

Paulina Kłos-Czerwińska  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7889-7813>

The Jacob of Paradies University in Gorzów Wielkopolski

e-mail: paulinaklospaulina@gmail.com

Sign and meaning: A pragmatic intervention

Znak i znaczenie: interwencja pragmatyczna

Abstract

The article concerns the problematic of the transference from the regions of sign and meaning creation into the sphere of pragmatic and agential attitude towards the world. The line of analysis leads from the processes of affective encounters, through the workings of auto-affection, towards active agency in the form of the possibility of pragmatic intervention in the social field. The theories of Gilles Deleuze and his useful interpretation of Spinozian *conatus* as the power to act, Susana Caló's semio-pragmatics and Jan Slaby's new approaches to the idea of the affective genealogy of the agency of the subject serve as support for the analysis. The article is aimed at the presentation of the, sometimes obscured, transformation of theory into practice, of how the contents initially expressed only at the level of meaning may change into an active force for doing and also, as a result, how the 'learner of the world' is transformed into its 'teacher'.

Keywords: meaning creation, pragmatic intervention, affective agency, auto-affection, motivation

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy problematyki przejścia z obszaru znaku i tworzenia znaczenia w obszar pragmatycznego i sprawczego nastawienia względem świata. Linia analizy jest prowadzona od procesów afektywnego spotkania, przez działanie autoafekcji, w kierunku aktywnej sprawczości w formie możliwości pragmatycznej interwencji w polu społecznym. Teorie Gillesa Deleuza i jego przydatna interpretacja spinozjańskiego *conatus* jako siły do działania, Susany Caló semio-pragmatyka i Jana Slabego nowe podejścia do idei afektywnej genealogii sprawczości podmiotu służą za pomoc w analizie. Celem artykułu jest prezentacja, czasami niejasnej, transformacji teorii w praktykę, tego, jak treści początkowo wyrażone jedynie na poziomie znaczenia mogą zmienić się w aktywną siłę działania, oraz ostatecznie tego, jak uczący się od świata zmienia się w tego, kto uczy, czyli w nauczyciela.

Słowa kluczowe: tworzenie znaczenia, interwencja pragmatyczna, sprawczość afektywna, autoafekcja, motywacja

Introduction: sign and meaning

Traditionally, sign and meaning are treated as the phenomena described within the framework of Plato's *Cratylus* (Plato, 2008) and de Saussurian notions of language (de Saussure, 1959). In these frames sign is presented as an indicator of something that is placed beyond or outside language: in the case of Plato, the shadows on the cave's wall are representations of the only true, never-changing forms of Ideas, whereas de Saussure seems to involve the sign in a never-ending play of significations coming from the relations between signifieds and signifiers. But sign and meaning involve much more than this, for they must be included within the context of social practice in order to realize the function assigned to them in culture.

Culture, however, does not tell us what this relation between theory and practice is. It does tell the difference between them, but the question of how it is possible that theory comes fluently into practice remains obscure. That is why, it would be useful to find a way out of the theory into practice problem step by step with the help of well-established notions coming from the interconnections between philosophy and linguistics.

Initially, it should be clarified, that sign and signification should not merely be regarded as an assembly line for the production of meaning. Sign can also be the origin of action and intervention. To follow this transition from sign through meaning to action, it is necessary to consider some crucial notions on the way. The notions I would like to consider are the following: *the encounter with the transcendental sign*, which is an idea first used by Gilles Deleuze (1968; 1988; 2014b); *affects*, which can be directed to both sides of affective relation: out of the subjective mental life towards the outside, and from the outside towards the subjective sphere of mental possibilities; *auto-affection*, which comes from this affection and is later transformed into motivation; and finally *pragmatic intervention*, which originates inside the subject, but is actively directed outside of its mental grounding. We can observe here the transference from what is semantic in language to cultural semiotics.

