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Application of hermeneutics and transcendental pragmatics in linguistics

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Abstract

The paper proposes a brief overview of tendencies in pragmatics (evolution of sign perception as a dyadic::triadic::quadratic entity; its interpretation not as a static, but dynamic, discourse bound phenomenon, analysis of Peirce's views on sources of rational explanation), paying major attention to Apel's distinctive philosophical approach, known as transcendental pragmatics, its congeniality with general principles of hermeneutics and potentials of its application in linguistics.

Keywords

hermeneutics, pragmatics, sign, simulacra, transcendental grammar

Zastosowanie hermeneutyki i transcendentalnej pragmatyki w językoznawstwie

Abstrakt

Artykuł proponuje krótki przegląd tendencji w pragmatyce (ewolucja postrzegania znaków jako bytu podwójnego :: potrójnego :: poczwórnego; jego interpretacja nie jest zjawiskiem statycznym, ale dyna-

micznym, dyskursywnym; analiza poglądów Peirce'a na źródła racjonalnego wyjaśnienia), zwracając szczególną uwagę na wyróżniające się podejście filozoficzne Apela, znane jako pragmatyka transcendentálna, jego zgodność z ogólnymi zasadami hermeneutyki oraz potencjał jego zastosowania w językoznawstwie.

Słowa kluczowe

hermeneutyka, pragmatyka, znak, symulakry, transcendentálna gramatyka

1. Introduction

A number of scholars argue that certain branches of linguistics are hermeneutical by their nature. Rennie (2012: 385), for instance, claims that in qualitative linguistic research and discourse studies, the method of hermeneutic circle is implicitly applied to educe and articulate meaning of the text. Furthermore, Sanders (2005: 57) names a number of areas of qualitative linguistics he considers to be hermeneutical by the methodology of use, e.g.

applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, argumentation studies, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, ethnography of communication, language pragmatics, rhetorical communication and semiotics.

In this paper, I will demonstrate that hermeneutics and transcendental pragmatics are not only applied in certain fields of linguistics, but provide access to understanding the grammatical structure of language in general, being constituent parts of contemporary linguistic analysis.

2. Language as a societally created semiotic system

Viewing language as a product of society lies at the core of interpretation of any linguistic phenomenon. Hjelmslev (1969: 3)

insists that

language is the instrument with which man forms thought and feeling, mood, aspiration, will and act, the instrument by whose means he influences and is influenced, the ultimate and deepest foundation of human society.

Being a social phenomenon, language differs from other social institutions as it is a system of communication and, in particular, a system of signs. It constitutes itself as the central part of “a science that studies the life of signs within society” (Saussure 1966: 16), i.e. “semiology” in Saussure’s terms.

This view is shared by many scholars. As stated by Panther and Thornburg (2009: 3),

human languages are semiotic systems in which forms are conventionally paired with meanings [...] The semiotic character of language holds not only for individual lexemes but also for grammatical constructions, which code more or less abstract (schematic) contents and communicative functions.

Language, however, should not be confused with speech. Saussure’s differentiation of these two notions lies in the very definition of speech as an individual act of will and mind. Within this act it is important to distinguish between: “(1) the combinations by which the speaker uses the language code for expressing his own thought; and (2) the psychophysical mechanism that allows him to exteriorize those combinations” (Saussure 1966: 14).

It brings us to the problem of the difference between two distinct modes experiencing language. Language is a semiotic system, legacy of the many, which functions on the basis of grammatical rules, shared and recognized by everyone. Speech, in turn, is individual, subjective and flexible, it is the way language is used.

3. Interpretation of grammar and individual use of language

Grammar itself can be compared to a game. They are both represented by a set of rules. A game is “a transformation system of essentially the same structure as a semiotic” (Hjelmslev 1969: 110), with the exception that the rules of a game are syncretic by their structure, i.e. their meaning and form coincide and consequently do not require interpretation. On the contrary, linguistic signs which constitute any language demonstrate a dichotomy between the expression-form and the content-form. The meaning which defines them needs to be construed via interpretation. Grammar, as a set of rules, cannot be perceived. This very fact limits our capacity to interpret it.

