
ENUNCIÇÃO

**Revista do Programa de Pós-graduação em Filosofia da
UFRRJ**

Linguistic Pyrrhonism: Self-Destruction, Dogmatic Assertions, and Skeptical Expressions

Pirronismo linguístico: autodestruição, afirmações dogmáticas e expressões céticas

Guadalupe Reinoso*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0003-5732>

Abstract: Usually, in the context of linguistic skepticism, the focus is on interrogating the capacity of language to mirror reality. My starting point is to explore a position that has radically questioned the ability of language to faithfully represent reality and postulated that philosophy is only possible as a critique of language. Fritz Mauthner assumed a linguistic-epistemological skepticism, according to which language is a source of deception and superstitions. My aim is not a detailed analysis of Mauthner's philosophy, but rather an attempt to answer the question: Is it possible to establish the relationship between philosophy and language starting from a skeptical philosophy that is not radical and negative? To defend the idea of a non-radical and actively skeptical approach, I will review the main ancient sources of Greek Pyrrhonism, Sextus Empiricus. My main purpose is not exegetical; I will take only those elements that enable me to defend the coherence of a Pyrrhonian philosophy without implying its self-destruction. I consider that Sextus Empiricus' explorations of language, especially with regard to the reflection on the practice of philosophy as distinct from dogmatic assertions, allow me to present a viable and updatable sceptical philosophical proposal.

Keywords: Skeptical Philosophy, Pyrrhonism, Language, Dogmatic Assertions, Self-destruction

*CONICET Researcher and Chair of Metaphysics II, FFyH, UNC. Director of research group: *Actualizaciones del neopirronismo: el legado del escepticismo griego en la filosofía moderna y contemporánea*. SeCyT, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. guadalupe.reinoso@unc.edu.ar

Resumo: Em geral, no contexto do ceticismo linguístico, o foco está em questionar a capacidade da linguagem de espelhar a realidade. Meu ponto de partida é explorar uma posição que questionou radicalmente a capacidade da linguagem de representar fielmente a realidade e postulou que a filosofia só é possível como uma crítica da linguagem. Fritz Mauthner assumiu um ceticismo linguístico-epistemológico, segundo o qual a linguagem é uma fonte de engano e superstições. Meu objetivo não é uma análise detalhada da filosofia de Mauthner, mas sim uma tentativa de responder à pergunta: É possível estabelecer a relação entre filosofia e linguagem a partir de uma filosofia cética que não seja radical e negativa? Para defender a ideia de um enfoque não radical e ativamente cético, analisarei as fontes antigas do pirronismo grego, Sextus Empiricus. Meu objetivo principal não é exegetico; apenas pegarei os elementos que me autorizam defender a coerência de uma filosofia pirrônica sem implicar sua autodestruição. Considero que as explorações de Sextus Empiricus sobre a linguagem, especialmente no que se refere à reflexão sobre a prática da filosofia, diferentemente das afirmações dogmáticas, permitem-me apresentar uma proposta filosófica cética viável e atualizável.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia cética, pirronismo, linguagem, afirmações dogmáticas, autodestruição.

1. Introduction

The relationship between skepticism and language can be conceptualized in various ways. Usually, in the context of linguistic skepticism, the focus is on interrogating the capacity of language to mirror reality. Consequently, by interrogating the relationship between language and the world -the semantic dimension-, skepticism also calls into question explanations of meaning. In this text, I will focus on a position that has radically questioned the ability of language to faithfully represent reality, instead of the debates about theories of meaning. Thus, I will begin with Fritz Mauthner's (1874-1923) linguistic-epistemological skepticism, according to which language is a source of deception and superstitions. My aim is not a detailed analysis of Mauthner's philosophy¹, but rather an attempt to answer the question: Is it possible to establish the relationship between philosophy and language from a skeptical philosophy that is not radical and negative? In order to defend the idea of a non-radical and actively skeptical approach to this

¹ For introduction to Mauthner's ideas, see BAHR, F. "Estudio preliminar". In: Mauthner, F. *Spinoza. Un bosquejo de su vida y su influencia*. Córdoba: Encuentro Grupo Editor, 2011, pp. 7-30. And DI TOMASO, S. "Lenguaje y filosofía: la Sprachkritik de F. Mauthner a la luz del Pirronismo". *Síntesis*, (15), 2024b, pp. 43-59.

relationship, I will review the ancient sources of Greek Pyrrhonism, Sextus Empiricus. My main purpose is not exegetical; I will only take the elements that enable me to defend the coherence of a Pyrrhonian philosophy without implying its self-destruction, or self-cancellation (*quietism*)². I consider that Sextus Empiricus' explorations of language, especially with regard to the reflection on the practice of philosophy as distinct from dogmatic assertions, allow me to present a viable and updatable sceptical philosophical proposal.