Susana Caló's semio-pragmatics

Susana Caló is a representative of the current in linguistics called 'semiopragmatics'. In the article "Semio-Pragmatics as Politics: On Guattari and Deleuze's Theory of Language" she refers to affective agency, which is used by Gilles Deleuze to shift the activity from the sphere of meaning creation to active intervention in the social surroundings. Deleuze (2010) and Félix Guattari (2024) propose this particular affective agency as a form of action that originates in the language of affects. In this theory we encounter the assumption that affect is not only an experience of affection when the body is affected, but also an intervention – when it is the subject that affects the outside world. Following this line of thought, we might be tempted to come to the conclusion that language is overlooked here or placed on a farther plane of importance, and only affect is given priority. This is not the case, however, for as Caló explains, "rather than offering an 'escape from

language', Guattari and Deleuze recast language as a social and political practice" (Caló, 2021: 266). She comments later that Deleuze and Guattari "develop a social and semiotic critique whereby the very concept of language changes from representation to intervention in a material and social field" (Caló, 2021: 266).

The beginning of this approach is the Deleuzian "attempt to denounce the primacy of the linguistic signifier in the production of meaning" (Caló, 2021: 267). This primacy was initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure and consisted in the division of sign into signified and signifier, which inaugurated their mutual relation in the form of the free play of significations. Since the Deleuzian intervention this free play of significations has ceased to be treated as the origin of meaning production. What follows is a change in the plane of linguistic analysis from the classical explanation of the sign and meaning relation, where the meaning is represented by sign, to a more pragmatic approach, where the meaning is not only a representation indicated by the sign, but becomes the source of understanding and other discursive formations as a result of a fundamental encounter on the level of sensible experience.

Deleuze's encounter

An encounter with a transcendental sign is an idea introduced into the literature by Gilles Deleuze. It is connected with the assumptions of transcendental empiricism, with Gilles Deleuze as one of its representatives. To understand what an encounter is and what its place is in the creation of meaning, we need to get to know what 'transcendental' and 'empirical' mean here. We should remember, at the same time, that thought and meaning production for Deleuze do not appear without some incitement, which is in agreement with his conception of a new image of thought.

According to this theory, the subject does not normally think. It is only because of an encounter, treated as something that comes from outside the human's general rational powers, that the human subject starts to think. So, the impulse for thinking must come from a region other than thinking. Conor Heaney (2018) writes that "rather than being related to what is recognisable, thought is produced when we encounter that which we precisely do not recognize; the object of the encounter 'is imperceptible precisely from the point of view of recognition' (Deleuze, 2014a: 184). Experience and thought are produced in an encounter with that which can only be sensed – that which can only be felt – rather than that which can be recognized, represented or known" (Heaney, 2018: 380). Thus, the object of the encounter exceeds what the subject is usually accustomed to, it transcends the rational possibilities of the mind and it is only in this situation that thought and thinking processes are likely to appear. That is why the object of the encounter is called 'transcendental sign', which means 'coming from the outside of general rational experience'. In addition, however, it also means that this kind of outer sign becomes a condition for thought in general, so, it also means that the human subject cannot think or create without the help of this impulse (see: Heaney, 2018: 380). That is why we call this Deleuzian approach to thinking and producing meaning 'transcendentalism'. This

transcendentalism must go hand in hand with empiricism, because this ‘sign from without’ must be experienced by the subject’s body, by the senses. That is why it is ‘empiricism’ – in order to produce meaning the subject must first *experience* something what exceeds the mind’s possibilities: this object of experience does not fit into the subject’s usual working patterns of mind. Only when the subject meets the object of encounter empirically do the possibilities of meaning production become open and thinking processes may start. This opening would be impossible without an outer impulse. Otherwise, the subject would subsist in passive stagnation. Thus, to summarize, encounter is something decidedly fundamental for the production of meaning and is treated as the transcendental sign for subject’s creative possibilities. This assumption is not without importance for further analysis, where sign and meaning will not be presented as a part of theory, but will also appear as an element of practice.

The change of perspective

Transcendental sign is described by Deleuze as something that leads to, or is a result of, a fundamental encounter (depending on whether subject is the agent or experiencer) and happens in the real world, not only in the world of meaning: it changes meaning into action. It should be emphasized here that the author of the article does not want to say that meaning and understanding are the beginning of and impulse for action – that does not need explanation and is a truism. The article is rather an attempt to explore how this transformation from meaning into action takes place: how the change from the position of passive observer or namer to active doer in the realm of subjectivity occurs.

