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Sign and meaning: from Plato and de Saussure to Derrida and Deleuze

Znak i znaczenie: od Platona i de Saussure'a do Derridy i Deleuze'a

Abstract

The article concerns the problematic of sign and meaning. It starts with Plato's explanation, which was to give rise to the tradition of Western metaphysics based on the dualistic divisions of logocentrism. De Saussure inaugurated the deconstruction of this approach based on the division of sign into signifier and signified, thus initiating linguistics. The most interesting versions of this problem are those of postmodernists, Derrida and Deleuze. The latter's proposition is crucial because it is constitutive not only of meaning creation but also of the whole process of subjective becoming, of which meaningful creation is the most important part. The article is aimed at the presentation of this transformation: from Platonian representation to the power of affective intensities, where the life of the subject depends not only on reason and the rational correspondence to the idea, but above all on the sensitivity of its internal absorption, creatively developed by its encounters.

Keywords: meaning, sign, sensitivity, affects, subjectivity, individuation

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy problematyki znaku i znaczenia. Zaczyna się od platońskiego wyjaśnienia, które spowodowało powstanie tradycji zachodniej metafizyki opartej na dualistycznych podziałach logocentryzmu. De Saussure zainaugurował dekonstrukcję tego podejścia opartą na podziale znaku na znaczące i znaczone, tym samym tworząc językoznawstwo. Najbardziej interesującymi wersjami tego problemu są wersje postmodernistów: Derridy i Deleuze'a. Propozycja tego ostatniego jest kluczowa, ponieważ stanowi nie tylko o tworzeniu znaczenia, ale także o całym procesie stawania się podmiotowego, którego twórcza kreacja jest najważniejszą częścią. Celem artykułu jest prezentacja tej transformacji: od platońskiej reprezentacji do siły afektywnych

intensywności, gdzie życie podmiotu opiera się nie tylko na rozumie i racjonalnym odniesieniu do idei, ale przede wszystkim na wrażliwości jego wewnętrznego odbioru, twórczo rozwijanego przez jego spotkania.

Słowa kluczowe: znaczenie, znak, wrażliwość, afekty, podmiotowość, indywiduacja

Introduction: Plato

If we want to get to know a thing, it is necessary to have or to produce different experiences of this thing. These experiences may include perceptions, such as sensing, touching, smelling, or getting to know its name. Knowing is a most ephemeral experience, because its traces are not given to the senses but to the mind, which is not given in material form, too. Thus, we need to save these traces differently from feeling them in the senses. We have to write them down, to match signs to them, to save them in the form of meaning.

Knowing is a particularly ephemeral experience because how can we know the right name for a thing if this name is not bound to the thing, or at least not bound to it inseparably? What is it that connects a thing intrinsically to its name without producing a break, a scission between them? Socrates in the conversation with Cratylus in the Platonian dialogue states that it is the truth of this thing that is decisive with regard to whether the name is appropriate to a thing or not. This truth can also be treated as a natural given of a thing, that is why the relation of the name to its carrier (a thing) should be a natural relation. According to this assumption we do not need an arbitrary decision about what name to give to a thing, because each thing has its own, natural name that is attached to it on the basis of the truth of this particular thing. Thus, the truth about a thing constitutes its natural name, and the relation between the name and the thing is based on this truth. Socrates in Cratylus states: “Things are not relative to individuals [...] they must be supposed to have their own proper and permanent essence, they are not in relation to us [...] but they are independent” (Plato, 2008: 272). Thus, we “have the confirmation that not every way of connection between word and thing is the right way, so it is not the arbitrary convention that prescribes the name to the thing. There are right or wrong attachments and the right way is the natural way (Plato, 2008: 273). Elsewhere, I argue that:

The assumption that names of things are appropriate to each other is in accordance with the overall theory that Plato is an author. The theory states that we can find the truth about things because there exists an ideal for each thing, and even if the thing does not fulfill its ideal we can always compare it with its ideal form that is called “an idea.” In our everyday world we do not encounter the real truths about things, but we can have access to them in dialectical thinking: when we abstract things from their particularities we approach the *eidos* – the essence of a thing that does not change in time, is universal and distinct (Kłos-Czerwińska, 2012: 12).