1.1. Skepticism, Knowledge and Critique of Language

For Mauthner, as for Kant, the mission of philosophy is a criticism of the conditions of possibility of our knowledge, but this criticism is now understood as *a critique of language* (*Sprachkritik*). In *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1903) and in *Dictionary of Philosophy: New Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1910-11)³, Mauthner points out that: "Philosophy is a theory of knowledge, a theory of knowledge is a critique of language"⁴. It should be kept in mind that, for Mauthner, neither is the critique of language a merely linguistic analysis nor produces an ordered theoretical system of knowledge⁵. At the center of Mauthner's thought, stands the conviction that language is an ultimately unsatisfactory tool for philosophical thought because language creates *superstitions* (*Aberglauben*). Therefore, he drastically questions the possibility of *representing* reality through words. His critique is so radical and negative that he calls his position *epistemological nihilistic skepticism*⁶: knowledge of the world through language is

² In this discussion, I interpret *quietism* in these terms: skeptical philosophy consists exclusively of negative and inert elements; skeptical philosophy is self-destructive; Pyrrhonian philosophy has aphasia, or discursive silence, as its ideal. For those who would like to explore the relationship between Quietism and Pyrrhonism, consult: REINOSO, G. "Neopirronismo contemporáneo: una propuesta performativa". En *Neopirronismo clásico y contemporáneo. Discusiones en torno al legado escéptico*. Reinoso, G.; Uanini, F.; Di Tomaso, S. (Eds.). Colecciones del Ciffyh, Área Filosofía, 2024, pp. 19-35. And REINOSO, G. "Neopyrrhonism as Metaphilosophy: a Non-Quietist Proposal". *Praxis Filosófica*, 2022, vol.54, pp. 11-30.

³ I will use two editions in Spanish, MAUTHNER, F. *Contribuciones a una crítica del lenguaje*. Barcelona: Herder, 2001, and in Portuguese, MAUTHNER, F. *O avesso das palavras*. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2024. In the Spanish edition the citations will be preceded by the initials CCL and the page number. In the Portuguese edition the citations will be preceded by AP and the page number. All the passages based in these editions have been translated by me. The German editions are available at < <https://openlibrary.org/> >.

⁴ CCL, p. 21; AP, p. 205, p. 473.

⁵ Cf. CCL, p. 27.

⁶ CCL, p. 22; AP, pp. 472, 475; "extreme skepticism", AP, p.193.

impossible⁷; human beings “will never be able to go beyond a figurative presentation of the world”⁸. In his view, the final purpose of philosophy must be a freedom from words, from the *tyranny* of language: “the critique of language must teach liberation from language as the highest goal of self-liberation”⁹. Consequently, philosophy must fight against and resist linguistic seductions.

While the idea of liberation seems to present a positive therapeutic aspect of Mauthner’s skepticism, both his diagnosis, language deceives us, and his conclusion, it is not possible to know the world, are radical and negative¹⁰: “Language is not a suitable tool for understanding nature, because neither [both], language nor nature, remain immobile; the eternally rotating word hunts for rotating reality, and cannot catch it”¹¹. Both, the object of his research project and the tool to analyze it, are language¹². Therefore, the critique is an *internal* critique, a fight against language through language: “(...) I must do away with the language that is behind me, beside me and before me; step by step, therefore, I must tread on and destroy each rung in the ladder”¹³. This way of understanding critique as internal to language seems to lead the project into a paradox. As Di Tomaso points out, the critical project “is unviable, because it cannot use as an instrument that which is called into

⁷ CCL, p. 23.

⁸ AP, p. 205.

⁹ CCL, p. 31.

¹⁰ Especially in his late text “Exposition of my philosophy” (1922), in *Die Philosophie der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen*, Bd3, Ed. by von Raymund Schmidt, Leipzig: Meiner, pp. 120-144, Mauthner uses adverse and tragic expressions, to describe his first “linguistic” experiences that led him to propose the idea of a critique of language, such as “the monstrosity of language” (AP, p. 466), “linguistic dread”, “hate-filled death sentence against the value of all languages”, (AP, p. 467) among others. In *Contributions*, he uses the expression “*prating cheat*” (in English in the original text, AP, p. 193) to refer to language.

¹¹ AP, p. 475. Mauthner’s work was soon read by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). Many of Mauthner’s ideas appear in several of Borges’ short stories, such as “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” and “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”. In the latter, the name of Mauthner appears, and the arbitrariness with which our general linguistic concepts operate is illustrated by the following classification of “a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance”, (BORGES, J. L. *Other Inquisitions (1937–1952)*. Translated by R. L. C. Simms. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964, p. 103).

¹² Cf. CCL, p. 33.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

question; or, if it is viable, it becomes self-destructive”¹⁴. Beyond the paradox, it should be noted that this “internal” aspect does not imply a subjectivist – *solipsistic*- approach to language since, for Mauthner, language has a social existence. It does not exist in the minds of human beings but circulates among them¹⁵; “language and reason are among [human beings], they are social phenomena, they are one and the same social phenomenon, like customs. Perhaps it is also just like the rules of a game”¹⁶. Nonetheless, his perspective on language and knowledge is negative because both are illusions, falsifications; always understood in a negative way as anthropomorphic metaphors¹⁷.