In order to understand how this transformation from meaning to action takes place, we need to follow on from the explanation of Deleuzian notion of encounter to the processes of auto-affectation, motivation and decision to act. The shift from encounter to meaning creation and finally to action lies in the sphere of this new image of thought – the crucial notion of the theory by Deleuze, where thought is based on affective forces.

In the production of meaning, Deleuze and Guattari try to give priority to affective forces, rather than to base it on the de Saussurian play between signified and signifier. Thus, to produce a meaning, first, an affect must be experienced. So, it is not enough to ‘think’ the meaning, namely: to appropriate the sign to its real counterpart – e. g. the sign ‘tree’ to the tree outside the window. So, to ‘think’ does not consist in finding the semantic representation of the sign. It does not mean finding representations at all, because representation has already been discarded by Jacques Derrida (2009) and deconstruction in the form of the deconstruction of the logocentric approach to meaning (see: Kłos-Czerwińska, 2015). Since then, all other divisions made according to the matrices of binary divisions (like the division into signifier and signified) have also been called into question. It was this cancellation of representation that prepared the ground for the Deleuzian rereading of Benedict Spinoza, whose idea of desire as a productive force in creation, rather than production based on the duality of sign and its representative, took hold in the pragmatics of the meaningful subjective becoming that leads to social intervention.

Spinoza's affects: affecting and being affected

Contemporary affection in linguistics and philosophy seems to have been greatly elaborated and popularized in books on coaching or philosophical counseling, not to mention its role in classical psychology or psychotherapy. Deleuze, however, conceptualizes the role of affects differently from these popular interpretations of psychological or philosophical truths. He applies the hints delivered by Benedict Spinoza (Deleuze on Spinoza: 1968; 1988; 2014b) who joins affects with the primordial power in human beings that drives them to all their activities, both, mental and physical. This primordial power is 'desire' – Spinoza calls this interior power *conatus* (see: Deleuze, 1968; 1988; 2014b). *Conatus* means two things for Spinoza: affecting and being affected.

Spinoza's idea of the transformative potential of affect as the possibility of affecting and being affected is still very productive today. This whole new branch of approaches to the issue of production of meaning based on desire and affects is called affective theory and many new elaborations continue to appear in the attempt to understand the relations between the production of meaning and its affective counterparts, such as the evaluation of the many possible options of acting, the choice of appropriate answers, the process of decision making and finally active agency as a kind of transformation of what has previously only been in the sphere of thought, but can now be actively realized. But Spinoza's invention is that, whereas the classical philosophers treated affecting and being affected as opposite poles of a relation or influence that might be subsumed to the classical idea of the duality of sign, Spinoza means by it the force that works between them – this is the force of desire that joins instead of separates, while simultaneously producing one active movement that governs the diverse becomings of the subject.

Auto-affection and motivation

The concept of encounter connects with affects in such a way that the subject may repeat chosen encounters in order to incite certain affects, which may lead to action. When the subject repeats those affects that correspond to its nature and to the quality of its becomings – its power to act is increased. Here Spinoza says

[t]hat individual will be called good (or free, or rational, or strong) who strives, insofar as he is capable, to organize his encounters, to join with whatever agrees with his nature, to combine his relation with relations that are compatible with his, and thereby to increase his power (Deleuze, 1988: 23).

So, the point is that the subject must repeat such affects that increase the power of action. By repeating them the subject becomes more causative: it produces meanings not only for the sake of theory, but also for the sake of action. As a result of these affective encounters the content of meanings may tip the scale for the benefit of some choice – so it may take part in the decision process by creating motivation. What is meant here is that affects give rise to an increase in motivation – they draw "individuals into their ambit

by offering them occasions for immersion within a sphere of resonance and intensity” (Slaby, Mühlhoff, Wüschner, 2019: 5). Thus, affects open another sphere of influence, where subjects are drawn into action by passions that are in agreement with their quality of being and which they choose. Thus sign and meaning do not have only a representational value here, but are of an affective character that leads to acting in the world and not only to declaring its meaning. The point is not to describe the meaning, but to put it into action. This process consists in directing encounters in such a way as to produce in the subject the desired affects that go hand in hand with this subjects talents to experience reality in many different, but chosen, modes. After this particular directing and organizing of the encounters the learner usually has self-knowledge of what induces the transfer from the position of experiencing to exerting influence.