Similar views were expressed by Schleiermacher (1998), who distinguished between a “grammatical” treating of a language as a semiotic system functioning on the basis of rules, i.e. grammar, and technical interpretation dealing with speech produced by an individual, i.e. use of language. Ricoeur (1981: 47) considers grammatical interpretation to be “objective”, and technical or psychological interpretation to be “positive”, “because it reaches the act of thought, which produced the discourse”. Therefore, psychological interpretation can be achieved by means of empathy, given the empirical accessibility of speech. Language as a socially construed semiotic system lies outside of subjective experience and, consequently, cannot be analyzed through empathy only. Grammar, as a set of rules, governs the way linguistic signs function within a semiotic system called language. The starting point of understanding grammar lies in understanding linguistic signs.

4. Static vs. dynamic modes of sign perception

Primarily linguistic signs were interpreted as static entities. Saussure offered a dyadic sign model, accentuating a non-motivated nature of a linguistic sign, which consists of “a con-

cept and a sound image” (Saussure 1966: 66). This model was later substituted by theories about the triadic structure of linguistic signs.

The problem is that languages differ from genuine convention based sign-systems, in which the structure “meaning=form” is isomorphic.

According to Peirce (1994 [1932]: 2.228), “A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity”. Peirce introduces a triadic structure of a linguistic sign, which consist of three interconnected parts: an object, a representamen and an interpretant. Thus, the process of signification, i.e. semiosis, is not merely constituted by a dyadic relationship between a sign and an object it stands for. The essence of semiosis lies in correspondence between an object and its mental representation.

Following Peirce’s ideas, Morris proposes four elements of semiosis: sign vehicle, designatum, and interpretant and interpreter. “The mediators are sign vehicles; the taking-account-of are interpretants; the agents of the process are interpreters; what is taken-account-of are designate” (Morris 1971: 19).

5. Discourse and culturally bound interpretation of linguistic signs

Except for being dynamic entities, linguistic signs should be interpreted inseparably from the discourse. It is widely accepted by cognitive linguists that “meanings of the parts of a construction contribute to the meaning of the whole, but the meaning of the whole is often unpredictable, but holistic and idiomatic” (Panther and Thornburg 2009: 3). Sentences are used as a totality in order to express a complete thought (Rossi-Landi 1983: 129).

Taken separately from the system, signs are interpreted on the basis of their connection with the signified or their influence on the interpreter. It is more worthwhile, however, taking into consideration their connections with other signs depend-

ing on the dynamics of semiotic system in which they function. Signs gain additional qualities determined by their place and value within this system.

The central standpoint of Phenomenological Hermeneutics (Gadamer, Heidegger, Husserl) is that human reality is construed by meanings, which are ways of making sense of reality. Meanings form intersubjective culturally and socially constituted systems. According to Heidegger, description is always already interpretation. Every form of human awareness is interpretive and language serves as a means of reaching understanding (Heidegger 1996).

For Husserl (1967), the central idea behind “intersubjectivity” stipulates that the meaning of any phenomenon is built on the basis of personal or subjective experience of several subjects. Empathy gives access to representations of objects formed in the consciousness of other people. This psychological process involves perceiving another person’s experience with one’s own mind. Correspondingly, the meaning can be construed only if intersubjective representations coincide. If these representations coincide, they exist independently from single person’s consciousness. If they exist beyond empirical perception of one subject, they belong to the world of objective phenomena.

Gadamer, in turn, claims that understanding does not come from perceiving subjective experience of another person, but “language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting” (Gadamer 2004: 390). The process of transforming concepts and intentions into an abstract language of signs causes alienation between a sign and its meaning. This alienation can be overcome only in interpretation. Understanding lies at the core of interpretation. Subsequently, the hermeneutical task lies in “coming to a proper understanding about the subject matter, which takes place in the medium of language” (Gadamer 2004: 387). The meaning of a linguistic sign is construed as a result of reaching an agreement about similarities between intersubjective

representations of one and the same phenomenon existing in the mind of others.

Arguing against purely structural interpretation of linguistic signs, Ricoeur defined the hermeneutic task in construing meaning through culturally bound discourse. Interpretation of any text should be situated outside the immanence of language. In his own words, the claim is illustrated as follows:

There is no reference problem in language: signs refer to other signs within the same system. In the phenomenon of the sentence, language passes outside itself; reference is the mark of the self-transcendence of language (Ricoeur 1979: 74).