In describing his philosophy as a radical and epistemological skepticism, Mauthner emphasizes that it should be understood in the sense of David Hume’s skepticism and not in the sense of the *uncritical* and *dogmatic* ancient Greek skeptics¹⁸. While the relation to Hume seems clear in terms of the epistemological emphasis of his skepticism, it is difficult to understand why Mauthner speaks of radical skepticism as an inheritance of Hume’s “modest” or “mitigated” skepticism. Regarding ancient Greek skepticism, for Mauthner, probably guided only by his reading of Hume and not by Sextus’ texts, understands that ancient Pyrrhonism, in order to be a coherent and non-dogmatic position, must have as its philosophical ideal discursive *aphasia*, that is, non-assertion on any issue. Mauthner uses the metaphor of the ladder to emphasize that critical activity allows one to climb while destroying the linguistic steps. If the linguistic ladder is destroyed after the critical philosopher has climbed it, it is silence that appears at the top as the philosophical ideal¹⁹. The pyrrhonian skeptic, in order to avoid the accusation of self-destruction, must accept the radical consequence of his philosophical proposal: discursive silence.

I think that Mauthner, beyond his philosophical way of thinking about language and identifying the kind of skepticism he professes²⁰, enables us to see two Pyrrhonian

¹⁴ DI TOMASO, “Lenguaje y filosofía”, p. 50.

¹⁵ Cf. CCL, pp. 54-55.

¹⁶ AP, p. 473. In order to explore the relationship between Mauthner, Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism, see SLUGA, H. “Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism”. In: Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (ed.) *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 99-117.

¹⁷ CCL, p. 61.

¹⁸ Cf. AP, pp. 472-75.

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 33-4.

²⁰ G. Weiler argues that Mauthner’s radical skepticism becomes *self-defeating*, producing an *aphasic* “mysticism”. Thus, Mauthner’s project is presented as an anti-philosophy. From Di Tomaso’s point of view,

challenges about language which skeptics must face if they want to free themselves from dogmatic assertions or word-dogmatism –word-superstition (*Wortaberglaube*). On the one hand, the accusation of self-destruction that was made to the skeptics due to the use of arguments against *dogmas*; on the other hand, the typical characteristic of language that Sextus remarks, its affirmative character. Both challenges can be seen as different aspects of a larger challenge, the charge of *apraxia* (or *adynamia*), in terms of the unviability (or un-livability)²¹ of the Pyrrhonian philosophical orientation²². Therefore, as Mauthner, we could think that the goal of Pyrrhonian philosophy, taking into account the reflections on language, if skepticism is to be considered a coherent philosophy, is the ideal of aphasia or total silence. However, was it Sextus Empiricus's philosophical goal?

2. Ancient Pyrrhonism: *Apraxia* and Self-Destruction

At the beginning of Book I of *Outlines of Scepticism*²³, Sextus presents his philosophical orientation as differs from dogmatic philosophies because a pyrrhonian neither affirms nor denies that she has discovered the truth²⁴. The proposal is not to offer an alternative theoretical philosophical system, but to present a philosophy understood in terms of an ability (*dynamis*²⁵). This ability consists in offering, in a dogmatic dialectical scenario, arguments of equal persuasiveness that achieve equipollence with dogmatic arguments. Once this equipollence is achieved, we have no criterion to determine the content of the truth or falsity of the arguments; therefore judgement is suspended. In the closing of book III, Sextus summarises his proposal in these terms: “Skeptics are

this anti-philosophical conclusion is misguided. Weiler omits the elements that make it possible to assess what kind of skepticism constitutes the critical-philosophical project. In particular, he disregards the differences between modern skepticism and Pyrrhonism (Cf. DI TOMASO, “Pirronismo y criticismo: una lectura neopirrónica de la *Sprachkritik* de F. Mauthner”, pp. 66-69; DI TOMASO “Lenguaje y filosofía: la *Sprachkritik* de F. Mauthner a la luz del Pirronismo”, pp. 51-54). Di Tomaso rehearses a reading that brings Mauthner's critical project closer to the Pyrrhonic *zetesis* (DI TOMASO, *Ibidem* a, pp. 69-79; *Ibidem* b, pp. 51-54).

²¹ Cf. CORTI, L. “Mind and language of the Laertian Pyrrhonist: Diog. Laert. IX 74-77”. In: Vogt, K. M. *Pyrrhonian Skepticism in Diogenes Laertius*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, 2015, pp. 123-145.

²² BRITO, R. P. de. *The Skeptical Dynamis and Its Pragmatic Possibilities*. Springer International Publishing - Synthese Library, 2022, p.9.

²³ The edition used is the following *Outlines of Scepticism*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Ed. by Annas, J. and Barnes, J. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. The citations will be preceded by HP, the number of the book and the line number.

²⁴ HP I. 1-4.

²⁵ HP I. 8.

philanthropic and wish to cure by argument [*by speech*], as far as they can, the conceit and rashness of the Dogmatists”²⁶. A line further on indicates: “they employ weighty arguments; capable of vigorously rebutting the dogmatic affliction of conceit (...) they employ milder arguments against those who are afflicted by a conceit which is superficial and easily cured”²⁷. What I am interested in emphasising is that this philosophical ability entails a linguistic ability. Thus, from the very beginning of the presentation of Pyrrhonian philosophy, the relationship between philosophy and language is proposed. It is not my intention to claim, anachronistically, that Sextus Empiricus postulated that philosophical problems are linguistic problems, but a methodological relationship between philosophy and language is established. This methodological aspect is reinforced by the presentation of tropes (argumentative figures²⁸). In this context, tropes can be understood as different tools for the exercise of equipollence. From the above and from my reading, what I am interested in emphasising is that the charge of *apraxia* (*adynamais*) is related to this methodological approach, as it is considered a challenge to the viability of skeptical philosophy as ability (*dynamis*).