It is worth reinforcing here once more that the emphasis is placed not on representation, but on experience and sensitivity: sign loses its representative potential, gaining instead a transcendental function. The transcendental sign given in an encounter may incite reaction which was originally of theoretical formation (took the form of thinking), but which eventually may transform into action. To achieve this, it must go through the following stages: 1. An encounter takes place, 2. The transcendental sign delivers an impulse, 3. Affects are moved, 4. The subject becomes affected, which instigates motivation, 5. Affection from outside is prolonged: the subject affects itself as if from outside, which appears to be auto-affection (first the process involved is teaching, then it becomes learning), 6. Affection changes direction from being directed to itself (learning) to being directed to outside (action), 7. Finally, what has been affected becomes the agent who affects. As a result, we can summarize that sign may be interpreted as possessing pragmatic, and not only representative, meaning and it is in this sense that it is understood by Deleuze.

To make this enumeration clearer, it may help to indicate that point 5 assumes that this conditioning of meaning production from outside by the transcendental sign must change the form from outer to inner, because it is not enough for the subject to be motivated from outside by the transcendental sign in order to act. The force of activity must be somehow taken over by the subject itself, so it has to be auto-motivated. It has to self-determine itself first, which means that it has to auto-affect itself. This gives rise to a question about the meaning and character of this auto-affection. The answer is that it takes the form of affects that draw subject to action. These affects need not be strong affects, but they should be in agreement with the subject’s talents, predilections and natural qualities. They must be in agreement with the inner ‘interest’ in order to be able to increase the subject’s power to act. Not all affects can do this, only those that are beneficial for the subject – which make the subject a better person. The subject is usually interested in such affects, but needs a small ‘pull’ to be drawn by them. Only this ‘pull’ from beneficial affects may strengthen the agency and in this sense affects may increase motivation. It is done first by proper organization of encounters, by repeating beneficial ones, which affect the subject. Then the subject becomes somehow trapped in the sphere of in-between-ness – between being under affection and affecting. To come out of this impasse a certain self-determination is required. As Jon K. Shaw explains, self-determination leads from being under affection to affecting because “expressive force is given a new origin – it no longer originates

in the outside, but is the organism's self-determination from the very base, fond, of being" (Shaw, 2016: 167). So, the subject learns how to change direction from being under affection toward affecting. First it is self-affecting – directed toward itself in the movement of self-determination. When results are seen in the increase of the positive power of affects that draw out subject's abilities – the subject is moved to change the direction of affecting toward the outside. We call it auto-affection and finally motivation to act.

So, in order to be motivated the subject must auto-affect itself. Thus, encounter appears to be a source of affection that may be transformed into motivation. The next step is self-determination. A certain kind of self-determination is described by Jan Slaby (2008; 2012) as a part of the process called auto-affection¹: when the subject finds itself in the midst of the relation of affecting and being affected, it has to transform the powers that it experiences into the powers it might be able to produce on the basis of what is experienced. So, the subject has to shift from the position of the experiencer to the position of a doer. This small step of changing from the object for other powers to the subject that expresses its own power allows the subject to save its own sensibility in relation to the world: with its own voice in the creation of potential meaning. Jon K. Shaw (2016: 167) observes that the objective meaning starts to be produced out of the contraction of the internal meaning. So, meanings are delivered to the surface of social discourse, because they are extricated from the interior virtualities of potential by the repetitive mechanisms that strengthen the established internal intensities. These intensities become objectified and recognized as fully-fledged elements of the social discourse. In this way, what seemed earlier only a preliminary to the formulation of a statement, becomes statement. What was internal becomes external. What was intimate becomes political – this kind of formulation also appears in Brian Massumi's work *The Politics of Affect* (2021). Here we can observe how the affect system works: it is "capacious enough to account for the complexities of social context and individual personality" (Ahern, 2024: 97). What is more: it enables to change from one to another, from complexities of individual personality to objectivities of social system. Because something is in the interior sphere of the subject – it does not mean that it is irrelevant – it may constitute, or respond to, the wider problem. In this sense "The affect system [is] intermediary between drive system and cognition system" (Ahern, 2024: 97). In this sense self-determination is based on the possibility of the subject to understand its own emotional force – it must be conscious how to invest this emotional power to influence itself, how to auto-affect its very possibilities.