In his analysis of the Platonian seminal distinctions with regard to sign and meaning, Hans-Georg Gadamer in his work *Truth and Method* specifies that convention, achieved by agreement and practice, determines the only unequivocal source of meaning in common usage. The opposite theory states that words and things belong to themselves on the principle of rightness (see: Gadamer, 2004: 547–548). So, the meaning of a thing is given

in its name. Another problem issuing from the relation of a name to a thing is exactly the problem of meaning. If a name is attached to a thing on the basis of the principle of rightness because names belong to things on the basis of the fact that they are part of these things – their indistinguishable truth about them – then the belonging of a name to the thing is called the meaning of this thing. The meaning assumes that ‘the name’ is found to be an element of its representative, so, we have here a certain ‘word-and-thing’ unity. Meaning is the revealing of this unity given in signs. So now, we need to resolve the problem of how signs are related to meaning, i.e. whether it is encapsulated in this unity of word and thing, or constituted in such a way, that they may create a certain unity of revealing signs and sentences in the form of a certain sequence called narration. This sequence is given in the passing of time, so we do not have here *eidos* given in the absoluteness of one definitive moment of time, but a certain sequence that is somehow provided to move along a vector of time. But, we may ask how to describe and understand this extrapolation of meaning in time? How can the meaning be produced if originally it was based on name and word given punctually? What to do to reveal this punctual moment into sequence or signification, if word and thing are given at the same time without any delay or distance between them? The answer is provided in the second great proposition of the understanding of this problem prepared by Ferdinand de Saussure, and this also inaugurates the inquiry into the problematic of sign and meaning called linguistics.

De Saussure and sign

Ferdinand de Saussure was born in 1857 and died in 1913. In 1916 his seminal *Cours de linguistique générale* was published posthumously. According to many writers he provided “a theoretic foundation to the newer trend in linguistic study” (de Saussure, 1959: XI). He observed that “language is a self-contained system whose interdependent parts function and acquire value through their relationships to the whole” (de Saussure, 1959: XII). However, the language for de Saussure is [also – P. K-C.] both a social product and a collection of conventions, “it belongs [hence – P. K-C.] to the individual and to society” (de Saussure, 1959: 9). “It is created in such a way that mental facts (concepts) are connected in the brain of a person with representations of the linguistic sounds (*sound-images*) which are used by this person to express intended meaning” (Kłos-Czerwińska, 2012: 17).

De Saussure’s theory is vital from the point of view of the logocentric, ‘word-and-thing’ unity writings of Plato, because it extricates the stable, substantial sign that is punctually given to a thing in the absolute moment of time from itself. De Saussure introduces the division into signified and signifier, a division that takes the original ideal *eidos* out of itself and introduces it into the passing of time, revealing the meaning construction called signification. Thus, from this moment we cannot only talk about the punctual and momentary ‘word-and-thing’ unity, but also about the meaning construction revealed in the passing of time in the form of traces.

Signification according to de Saussure “is defined as an internal measure of the difference between signs” (Sanders, 2006: 79, cited in: Calo 2021: 268). However, de Saussure

is still mostly interested in language treated as *langue* rather than *parole* and “the true and unique object of linguistics [for him – P.K.-C.] is language (*langue*) studied in itself and for itself” (Saussure, 1959: 232, cited in: Calo, 2021: 267). For this reason we can “argue [after Deleuze – the writer that will be described in the next section of this article – P.K.-C.] that the Saussurian model severs the subject of language from the subject of practice. By severing language from actual speaking, writing and reading, language is stripped of its sociality” (Calo, 2021: 269). Originally, de Saussure didn’t treat language in this way. The division into signified and signifier was planned to move the sign out of its stabilization in order to give it more power to produce new significations. This aspect of the production of meaning was underlined by another acclaimed writer and philosopher, Jacques Derrida. His deconstruction both of the unity of a sign and of the unequivocal divisions made by de Saussure undermined the classical approach to the production of meanings, the understanding of the originality of the ‘image-sound’ introduced by de Saussure and the notion of cognition based on the stable content of meaning. Instead, Derrida introduced the production and the process into the middle of the phenomenological ‘eidos’.

Derrida and the production of meaning

Jacques Derrida was born in Algeria in 1930. One of his main works is *Writing and Difference* (1967). In the first chapter of this text he explains the necessity of the insertion of force into the process of meaning creation. As a result of this enterprise the notion of signification starts to play a crucial role in the process of creation. At the beginning of his analysis he refers to the traditional understanding of the sign and meaning, where they are predominantly treated as conclusively constituted and constructed. In contrast to this approach, Derrida states that “form fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself. That is, to create” (Derrida, 2009: 3). That is why it is worth introducing force into the problematic of meaning creation, which is exactly what Derrida does. In his approach force constitutes the moment of meaning creation, and the process in which it appears and works can be called signification.