Following Brito, this charge against the viability of skeptical philosophy is common in modern authors such as Descartes, Mersenne and Hume²⁹. Since these authors assume that Sextus’ proposal not only renders skeptical philosophy unviable or impracticable, but also abolishes the realm of life, the challenge takes on a nihilistic character. Skepticism is beginning to be thought of as a *disease* of reason, not as a *cure* –therapy– as it was originally conceived. Nonetheless, modern philosophers were not the first to question the viability of skeptical philosophy, this challenge “started appearing at the very beginning of the history of the Skepticism” with Aristotle and Diogenes Laërtius³⁰. As we have seen above, the challenge of *apraxia* can be understood in at least two ways, or by implying two problems. The first is the problem of the viability of the practice of skeptical philosophy (the charge of incoherence). The second is the problem of the cancellation or inertia of the world of action and life (the charge of insincerity). Although it is not always possible to

²⁶ HP III. 280.

²⁷ HP III. 281.

²⁸ HP I. 31-186.

²⁹ Cf. BRITO, *The Skeptical Dynamis*, p. 9.

³⁰ Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 52-53.

distinguish between these two problems (methodological philosophical orientation and the way of life)³¹, I am interested in focusing only on the first. The *vital* dimension of the second will be left aside.

Considering the methodological relationship between philosophy and the ability to use tropes established above, I would like to ponder what some interpreters have understood as the way to escape the charge of unviability: the self-destruction or *peritrope*³².

2.1. Purgatives, Fire and a Ladder

After accepting the *apraxia* challenge, many interpreters defend Pyrrhonian coherence by emphasising the dissolutive or destructive nature of skeptical arguments. In other words, they understand the use of arguments in an instrumental way, a use in which there is no dogmatic assent. The problem with this interpretation is that it understands the Pyrrhonian orientation as a merely negative and radical proposal that, after its *purgative* work, cancels or destroys philosophy. This self-destructive character (*peritrope*) is crucial to the Pyrrhonian use of arguments or tropes, since as purgatives not only remove humours from the body, they also expel themselves along with the humours³³. Castagnoli considers McPherran's suggestion, according to which Sextus uses the similes of purgatives³⁴, fire and ladders³⁵ to show that skeptical expressions and arguments (for instance, *proof against proof*³⁶) refute themselves, to be misguided. McPherran rescues a positive and therapeutic aspect in this way of using arguments: before self-refutation, the skeptical arguments have

³¹ The debate about the scope of the suspension of judgement, based on the examination of the beliefs to which the skeptic can subscribe or assent, is at the heart of the dispute between two interpretations of Pyrrhonism: the *rustic* -the suspension is global or radical on all kinds of beliefs-, and the *urban* -the suspension is limited only to philosophical *dogmata*, (see *Ibidem*, p. 54-65). This dispute does not clearly distinguish the two challenges involved in the *apraxia* accusation. For Aristotle life without belief is a vegetable life, is a way of living like plants (see *Ibidem*, p. 14.).

³² FOGELIN, R. "Wittgenstein and Classical Skepticism". *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 21, March, 1981, pp. 3-15; FOGELIN, R. *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. Oxford University Press, 1994; MCPHERRAN, M. L. "Skeptical Homeopathy and Self-refutation". *Phronesis*, 32, 1987, pp. 290-328

³³ Cf. HP I. 206-7.

³⁴ HP I. 206, II. 188.

³⁵ The edition used is: *Against the Logicians*. Bury, R. G., Vol. II. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1935. The citations will be preceded by AD, the number of the book and the line number. AD VIII. 480-1.

³⁶ HP I. 14-15.

had their expected effect on the dogmas, thus leaving the dogmatist in the beneficial state of *epoche* and *ataraxia*³⁷. However, for Castagnoli, McPherran is wrong in his interpretation because he assumes that Sextus admits the charge of self-refutation. According to Castagnoli's proposal, with which I agree, Sextus does not accept, "and so much the less embraces"³⁸, the charge of *apraxia* and it is possible to reconstruct his philosophical proposal in a positive and dynamic way without implying self-destruction.

I choose the term self-destruction in order not to imply the problem of whether the skeptic denies the principle of non-contradiction³⁹. On the other hand, from my perspective, if the challenge is understood in terms of contradiction or refutation, the postulation of equipollence is misinterpreted. It should not be interpreted in terms of refutation or contradictions because something is refuted, strictly speaking, when it is shown to be false through some form of argument⁴⁰. The aim of skeptical philosophy is not to refute in a definitive sense, but only to show the dogmatist that what she affirms or denies cannot yet be affirmed or denied by her own criteria. The skeptic only expresses what seems to her now.