Smith (1997: 17) sums up the above-said in the way that in contemporary discourse, interpretation is the only way to gain knowledge, it is the main means of demonstrating the impossibility of a culturally transcendent discourse.

The process of accessing language starts with understanding that it is a semiotic system constituted by linguistic signs, the meaning of which is dynamic and culturally bound. Language itself has evolved in society and for it to be able to perform its primary function, i.e. to communicate thoughts and intentions from one subject to another, the meanings have to be conventional and recognized by others. Signs, however, interact with other signs and change over time. They also depend on context, which provides them with additional shades of meaning. As a result, for the meaning to be retrieved we need to rely on empathy. Itkonen (2004) characterizes empathy as a method of reaching rational explanation, which is based on iconicity. Iconicity, respectively, is understood as similarity, a “picture-like” relationship between extra-linguistic reality and language (Itkonen 2004: 21). For him, conventionalized empathy is intuition (Itkonen 2008). It is the fundamental point of understanding any linguistic activity. Access to meaning is provided by “the native speaker’s linguistic intuition” (Itkonen 1978: 56). Speakers elicit the meaning of linguistic signs relying on their own intuition. Although the process of

understanding largely depends on individual consciousness of people, interpretation happens only in comparison of intersubjective representations of objects. For Bergson (1912), intellectual effort is a prerequisite of interpretation. With its help, one can unveil the meaning which lies at the core of iconic sign transformations. Intellectual effort is based on intuition, the latter can be characterized as “the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in itself and consequently inexpressible” (Bergson 1912: 7). Bergson (1920: 196-199) introduces a notion of a “dynamic scheme”, which means an abstract idea containing all the images, in the estate of reciprocal implications with the proper function they perform as a whole. Unfortunately, linguistic signs being inherently dynamic remain a thing-in-itself. In a certain sense, their meaning being fluid and changeable is impossible to capture. Proper understanding is possible only as tracing iconic sign transformations from perception to interpretation (Peirce 1994 [1932]: 2.141-142). Such intellectual empathy or intuition mediates perception and reasoning in order to gain objective knowledge about linguistic phenomena.

Eco (2000: 13-14) expresses an idea that we produce signs in order to articulate meaning. The dynamic nature of linguistic signs, however, turns semiosis into an endless process of interpretation. The concept of “unlimited semiosis” enables the semiotic system to recheck itself entirely using its own means (Eco 1979: 68). This term refers to interpretation as a sequence of interpretants, when the signified is functioning as a signifier for a further signified, and is endlessly reproduced.

6. Problem of infinite sign transformation and formation of simulacra

Contrary to the structural approach (Saussure), to the interpretation of a linguistic sign as immanent and autonomous to extralinguistic reality, the post-structural approach (Baudrillard, Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida) further developed the per-

ception of a linguistic sign as an ontologically, pragmatically and semiotically determined phenomenon, which is defined by the object of its representation, subject and method.

The attempts to reconsider the nonlinear mode of thinking and the dynamic character of signs have brought to light the problem of transformation of signs into simulacra (Baudrillard 1994), rhizomaticity of their meaning (Deleuze-Guattari 2005) and impossibility of their analysis without deconstruction (Derrida 2001).

Bloomfield (1933: 74-75) depicts the problematic nature of contemporary linguistic discourse in the following statement: "Our knowledge of the world in which we live is so imperfect that we can rarely make accurate statements about the meaning of a speech-form".

Unfortunately, neither intersubjectivity nor unlimited semiosis are capable of grasping the meaning of a linguistic signs which has undergone numerous transformations and is on the way of becoming a simulacrum.

According to Marcuse (2002: 17), in contemporary society mass behaviorism causes "habit of thoughts". Such state of affairs produces a one-dimensional man, who mainly mechanically responds to stimuli. "Transcendence" (Marcuse 2002: 17, 77, 175) liberates the individual from the predominant one dimensionality, it implies an act of will which overcomes the behaviorist way of thinking.