In Derridian texts the problematic of meaning is moved in a different direction, connected with production and creation. It is realized by the particular exchange of the origins of sign production. Derrida chooses here to focus not, as in de Saussure, on the sound-image of sign, but rather on the continuous, in black ink, production on paper, called writing. It is then much more intuitive to understand what is on his mind when he mentions the supplement – the leftover of signification in the form of words and sentences given in ink. “To write [for Derrida – P. K.-C.] is to know that what has not yet been produced within literality has no other dwelling place [...]. Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning” (Derrida, 2009: 11). It is creation in its constant process that surprises the writer¹. He

¹ “The writer’s thought does not control his language from without; the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself” in: Merleau-Ponty, 1964, cited in: Derrida, 2009: 11.

finds himself submerged in words that have no other origin than that which he is the author of. It is not a sign that conveys meaning. It is rather the constant process of production that creates it: the author does not have the thoughts previously, before attaching proper sounds to them and finally expressing them. It is the language itself that takes him by surprise and carries constantly new meaning within itself. Thus, it is not the writer that is the author of thoughts: it is the language that speaks through him. Derrida states that this happens because “writing is inaugural, in the fresh sense of the word, that it is dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future” (Derrida, 2009: 11). And what is more, the future is not pre-given in the form of signs and words, but is constantly open, and the forthcoming meaning exceeds all subjective expectations; that is why, as Derrida states, there is no ready, awaited Book given somehow in advance, whose meanings must merely be actualized by statement or writing. The future of production is open and unexpected: “To write is not only to know that the Book does not exist and that forever there are books, against which the meaning of a world not conceived by an absolute subject is shattered” (Derrida, 2009: 10). This is the lost certainty, “this absence of divine writing” (Derrida, 2009: 10) that speaks through this language devoid of any grounds, of the origin: the first is always already constituted by the second.

In the Derridian approach formulations of certain premonitions of other more contemporary versions of the understanding of the notions of sign and meaning also appear, where not only presence and Being, nor only process and future are concerned. Derrida still thinks that “the attempt-to-write poses itself as the only way out of affectivity. A way out that can only be aimed at, and without the certainty that deliverance is possible or that it is outside affectivity. To be affected is to be finite: to write could still be to deceive finitude, and to reach Being” (Derrida, 2009: 14). For other writers, however, writing is not only “the impossibility of its ever being present, of its ever being summarized by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness” (Derrida, 2009: 15). It is not also that “the inside of the text will always have been outside of it” (Derrida, 2010: 347), because here a new category of understanding will be introduced, the category of “in-between-ness”, inaugurated in the discourse on sign and meaning by Gilles Deleuze.

Deleuze and affective meaning

Gilles Deleuze was born in 1925 and died in 1995. In 1968 one of his main works, *Difference and Repetition* (2010) was published. The category of ‘in-between-ness’ is connected in Deleuzian writings with the problematic of affects and is based on a transformation of the Spinozian notion of *conatus* (see: Deleuze, 1968; 1988; 2014). Spinoza talked about exerting an affective influence while simultaneously being under its influence. *Conatus* concerns this space of ‘in-between-ness’ of affecting and being affected.

This emphasis on the space of ‘in-between-ness’ is characteristic of philosophy after the affective turn, that was prepared by the Deleuzian approach, which blurred the distinction