An alternative interpretation is developed by Castagnoli, named *self-bracketing*:

When the Sceptic utters this expression he is not *asserting* anything absolute, *de re*, but just *expressing* something relative, *de se*: he is voicing his mental state of equilibrium and suspension of judgement and what appears to him about the persuasive force of unclear matters⁴¹.

This implies that the force of skeptical arguments lies not in proving or disproving the falsity of an argument (refuting it), but in its persuasive force. Persuasiveness is understood as that force in the argument which causes the dogmatist to revise her claims in her own terms and to suspend judgment. In this way, Sextus' proposal is not to refute but to *bracket* dogmata. Castagnoli proposes the philological metaphor of bracketing in these terms: "the act of putting a text within round brackets indicates that you reject it as

³⁷ Cf. CASTAGNOLI, L. "Self-bracketing Pyrrhonism". In: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, XVIII, 2000, p. 263.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 264.

³⁹ See BRITO, *The Skeptical Dynamis*, pp. 12-3. For an examination of the ancient debate on the argument of self-refutation from a philological, logical and historical study of the classical sources, see CASTAGNOLI, L. *Ancient Self-Refutation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

⁴⁰ Cf. CASTAGNOLI, *Ancient Self-Refutation*, p. 272.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

spurious, but by this very act you are not replacing the expunged words with any alternative text”⁴². This skeptical strategy only works in the dialectical game. In this context, skeptical arguments are “potentially self-bracketing, i.e. if taken as true dogmatic maxims they are self-referring and say of themselves what they say of the other unclear things. They are, we could say, <self-bracketing brackets>”⁴³. Following these suggestions, we can now interpret the similes of the purgatives, the fire and the ladder in a non-self-destructive way. What is expelled, what is burnt, what is thrown away is the pretension of making dogmatic statements. On the other hand, skeptical expressions are understood, by emphasising expressive capacity, as *avowals* or confessions. Therefore, skeptical arguments and expressions are not proofs of the truth about reality and do not have the function of demonstrations. The skeptic can, from his philosophical orientation, share with the dogmatist her current *pathos*, her present affections without asserting the truth of them. In the next section, I will explore the relationship between skeptical philosophy and dogmatic assertions.

3. Dogmatic Assertion

In this section, in the context of the relationship between skeptical philosophy and language, I would like to explore another aspect of the *apraxia* charge: the skeptic asserts that nothing can be asserted. This claim therefore subscribes to negative dogmatism or is a self-destructive philosophical proposal. Sextus begins his *Outlines of Scepticism* by pointing out that the skeptics are philosophers “still investigating about truth”⁴⁴. Neither do they assert having discovered truth, nor do they assert that it cannot be apprehended⁴⁵. From this view, there seems to be a relationship between philosophical investigations and “non-assertion”. Skeptics can only investigate when they cannot assert. So far, not asserting may imply an open view of truth. Later on, when Sextus describes skeptical orientation and explains that it does not postulate dogmas, not asserting could imply avoiding the postulation of substantive theses, of philosophical theories. This is their way of avoiding

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 288.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 289.

⁴⁴ HP I. 1, 2.

⁴⁵ HP I. 3, 4.

word-dogmatism. According to that, skeptics utter their own expressions in such a way they are *bracketing* dogmatism; then, skeptics cannot be said to hold [or assent] dogmas in uttering them. With skeptical expressions they say what is apparent to them and report their own feeling [*pathos*] without holding dogmas, they assert nothing about external objects⁴⁶. The latter idea does not imply any commitment with the *modern problem of the external world*. Since the way they use of expressions to report their own feelings is deprived of dogmas, skeptical orientation is *aporetic*, “from its being at a loss whether to assent or deny”⁴⁷, but it is not silent or aphasia.

The skeptic has the possibility to report her *pathos* through her expressions. For example, “I determine nothing” is used in the following sense: “what is apparent to them about the subject proposed -not dogmatically making a confident assertion, but describing and reporting how they feel”⁴⁸. Reports show their feelings; they are different from dogmas, of assenting to something unclear. Here a link is established between assenting and asserting. Sextus understands the dogmatic use of assertion in relation to assenting to something beyond appearance; this relationship between assenting and asserting is expressed in judgment. The standard way of characterizing the linguistic act of asserting something is that of expressing a judgment; so if someone utters a phrase by asserting it, she expresses having judged its content to be true. Asserting implies judging, but skeptics cannot judge; therefore, they cannot assert⁴⁹.

From a different viewpoint, to understand the skeptic use of expressions, Sextus describes his orientation as the ability to set out oppositions (not refutations) in the dialectic scenario, in which the assertion of arguments is implied. In other words, the use of arguments is a way of making assertions, but only to provoke equipollence and to suspend judgment. In this way, not asserting may suggest a temporary way of asserting: in order not to assert, skeptics need to assert first.

⁴⁶ HP I. 15.

⁴⁷ HP I. 8.

⁴⁸ HP I. 197.

⁴⁹ Cf. CORTI, *Mind and language*, p. 127.