All these terms, e.g., transcendence, conventionalized empathy, intuition and intellectual effort, are different names of one and the same concept. They all represent a certain act of will performed by a thinking individual directed at conceiving the meaning of linguistic signs. In order to achieve this goal, one should follow the logic of iconicity of sign transformation through the process of its existence. Iconic sign transformation can only be traced in interpretation of intersubjective representations that exist in the mind of others.

Unfortunately, the fetish character of communication leads to unification and depersonalization. Rossi-Landi (1983: 77) claims that at a certain point in time, the production and ex-

change of words and phrases become regular and systematic. The mechanical nature of communication transforms signs into simulacra, which “take on the appearance of autonomous existence” (Rossi-Landi 1983: 77).

Any sign can potentially turn into a simulacrum due to its dynamic nature and capacity to be endlessly commutable. According to Derrida, the very essence of signs lies in their ability of being repeated.

A sign which does not repeat itself, which is not already divided by repetition in its “first time,” is not a sign. The signifying referral therefore must be ideal—and ideality is but the assured power of repetition—in order to refer to the same thing each time (Derrida 2001: 310).

7. Transcendental Pragmatics as key to interpretation of linguistic signs as dynamic entities

Apel (1994: 78) introduced the concept “transcendental semiotics”, which combines transcendental pragmatics and hermeneutics. This approach is designed to provide access to understanding of meaning. The meaning itself embraces three key elements, e.g., “subjective intention, linguistic convention and reference to things” (Apel 1994: 78). None of these constituent parts is hierarchically superior to the other two. They are equally important in “understanding and explicating the meaning of utterances or of written texts” (Apel 1994: 78). Boersema (2009: 143), analyzing Apel’s ideas, emphasizes that in the process of interpretation and articulation of meaning, these key elements complement and restrict each other and serve as “regulative principles of inquiry”.

In order to grasp the meaning of signs in dynamics, Peirce’s focus on their triadic structure is insufficient, the introduction of the fourth element represented by the “communicative community” is essential. Apel’s methodology transcends the interpretation of meaning by the cognizing subject beyond individual consciousness of one single person. Understanding,

from his perspective, is achieved by the transcendental subject, represented by a linguistic community, all members of which are involved in the act of communication and contribute to the process of reaching a consensus. Each member of this community “converts its understanding of symbols into real operative rules of behavior or habits” (Apel 1981: 29). Intersubjective communication between these subjects is not simply information exchange. It involves them in a language-game which, from a semanto-pragmatic perspective, is a prerequisite of reaching an agreement about the meaning of linguistic signs. What is more, intersubjective communication also reassures an argumentative discourse. Within the pragmatic dimension of this process, all the participants of language-games must be taken into account in “a very striking, anthropologically and socio-comprehensible sense as the precondition of the possibility for the perspectivistic interpretation of reality ‘as something’” (Apel 1980: 99).

With Peirce and others, Apel claims to have “fallen back upon the normative conception of an ideal consensus to be established within an ideal and unlimited communicative community” (Apel 1998: 151). In other words, all rule-following rotates around an ideal of reaching a consensus, which is designated to regulate the way language as a semiotic system functions.

This leads Habermas to claim: A sign can fulfill its representative function only if, along with the relation to the objective world of entities, it simultaneously establishes a relation to the intersubjective world of interpreters” (Habermas 1992: 101). He argued that speech acts constitute a communicative practice, which is “oriented to achieving, sustaining, renewing consensus” (Habermas 1984: 17). The rationality of communicative practice is based on the consensus, achieved by intersubjective agreement. This definition implies the recognition of language as a social phenomenon, which is inherently rational.

8. Conclusions

Conventional nature of language makes its interpretation possible. According to Langacker (1987: 27), “speakers clearly have some conception of what does or does not accord with linguistic convention”, i.e. “usage” can be interpreted as normatively sanctioned use (convention). Therefore, access to understanding grammatical structures is provided by native speakers’ intuition. By employing Apel’s concept of a linguistic community as a Transcendental Subject, it is possible to construe an image of an ideal respondent, providing the interpreter with objective knowledge about the meaning of a linguistic sign and a speech-form accordingly. Modern linguistics has been doing so, most probably unconsciously, by using multiple respondents in experimental studies. Statistical analysis of the totality of their answers helps researchers to reveal the conventional use of grammatical forms and unveil general grammatical principles.

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