Interest

Deleuze and Guattari try to give priority in the production of meaning to affective forces. This move changes the potential meaning completely: when it comes from binary opposition system – it is only a play of signification. When we assume that meaning comes from the affect system and is the "intermediary between drive system and cognition system"

¹ Auto-affection is also described in a very interesting way by Zeynep Direk (2024: 202–213).

(Ahern, 2024: 97) the subject must appear as interested in this meaning. It is not a free play for it any longer, the subject wants it to mean something that it is interested in. The subject starts to care about this meaning. In this way, states Deleuze, this interest is what synthesizes the multiple becomings of the subject into one coherent whole. It is the interest that drives affecting on many levels: on the internal level it is auto-affecting, self-determination, motivation and on the external level meaning production and exerting affecting influence in the form of meaningful intervention. In this sense Caló states that “there is no language in itself that is not already an intervention in an extended material and social field” (Caló, 2021: 267).

We should also remember what is important for Deleuze: that it is in interest that the becoming of the subject originates. Deleuze quotes David Hume when he wants to indicate another important aspect of action connected with this interest, namely, the problem of how to act ethically. This issue is closely tied to the idea that it is affect that draws subjects to action:

Hume constantly affirms the identity between the mind, the imagination and ideas. The mind is not nature, nor does it have a nature. It is identical with the ideas in the mind. Ideas are given, as given; they are experience. The mind, on the other hand, is given as a collection of ideas and not as a system. It follows that our earlier question can be expressed as follows: how does a collection become a system? The collection of ideas is called “imagination”, insofar as the collection designates not a faculty, but rather an assemblage of things, in the most vague sense of the term: things are as they appear – a collection without an album, a play without a stage, a flux of perceptions [...] How does the mind become a subject? (Deleuze, 1991: 22–23).

And Hume and Deleuze offer an answer: It is “[t]he principles of affectivity [that] consolidate the mind, give it goals and activate it. The perspectives of these goals are at the same time the motives, dispositions to action, tendencies, individual interests”² (Deleuze, 2000: 195). Thus Deleuze and Hume explain how it is possible that drives and passions in humans may draw ethically good thinking and as a result ethically good actions. Passions are affects that care about its object – that is why the result of these passions is prone to be of ethically positive qualification.

Auto-affecting is thus presented, as another famous explorer of human affects Silvan Tomkins assumes, as the main motivational power able to move the stability of meaning that is accumulated in the subject. And Slaby explains once more, that it is “affective arrangements [that] often exert a ‘pull’, a kind of active allure” (Slaby, Mühlhoff, Wüschner, 2019: 5) that create motivation to change from the interiority of affection to the exteriority of affecting. From emotions to meaning creation and action.

Summary

According to the assumptions presented above, the affect system may be responsible not only for the affection of the subject, which is called auto-affecting, but also for the affec-

² Trans. P.K.-C.

tion directed outside the subject as a result of motivational processes. The affect system thus transforms the experiencer of affects into an active agent of affects, able to produce transcendental signs to motivate different spheres of the becoming of the subject. Thus, what appears to be only concerned with the creation of meaningful processes involving sign and meaning (which belongs to the discipline of linguistics) appears to have been transformed into a matter of active agency based on the content of meaningful creation (which belongs to the sphere of pragmatics of meaning). Sign and meaning are thus not only about the resemblance of what exists in the form of the linear meaningful process, but predominantly about how to do things with words (Austin, 1975), but in a different, Deleuzian sense. Factors that are involved include: the problem of decision, motivation, auto-affectation and the manifestation of decision. In general, these are factors that are connected with intervention in reality.