Lorenzo Corti recovers the observations of Diogenes on Pyrrhonism (IX 74-77), the objection of incoherence⁵⁰ is replied by distinguishing between two kinds of items: on the one hand, what they feel/what appears to them to be the case; on the other hand, the non-evident objects that lie beyond the things which appear and that dogmatists make assertions about. To Corti, the uses of skeptical expressions are grounded in a semantic distinction between phrases describing the speaker's feelings and phrases describing objects external to the speaker, and in a distinction concerned with the illocutionary force with which skeptics utter their phrases. Corti shows two important but controversial issues: the first one is the distinction between what skeptics do in the dogmatic scenario and what daily speech allows. In the dogmatic scenario, skeptics use temporary assertions. It is *as if* they asserted. In the daily scenario, they face life and share their feelings, but they do not do philosophy. Therefore, skeptics abandon philosophical investigation. Besides, if the distinction between dogmatic assertions and skeptical expressions is based on different objects - it is based on unclear objects and on feelings- it is implied that skeptics must be considering their feelings as true feelings. Consequently, according to this line of thought, skeptics appear to be equally inclined towards assertion.

3.1. Skeptical Expressions

Corti's perspective highlights a central aspect of Pyrrhonian approach on language: the recovery of natural language. However, it is crucial to note that when the Pyrrhonian recovers everyday speech it does not mean that she abandons philosophy or she proposes the ideal of philosophical aphasia. To avoid the conclusion of aphasia or total silence in philosophy, I refer to Stough, who clarifies this point: "the distinction between assertion and non-assertion marks off categories of speech rather than kinds of things. It creates a new kind of discourse 'peculiar' to the Skeptic, not a privileged kind of entity belonging to the subject's private world"⁵¹. In this context, appearances are not private in a solipsistic sense, as in modern philosophy. In fact, they are public because the skeptics share them with others through reports, and they can talk about and discuss them without any dogmatism. It should be noted that appearances, although shared, are not understood as an

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

⁵¹ STOUGH, C. "Sextus Empiricus on Non-Assertion". *Phronesis*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1984, p. 143.

illusion, or as superstition, as we have seen Mauthner does. Sextus reinforces this approach to discourse and goes one step further when he adds that the form of skeptical discourse is also interchangeable with various non-declarative modes of speech, such as the interrogative⁵² and the imperative⁵³ which are equally serviceable in revealing how something appears⁵⁴. Up to this point, the problem of language is presented within the framework established by the dogmatic scenario, in which the distinction between true and false propositions seems to be the main rule. Dogmatists understand that this is the only possible scenario to do philosophy. Skeptics seem to agree on this point with the dogmatists since, although they accept daily speech, they distinguish this field as different from the philosophical scenario. Skeptics have no philosophical “position”, that is to say, they hold no dogmas, but they do not deny having an “orientation” in the sense of a philosophical practice⁵⁵. Here, not only do skeptics show their interest to avoid the accusation of *apraxia* but they also show their possibility of producing skeptical reports. Then, the absence of doctrine does not imply the absence of an intelligible skeptical philosophy.

From this approach, non-assertion does not reduce skeptics to unviability or silence. They are philosophers “still investigating about truth”. With this in mind, we can ask: Can skeptics use expressions, in a positive way, not only to criticize the dogmatic uses of language in philosophy, but also to practise and share their own philosophical orientation? For Stough, skeptical speech “only has regulative and expressive functions (...) is parasite in descriptive discourse (dogmatic)”⁵⁶. This seems to suggest that, while skeptics may have their own reports, their status is derived from dogmatic discourse. In other words, they have no status of their own. I disagree with Stough’s diagnosis on this point. I will defend the Pyrrhonians have the possibility of producing philosophical discourses, which have their own status.

4. Skeptical Reports

⁵² HP I. 189.

⁵³ HP I. 204.

⁵⁴ STOUGH, *Sextus Empiricus on Non-Assertion*, p. 143.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 145.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 161.

Skeptics, as we have seen, avoid asserting, avoid taking stances about questions of truth, but freely engage in different uses and pragmatic functions of language. Thus, I think that the reflection on language and the way of understanding suspension of judgment in skepticism allows different uses of language and the possibility to create different records. In other words, not only does suspension of judgment enable skeptical investigation but it also enables different ways of using language. Sextus' approach to language is determined by the way of understanding philosophy and the guidance of phenomena, which leads Sextus to address the language problem in at least three different ways⁵⁷: 1- What we can call "the discursive fasting", since he avoids elaborating theories because they are beyond the phenomena. 2- The "apology" of daily speech to express what they feel without dogmatic commitments⁵⁸. 3- The idea of "reporting descriptively"⁵⁹ as *istorikos* does⁶⁰. According to this, I believe that, although Sextus presents a critical perspective on dogmatic assertions, in particular, and on the assertive character of language, in general, his philosophical goal is not aphasia or total silence. This does not imply that the skeptic falls into self-destruction, as Mauthner understood. Definitely, Sextus did not understand philosophy as a criticism of language, as Mauthner did, nor philosophical problems as linguistic problems. Nevertheless, the reflection about language is central in its orientation. For that reason, he presents alternative uses of language to avoid the problem of assertion through the skeptical phrases such as 'No more', 'Perhaps', 'Maybe', 'Possibly', 'I determine nothing', etc.⁶¹.