between subject and object, not only on the epistemological level of subjective development but also on the level of ontology, where the becoming of the subject starts. We could not talk about the becoming of the subject at all without this remarkable shift from the classical dualistic divisions in philosophy and linguistics into more inclusive solutions that prepared the ground for sensitivity as the origin of the transformation of the subject. So, the problematic of sign and meaning also had to take a completely different form: in 20th century poststructuralism and deconstruction it became neither knowledge about stable essences or ideas nor about their relation as a yardstick to the everyday experience of objects. It was therefore no longer about the correspondence of the sign and meaning based on the category of truth. So, we cannot talk here about representation taken as a simplification, but nor can we talk about representation taken as an addition of qualities to the object, either: objects could not be anything more than what was represented in the meaning. Thus, the meaning had the force of explication, but also a reduction and determination. In the 20th century's critical versions of poststructuralism and deconstruction this approach was totally inverted. Derridian and Deleuzian theories since then have not encapsulated the meaning of the object in the form of representation. The object could not be 'represented' in this way, so it could not amount to a set of clearly delineated meaningful qualities on the basis of the representative correspondence. Since then, the object is also that which is more than what is expressed about it. So, the object was not the idea represented by meaning, enclosed in it. In Derridian and Deleuzian theories the object is constructed from everything that is in relation to it. Thus, it cannot be strictly determined, rather, it is overflowing with meanings that can never be completely and totally expressed. Whenever we want to say something about an object – we cannot express its meaning completely, because this meaning is infinite – it is in cooperation with too many other elements of its surrounding fields to be able to be completely expressed. This overdetermination appears as a result to be its underdetermination. There exist no clearly delineated fields or spaces belonging to these objects that can be easily expressed in the wake of these relations. We can say nothing about the separated objects, nor about distinct subjects, because their fields are intermingled and one cannot exist without the others. This rule that governs acquiring knowledge and creating meanings is called 'the participation in the surrounding *milieu*' and was introduced into the philosophy by Jacob von Uexküll (2010). The term was originally called *Umwelt*. The consequence of the introduction of this term into the area of meaning creation and the meaning of being is that one is created or produced in the surrounding of the other's *milieu*. None of them can be created separately. This idea is crucial for the area of semiotics and meaning creation in 20th century poststructuralism and deconstruction.

The working of the principle of participation in one's own *milieu* is also visible in the idea called *autopoiesis*. This was introduced into the theories of ontoepistemology by Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana in their seminal work *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (1987). Autopoiesis is a mechanism visible in the working of the nervous system, whose "most crucial property [...] is operational closure" (Maturana, Varela, 1987, cited in: Foley, 2009: 9). It assumes that "the results of its [nervous system] internal processes are more of its own internal processes" (Foley, 2009: 9). Another researcher explains this mechanism in such a way:

In earlier times, we could usually judge machines and processes by how they transformed raw materials into finished products. But it makes no sense to speak of brains as though they manufacture thoughts the way factories make cars. The difference is that brains use processes that change themselves – and this means we cannot separate such processes from the products they produce. In particular, brains make memories, which change the way we'll subsequently think. The principal activities of brains are making changes in themselves. Because the whole idea of self-modifying processes is new to our experience, we cannot yet trust our commonsense judgments about such matters (Minsky, 1986: 288, cited in: Foley, 2009: 9).

In the same way we cannot separate the meanings from the *milieu* in which they appear. The autopoietic mechanism may be visualized by the metaphor of a couple dancing:

While dancing, the couple may be seen to be continually responding to the environment and altering their behavior according to its changes, for example, speeding up or slowing down in changes to the rhythm, adjusting their feet to bumps in the floor, etc. But, in fact, the range of behavior available to them is strictly constrained by the requirements on coordination of sequential movements during the dance [...]. Like the dancing couple the nervous system is constrained by its present state to a range of possible subsequent states; not just any subsequent state is possible [...]. Thus, what counts as the 'environment' for the purposes of the sensory receptor cells emerges from the world only through the present organization of the organism's nervous system, which, of course, is partly a function of its history of previous organizations. The 'environment' does not exist as an object of cognition apart from the state of operational closure of the nervous system; it is not pre-given (Foley, 2009: 9–10).

In the same way the world of objects is not pre-given before the meanings appear on the basis of the representative correspondence; their meaning is enacted on the basis of the *milieu* in which they appear and on the basis of the history of their previous organizations. These organizations, on the other hand, are the history of all the relations and processes in which the subject was involved. Autopoiesis is thus written as "the history of the recurrent interactions between organism and environment" (Foley, 2009: 10) based on the principle of participating in other's *milieu*, and this leads to meaning creation as a result of processual transformations of the becoming being.

