental philosophy» has come out at the beginning of the new Millennium. It involves «conducting experimental investigations of the

psychological processes underlying people's intuitions about central philosophical issues» (Knobe & Nichols (2008, 3)). As these philosophers claim, «these investigations have challenged familiar assumptions, showing that people do not actually think about these issues in anything like the way philosophers had assumed» (ibidem). One of the main applications of this method concerns semantics: if we test people's intuitions concerning the use of proper names, as Machery and colleagues (2004, 2009) did, there seem to be some striking differences in the way names are used across different groups from different countries involving different cultural traditions. You criticized the work by Machery and colleagues (in Martí (2009, 2014a, 2014b)) by arguing that such experimental data can at most tell something about what a given speaker might believe about her own use of names, not about the use itself. Can you summarize this basic point of your own?

GM: I have not criticized experimental philosophy in general, because experimental philosophy applies to many different branches of philosophy, and I think that in the many different branches of philosophy there may be different ways in which people start theorizing. I think that ethics is very different from philosophy of language. I have criticized mostly the experimental *semanticists*: my criticism is that originally, in Machery *et al.* (2004) and in many other papers, what they are doing is asking questions that invite the participants in the experiment to reflect about how they use language and how other people use language. And it seems to me that this is a task that the *theorist* has to perform. People use language; one thing is how they use it and a completely different thing is what they say when they *reflect* about how they use it. The second task is the task which pertains to the theorist, which doesn't pertain to laypeople, and doesn't pertain to a bunch of students form Hong Kong and Rutgers. It seems to me that the semanticist proceeds on the basis of the observations about how we use names, how we use general terms, but that doesn't mean that I'm endorsing a view according to which what the philosopher is doing is just describing what people do. The view that I'm endorsing is a view according to which people use expressions and the *semanticist* observes that use, in fact the semanticist in most cases knows that use, because he or she is part of the community.

CF: As you told in Martí (2014a, 75-8), he or she is like a «Martian anthropologist»...
GM: ... A Martian anthropologist that is part of the community, but takes two steps back and looks at the use of language by the community.

That's the input to start the philosophical reflection. I don't think that the theory is just the description of the use; but the *data* that the theory starts with are data about use. That's my criticism of experimental semanticists: that the data that they collect, the data that they use to test theories are not data about use.

CF: Experimental philosophers have put their accent on an alleged exaggeration of the gap between philosophers and non-philosophers, so they questioned the philosophers' tendency to appeal to their own intuitions because of some kind of expertise (see e.g. Knobe & Nichols (2008)). I agree that there is no such an expertise, but it seems to me that the genuine question to be answered is the following: «What characterizes a genuine philosophical attitude, once that the data to be analyzed have been collected?». It seems to me that experimental philosophers just overlook this point. What is your opinion about it?

GM: Experimental philosophers have insisted that there doesn't seem to be any reason to think that the intuitions of philosophers are any better than the intuitions of the laymen. In general, they think that in many areas the intuitions of the experts are no better than the intuitions of the laymen, like for instance the intuitions about grammaticality. I am not entirely clear about what I think about this issue. I think that experimental philosophers – at least many of them, in the origins of the movement – were people who really were convinced that the task of philosophy is fundamentally just to articulate the common sense beliefs and the common sense image of the world that people have. And of course, if the task of philosophy is just to articulate the common sense view of the world, then there is no guarantee that philosophers are going to get it just by reflection. I don't think that *that* is the ultimately right conception of what philosophy is all about. But it's a tricky issue. In any case, I think that expertise in philosophy makes a difference, for the following reason: one of the things that philosophers learn is to critically think about what follows and what does not follow from an assertion, and to analyze what commitments we accept when we assert something. That's something that comes from being exposed to all kinds of cases in which your immediate reaction, *on reflection*, turns out not to be what you really would like to say. Think for instance of ethics: one can have a certain kind of reaction... Is that the ultimate judgment? I don't think that it is, because sometimes on analyzing that reaction we realize that it contradicts some other principles and some other beliefs that we hold

dearly. So I think that there is a difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher, definitely.

CF: Let's return for a moment to the topic of ethics that you mentioned. I wonder whether applying the experimental attitude to ethics, and generally speaking to prima facie *subjective matters, can lead to something different than just radical relativism. It seems to me that if we interview people in order to understand what they think about a given ethical issues, different persons will express quite different ethical points of view; moreover, many persons will also add that, according to them, there is no correct point of view to be searched for. Indeed, naïve relativism is so widespread among researchers and scholars in humanities that it has become part of some kind of common sense. Are there, according to you, any philosophical consequences to be drawn from these facts?*

GM: The case of ethics that you raise is particularly interesting because, of course, our judgments about ethics are *culturally influenced*. In the case of ethics I think that it's obvious that they are, but we have to go *beyond* whatever judgment we produce that is based on how we have been raised and influenced by the culture we are immersed in. It seems to me that if we think that whatever the layman says, and whatever reaction the layman has, is what the theorist is going to take into account, then of course we are unavoidably going to end up with some form of cultural relativism. The value of philosophy, it seems to me, is that after we have those initial reactions, *then* we start thinking about why we have them: «Is this based on something that I have been taught and I have never questioned? Is that something that follows from something that I regard as more fundamental?». That's the value of philosophy for me, and I think that one of the dangers of experimental philosophy is that a lot of the experiments and collections of data that have been conducted so far just don't go over that first step.

CF: We must recognize that there is a theoretical interest in asking e.g. *why we actually use some kind of reasoning patterns that are based on some psychological biases, but it's hard form me to accept the experimental philosophers' claim that such theoretical interest should be considered as genuinely philosophical. Can you tell something more about this issue?*

GM: Of course it is interesting to study how people actually reason, but studying this topic is not of interest for a *theoretical* account of reasoning.

That's why I also think that studying what people think about the way in which we use names may be psychologically interesting, but it does not have interest to semantics. But the point you were making has another aspect, that has to do with the difference between different areas: for instance in semantics, how people actually use words is important in elaborating our theory, but in ethics how people actually behave is not of interest when you elaborate an ethical theory. So, the point is also that different areas of philosophy are very different in their aims and in the basis on which they reflect; similarly, experimental philosophers also should realize that in different areas of philosophy certain kinds of data are going to have interest and certain other kinds of data are not going to have interest. I think that philosophers have *always* been interested in data and they have always been reflecting about data, because philosophers *reflect a lot on real life* and why we do the things that we do, whether those things that we do have a justification or don't have a justification. When we claim that someone knows something – this is something that we do all the time – we, philosophers, ask ourselves: «What's the basis on which we can say that this claim is right or wrong?». So, I think that philosophers have always reflected on the world. When people think about time, about causality, the sciences are an input to that reflection. If you think about ethics, there is no science that is input to that. In philosophy of language for instance, although some of the things that linguists say have interest for philosophers of language – because the syntactic categories, after all, have an impact on semantics – it is not clear that the science of linguistics is the input for the philosopher of language. The actual use of language is. All these things have to be taken into account, because philosophers – who, according to experimentalists, need to get «out of the armchair» – have always been, in a very important sense, out of their armchair. They have *always* been reflecting about science and its methods, about what people do, about the justifications of what we do, about the way in which we claim that things happen or don't happen and our basis for that. Philosophers have *always* been out of the armchair.

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