These expressions are used in Sextus' discussion with dogmatism. They are presented as uses that describe and report how the skeptics feel⁶² in a non-assertive way of using language⁶³. In a critical aspect, against dogmatism, these uses could be considered

⁵⁷ Cf. OYARZÚN, P. *La letra volada. Ensayos sobre literatura*, Santiago de Chile, Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2009. It can also see: *Escepticismo, Literatura y visualidad*, ed. by P. Oyarzun & M. Rivera, Ventana Abierta Editores, Santiago de Chile, 2016 and his unpublished text "Escepticismo, creencia y ficción".

⁵⁸ SEXTUS EMPIRICUS. *Against the Professors* (books from I to VI). Bury, R. G., Vol.IV. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1949. The citations will be preceded by AD, the number of the book and the line number. AD I. 229-240.

⁵⁹ HP I. 15, 197, 203.

⁶⁰ HP I. 4.

⁶¹ HP I. 187-209.

⁶² HP I. 197.

⁶³ HP I. 192.

purgatives: they make the dogmatic claim to truth vanish once their use is over⁶⁴. In a positive way, daily speech, without philosophical dogmatic pretensions, represents the possibility for skeptics to communicate with others about how they feel, how they think, etc. Besides, I believe the skeptic has a third realm of language: reports. On the one hand, these reports have the positive character of daily speech (their non-ontological commitments, their non-assertive way); on the other hand, they represent the possibility of communicating the skeptical orientation. Hence, total silence is not Sextus Empiricus's philosophical goal⁶⁵.

4.1. Philosophical discourses

Beyond sharing the struggle against dogmatism that affirms the possibility of having knowledge of reality, the kinds of skepticism proposed by Mauthner and Sextus are different. These differences are perceived in the several ways of understanding the phenomenon of language in general and the possibility of philosophical discourse in particular. Mauthner had the conviction that language cheats us. This epistemological skepticism about the reliability of language is part of the cultural pessimism at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Austrian-Germanic tradition. This deception or superstition supposes the idea that, although there are words which aim at representing objects of the world, they fail at doing that because they have lost their anchoring in reality; then, they distort it. A very good example of words that are incapable of expressing the world's experience is Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter* (1902)⁶⁶. The author abandons writing completely, not only of books but also of letters because he can no longer formulate concepts given the variety of experience subject to a constant change. In fact, he falls into a "profound state of speechlessness" since words lose their references. From an

⁶⁴ HP I. 206-207; II 188; AD VIII. 480-48.

⁶⁵ Brito's position is that in *Against the Professors* (AD I-VI), Sextus includes not only a critique of the theoretical pretensions associated with the crafts or arts (*technai*), but also a proposal of a new way of understanding knowledge that can be characterized as empiricist and pragmatic. This is because it seeks truth only through approximation and adequacy. Consequently, it can be interpreted that Pyrrhonism is not merely self-destructive; rather, it *actively* proposes an alternative model for knowledge and philosophy (Cf. BRITO, *The Skeptical Dynamis*, p. 76).

⁶⁶ Hofmannsthal, in his letters to Mauthner, recognizes the influence that *Contributions* had on the ideas expressed in his text. For more information about the relationship between Hofmannsthal and Mauthner, see Muñoz Millares, J. "Introducción". In: HOFMANNSTHAL, *Una carta*, Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2008, pp.11-59.

epistemological viewpoint, this linguistic crisis, of this linguistic skepticism, brings up several concerns about the capacity of language to communicate anything that are not provisional truths⁶⁷; therefore, there is no guarantee that knowledge is possible. Arnes thinks that if *Chandos Letter* is not considered “a flight out of language”, it could indicate, in fact, a new formulation of the referential ontology of language. Mauthner “identifies language as an epistemologically coherent net of conventional concepts with only pragmatic, and not absolute, value”⁶⁸. Nonetheless, in this reformulation, language is redefined as “provisory fiction”: always a representation in perspective, a limited facet of the phenomenon described, edited by human concerns built into the language⁶⁹. In other words, in this negative conception of language, words are anthropomorphic metaphors that trick or “cheat” us. Thereby, at the philosophical level, if the coherence of this linguistic skepticism is kept, the consequence will be silence.

I consider that “linguistic skepticism” in Sextus does not revolve around the problem of radical deception, because he does not understand the problem of language as a sub-problem of the general question of the representation of reality, as Mauthner does. What Sextus criticizes is the assertive tendency of language, which should not be understood as a problem of representation, of creation of superstitions or of radical error. Therefore, his criticism of uses of language and suspension of judgment does not imply a final silence in philosophy. Hence, my point is that skeptics accept *pragmatic* uses of language -in fact, their reports are inspired by daily speech-, not only as a way of sharing their states with others but also as a way of sharing their philosophical orientation. The skeptical problem about language, rather, is the nature of assertion in dogmatic discourses, since investigation is cancelled by this assertive use. In these methodological terms, assertion could be understood as a product of dogmatic precipitation whose consequence is the end of philosophical investigation. Then, if this is the case, we may ask ourselves: isn't this dogmatic cancellation a way of silence?

⁶⁷ Cf. ARNES, K. M. “Linguistic Skepticism: Towards a Productive Definition”. *Monatshefte*, Vol. 74, No. 2, 1982, p. 153.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 145.