Following this, we can assume that autopoiesis is a mechanism that also explains the process of meaning creation. This change of the paradigm is particularly visible in the works by Deleuze. In his work we do not have any stable and static movement from one meaning to another. We experience rather multiple, continuously organized lines of flight that take part in the creation of meanings which are not clearly distinguished from their surroundings. Many paths of meaningful traces of different meaningful processes are included in these mechanisms of objectification of the elements of internal, subjective discourse. We can witness here another important transformation of the classical approach to the problematic of sign and meaning: we are witnesses of the transference from the ontoepistemology that is responsible for the explanation of meaning creation by the subject to ontogenesis that constitutes this creation and assumes that the sources of the meaning lie in the sensitivity of the subject, not only in his rational approach to learning. Ontogenesis means also that this sensitivity is acquired in the constant process that does not

distinguish between ratio and emotion, between subject and object or between exerting affective influence and being under the influence of it. It assumes that the majority of processes taking part in meaning creation happen in this sphere of “in-between-ness”. Thus, ontogenesis of meaning becomes based on the ontology of relations and being becomes the individuation involved in it.

Individuation

What is this individuation mentioned above? Deleuze explains that it is the becoming of meaning, but we should understand that creation does not stand for something that appears from nowhere, it has to be somehow inaugurated. Most usually something new has to be introduced into the system to inaugurate the transformation of processes and the creation of new meanings. This new element must be elaborated and assimilated in order to enter the history of the creation processes called individuation. Deleuze explains that it is the encounter that is responsible for the inauguration of meaning creation. Encounter comes from outside, but is, nevertheless, experienced internally, which causes internal reactions that take the shape of different changes in tensions, rhythms or spacing of this internal sphere. All these relations of power and strength may be treated as different forces of affects, that are still somehow unexpressed, undetermined, not delimited. We need the processes of creation to bring these affects outside of this internal space to make them explicit. Then we can call them the elements of the objective, external, understandable discourse. Without this objectification of these internal affects they would stay as an unexpressed chaotic mass of experience. To have meanings we have to dramatize this internal affective space in order to bring it closer to the surface of discourse. Barker states that “dramatization [is a – P.K.-C.] production of internal space [...]. This internal space is an organization of signs” (Barker, 2016: 101) and further “signs are fundamental to Deleuze’s philosophy, and to dramatization, because they bring together an ‘object’ and a ‘meaning’, or in Deleuze’s terms an Idea and an intensity” (Barker, 2016: 103). Thus, dramatization and intensity become the most important notions of the 21 century’s theories of individuation.

Conclusion

In the changing paradigm of meaning creation, individuation plays the most important role: Deleuzian dramatization leads to the creation of meaning through the intensification of different internal affective rhythms, tensions or relations in order to bring them to the surface of discourse – then they stop being the process of creation under problematization and become the part of the surrounding *milieu*. The subject, and the meaning of the subject, appear as the continuous history of the becoming of their different traces and the interrelations between them. All this happens in the sphere of “in-between-ness”, where nothing is clearly delineated and separated as in the Western tradition of philosophy

since Plato. Deleuze states that the only source of the creation of meaning is not the resemblance of an Idea, but the dramatization of the internal, affective space inaugurated by the encounter with something new, something alien to the system, which, as a result, instigates changes in this system. The result is the flowing process of meaning creation based on learning of sensitivity to new becomings, rather than on representing something that already exists, namely, an object. Thus, the Deleuzian attempt to grasp the ontogenetical character of meaning creation reveals crucial assumptions about the way in which the subject and object are reunited after a few thousands of years of the logocentric approach in ontology and epistemology. Subject and object are reunited because they take part in one and the same process of creation which is the process of becoming a being, called individuation. External, transcendental signs intermingle here with internal affective forces and both sides participate in the stimulation of sensitivity in order to produce objectified meanings.

In comparison with other theoretical stances presented here, the Deleuzian approach seems to be the most radical one. In his subversion of the traditional ways of getting knowledge about the world and the subject, one point visibly marks the difference: the process of individuation based on the dramatization of intensities. This process is treated as the gate to the creation of meaning. Nothing is unnecessary here: ontogenesis constitutes a method for the approach to the becoming of being, and its sources, signs and affects inspire us to further inquiry into the domain of sensibility. Meaning is thus treated mainly as a result of an engaged, sensitive approach to the world and the subject's surrounding *milieu*. Deleuze invites us to an experience that creates meanings. This holistic approach to this problematic surely has to be taken into account. This article was planned to present the relations between sign and meaning and the changing history of its understanding from the linguistic and philosophical point of view. It can also be read as an invitation to such a holistic approach to this problematic, as well as the recapitulation and extrapolation of the problems mentioned.

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