Thus, action comes not only from the use of the rational representative power of attributing a word to an object in the world, sign to its meaning. It is not only this correspondence between them that is the source of action. In fact, it is rare for this to be the cause of actions. It appears that stronger motives have to be used to build meaning. Motives that would have the power to change the situation of the subject into active engagement. These motives lie in the sphere of affects, and affects entail these kinds of signs and meanings which are somehow in kinship with them. We conceptualize these motives as something that has the power of awakening the subject from the experience of passive stagnation.

The second thing is, that the subject produces meanings that include contents that may be qualified as ethical – so affects do not only draw to action, but they may draw to ethically good action. That is why it is good to have good affects, because good affects draw subjects to signs and meanings which are somehow in kinship with them, so which are good themselves. Thus, repeating good affects exercises ethical sensitivity and as a result the subject becomes also more sensitive in the realm of the choice of linguistic meaning.

Deleuze explains: encounters with what exceeds the possibility of human rational powers, encounters with that which can only be sensed produce causality of another kind than that based on the representative power of sign and meaning. The proper representation of the reality with signs and meanings is not enough for the subject to find answers to the problems of this reality. There must be certain ‘pull’ that takes the subject outside of and beyond representation. Thus, the subject needs to be pulled by affects from passive reception and understanding to active agency. Thinking is thus the source of acting, but not thanks to theorizing, but thanks to being pulled and directed to action by affects. They have the power of transferring the subject from the realm of understanding to the realm of action. Of course action must be preceded by thinking and understanding, but it is affects that draw thinking toward related regions of agency. They have the power of attraction that works within the framework of related meanings. That is why it is desirable to have good desires and good affects in order to act well in an ethical sense. This is also the role of motivation: thinking without motivation delivered by affects would remain on the level of representation, not action. Affects have the power to take the subject from passive to active mode. It is affect that lies behind all action. In this sense that connects meaning and action Susan Sontag (2014) was right when she claimed that thinking is feeling.

Conclusion

The first symptom of action is visible in language – that is why it is the preliminary condition for intervention in reality. But in order to intervene in reality the subject must first find an expression for its inner emotions. To change from representing of meaning as the appropriation of a sign to its reality to intervening with the meaning in reality the subject needs to have this meaning in its disposition: it needs to be able to understand itself in the midst of emotion, in between being affected and affecting. To change from representing mode to intervening mode is the work of auto-affectation: the subject must affect itself under the impulse of being affected. This primary auto-affectation is affecting itself – so it is already an action. In giving response to something that is felt, the subject is taught to act. When teaching becomes learning we reach the moment of transformation: what was only a reaction becomes an action, the experiencer becomes a doer, the observer becomes an active agent. In this sense the affect system is the system that transforms the subject from the passive observer of its own being as affected to the subject in active agency and with readiness to intervene in the social field. According to Ahern, Silvan Tomkins asks “what motivates humans to want what they want” (Ahern, 2024: 97) and he answers: it is the affect system as “the primary motivational system in humans” (Tomkins, 1995: 34).

That is why, finally, we can say according to Caló that Deleuze’s and Guattari’s task “is to restore language to its practice” (Caló, 2021: 269) and to describe “how language is inseparable from a concrete world which it affects and is affected by” (Caló, 2021: 269). The subject’s active position to intervene in reality never ends with language. It must come through emotions and affects to receive its power to act. The relation of sign and meaning thus cannot be based on representation only. Thus, it is not only ontological semantics that directs who we are. The subject is thus not only what it thinks, but more what it feels and as a result acts. Proper organization of the affect system and individual or social decisions about the direction of encounters may help in a better understanding of feelings and emotions and as a result in a better organization of activities and actions.

Together with this affective influence goes the linguistic dimension and the problematic of sign and meaning. It would be impossible to change the source of meaning from representation to encounter without this emphasis on affects. As a consequence of this change of perspective, meaning appears to be based on the sensible element in human beings. Thus, affects appear to be the strongest attractor to the creation of related meanings which may ultimately lead to action. This is the reason why it is not a good idea to ignore affects when meaning is at stake.

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