5. Final considerations

As a final point, Sextus's linguistic skepticism should not be considered a merely negative concept but one which, in its implementation, conveys a different set of productive claims of language. It is an orientation that implies experimental linguistic records. Thereby, my aim in this paper is to defend the idea in which pyrrhonian skepticism is presented as a philosophical ability that enables the discernment of different uses of language. In this novel suggestion, skepticism is able to promote its philosophical orientation through language, producing skeptical expressions and reports, without falling into dogmatic assertions or into dogmatic silence. In my view, as I hope I have made clear, the explorations of language in Sextus Empiricus, especially as they relate to methodological reflection on the practice of philosophy as distinct from dogmatic assertions, allow me to put forward a viable and updatable skeptical philosophical proposal.

Bibliographic References:

- ARNES, K. M. "Linguistic Skepticism: Towards a Productive Definition". *Monatshefte*, Vol. 74, No. 2, 1982, pp. 145-155.
- BAILEY, A. "Pyrrhonian Scepticism and the Self-Refutation Argument". *The Philosophical Quarterly* 40, 1990, pp. 27-44.
- BAHR, F. F. "Estudio preliminar". In: Muthner, F. *Spinoza. Un bosquejo de su vida y su influencia*. Córdoba: Encuentro Grupo Editor, 2011, pp. 7-30.
- BORGES, J. L. *Other Inquisitions (1937–1952)*. Translated by R. L. C. Simms. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964.
- BRITO, R. P. de. *Sobre a noção de linguagem subjacente ao ceticismo pirrônico sextiano: um estudo do livro I de Esboços Pirrônicos, de Sexto Empírico, acompanhado de tradução e de uma investigação teórico-metodológica*. UF de Juiz de Fora, Faculdade de Letras. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Linguística, 2024.
- BRITO, R. P. de. *The Skeptical Dynamis and Its Pragmatic Possibilities*. Springer International Publishing - Synthese Library, 2022.
- CASTAGNOLI, L. "Self-bracketing Pyrrhonism". In: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, XVIII, 2000, pp. 263-328.

- CASTAGNOLI, L. *Ancient Self-Refutation: The Logic and History of the Self-Refutation Argument from Democritus to Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- CORTI, L. “Mind and language of the Laërtian Pyrrhonist: Diog. Laert. IX 74-77”. In: Vogt, K. M. *Pyrrhonian Skepticism in Diogenes Laertius*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, 2015, pp. 123-145.
- DI TOMASO, S. “Pirronismo y criticismo: una lectura neopirrónica de la *Sprachkritik* de F. Mauthner”. In: Reinoso, G.; Uanini, F.; Di Tomaso, S. (Eds.) *Neopirronismo clásico y contemporáneo. Discusiones en torno al legado escéptico*. Córdoba: Colecciones del CiFFyH, 2024a, pp. 63-83.
- DI TOMASO, S. “Lenguaje y filosofía: la *Sprachkritik* de F. Mauthner a la luz del Pirronismo”. *Síntesis*, (15), 2024b, pp. 43-59.
- FOGELIN, R. “Wittgenstein and Classical Skepticism”. *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 21, March, 1981, pp. 3-15.
- FOGELIN, R. *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. Oxford University Press, 1994.
- MAUTHNER, F. *Contribuciones a una crítica del lenguaje*. Barcelona: Herder, 2001.
- MAUTHNER, F. *O avesso das palavras*. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2024.
- MCPHERRAN, M. “Skeptical Homeopathy and Self-refutation”. *Phronesis* 32, 1987, pp. 290–328.
- REINOSO, G. “Neopyrrhonism as Metaphilosophy: a Non-Quietist Proposal”. *Praxis Filosófica*, 2022, vol.54, pp. 11-30.
- REINOSO, G. “Neopirronismo contemporáneo: una propuesta performativa”. En *Neopirronismo clásico y contemporáneo. Discusiones en torno al legado escéptico*. Reinoso, G.; Uanini, F.; Di Tomaso, S. (Eds.). Colecciones del Ciffyh, Área Filosofía, 2024, pp. 19-35.
- SPINELLI, E. “Sceptics and Language: phōnaí and lógoi”. In: *Sextus Empiricus. Histoire Épistémologie Langage*. Tome 13, fascicule 2, 1991, pp. 57-70.
- SEXTUS EMPIRICUS. *Outlines of Scepticism*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Ed. by Annas, J. and Barnes, J. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- SEXTUS EMPIRICUS. *Against the Logicians*. Bury, R. G., Vol.II. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1935.

SEXTUS EMPIRICUS. *Against the Professors*. Bury, R. G., Vol. IV. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1949.

SLUGA, H. "Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism". In: Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (ed.) *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 99-117.

STOUGH, C. "Sextus Empiricus on Non-Assertion". *Phronesis* Vol. 29, No. 2, 1984, pp. 137-164.

TURRI, J. "Pyrrhonian Skepticism Meets Speech-Act Theory". *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism*, 2, 2012, pp. 83-98.

WEILER, G. *Mauthner's Critique of Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

Recebido em: abril de 2025
Aprovado em: junho de 2025