ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ

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GENESIS OF EXPERIENTIAL MEANING

Abstract: *In the absence of exact criteria to ascertain qualitative matching of the same experiences in different individuals, one can only concede the fact that experience, as a generator and solidifier of meaning, is far from being an ultimate authority to arbitrate its exactness. Reality presented to one individual is never the same as that presented to another. Hence, different individuals do not experience identical but similar elements, and generate not identical but similar meanings thereupon. Every person has their own world, impervious to the worlds of others. And yet, there are invariable and objective elements of meaning streamlined across the whole community, which leads to the conclusion that their origins existed already in the most rudimentary stages of the formulation of meaning. It transpires then, that there is a certain discrepancy between those two notions of objectivity of meaning. In order to avoid the confusion which can ensue from that kind of dualism, it is only logical to operate with two, rather than one, terms.*

Key words: *meaning, genesis, experience, objective, subjective.*

I

The meanings of all symbols are directly or indirectly rooted in experience. Every conception of an object, marked with a symbol, contains, or at least indirectly assumes, a certain element of experience detached from the rest of the experiential whole in which it commonly appears, generalized, extrapolated or transformed by another action of the thinking apparatus. The role of experience in communication does not boil down to sheer reception and perception of mere symbols. Interpretation too, albeit much wider in its frontier, is based on experience. Good examples of that are symbols that are commonly met in ordinary life situations. Words, such as "train", "hat", "door" or "carpet" instantaneously bring about conceptions of objects that we have perceived numerous times in our lives. In his seminal work, Ernest Cassirer expanded the notion of meaning onto numerous symbolic forms too (Cassirer, 1923: 44). In such a situation, it no longer matters whether the conception includes more or fewer elements of images or abstractions, or, in other words, whether it is closer to sensation or notion. It does matter though, whether it results from a repetitive or a focused experience, emotions (Ogden and Richards, 1923: 124), or through the process of detachment, separation and isolation of certain elements and underestimation of others.

Symbols that are higher up the scale of exactness, such as those in science and art, typically do not have such an immediate and simple relation with experience. The objects that they mark, in most cases, have not been experienced by those who operate with them, whether it be that they were not present on the spot or at the time they could be observed (for example a tyrannosaur, a medieval battle) or because they are not real objects to begin with (such as Romeo and Juliet, absolutely empty space, perfect gases). Analysis and interpretation of these symbols, however, shows that the conceptualization of objects that we refer to, always and inevitably, contains experiential elements generated via indirect extrapolation. Dinosaurs can be con-

ceptualized on the basis of perceivable paleontological data and analogy with other reptiles. A medieval battle can be conceptualized on the basis of personal battles or fights we have been involved in, or those seen in the films. Absolutely empty space can only be comprehended by extrapolation of the emptying action, or, in other words, by removing objects from a confined field of observation.

II

Experience is commonly seen as something that is completely within the realm of subjectivity and individuality, something liable to variations and, in most cases, something that cannot be repeated or something that belongs to different individuals. If we were to uphold the view that experience can only be understood as individual and subjective, thereby subscribing to the thesis that experience is the basis of the formulation of meaning subsequently expressed through language, we would face an insurmountable obstacle: How can purely subjective experience serve to build intersubjective language?

Let us assume, for example, two individuals observing the same object – a computer monitor on a table. Because they are not positioned at the same spot, they observe it from different angles and from different distances. None of the forms and none of the colours will be exactly the same for both spectators – the accuracy and the clarity of their sight, their colour sensitivity and the illumination will vary from one to the other. The organization of the entire body, particularly the nervous system, will determine how each of them will see the monitor. In such a complexity of parameters, in which both individuals are watching and experiencing the same object, there will never be elements that are absolutely equal for both of them in quality, intensity and other facets. If we consider, further on, that different individuals do not

experience identical but similar elements, it would lead to the conclusion that reality presented to one individual is never the same as that presented to another. In other words, every living being has its own world impervious to the worlds of others. In a situation like that, no communication would seem possible. If a few ingenious individuals ever managed to create a language under such conditions, all their language signs would have totally subjective, personal meanings, based on their specific experiences, different and totally isolated from the experiences of others. Nobody would be able to learn a single word from others; translation from one language into another would be out of question, and, generally, people would not be able to understand each other. And yet, people do communicate with each other, with varying degrees of success though, and children do manage to learn copious numbers of words from their parents and other people in their surrounding, and it is possible to translate meanings from one language into another, which means that there is intersubjective language and there are intersubjective symbolic forms in general. How can these facts be reconciled?

To claim that language has an intersubjective essence due to certain aprioristic constitutive forms of thought, that all people have in common, can hardly be substantiated given the variability of mental forms and their origin in thought. The solution should therefore be sought in the assumption of intersubjective elements of experience itself. If there are invariable and objective elements in higher forms of mental processes that are streamlined across the whole community, it is then only logical to assume that their origins exist already in the most elementary experiences (it is difficult to balance between pure subjectivity and objectivity). If experiences of the human kind were all different, the meanings of their symbols would also be different, but they are not (Sanders Peirce,

1935: 86). It is therefore reasonable to assume that there are relatively identical and invariable elements in the experiences of each member of a group of people. They exist independent from the conscience of each individual subject, even though they are not independent from the general and mutual subject, in this case: the community awareness.

When hypothesising about the existence of objective experience, there ought to be certain supplementary explanations of the very notion at hand. Firstly, the term "objectivity" when used for psychological process, unlike material processes, can have two meanings. The first of the two deals with its *intersubjectivity*, that is, its *social* aspect. The experience of an individual subject can be viewed from the angle of its simultaneous relation with other subjects belonging to the same social group under the given conditions and within a certain period of time. Here, we need to establish the existence of invariable elements in the experience of all subjects of the group. A set of such elements can then be called objective experience, since it is independent from any individual subject. Lack of fresh air in a stuffy room, for example, will not cease to exist when any of the people therein leaves the room; indulgence in a piece of art will not vanish just because somebody becomes revolted on account of it including nudity. In the second case, objectivity can mean *objective base*, a correlation between experience as a subjective process and certain material or psychological objects. For example, objective experience can be that of seeing a certain object red, when it indeed reflects light under the 687 millimicron wave length. In such a case, subjective experience of a colour blind person would probably diverge away from the objective one.

Objective experience exists as part of a pre-set structure. It can actually be maintained that all the experiential elements of two subjects, viewed with their concrete, specific boundaries, are qualitatively different. There are no criteria to ascertain the qualitative matching of two experiences in all individual details. One can only concede the fact that no one can really enter another person's mind and see what is going on in there. Hence, what we refer to as "objective meaning" is actually an assumption of an invariable, objective *structure* among elements of subjective experiences of a group of subjects.

III

Language facilitates people's communication. There is, however, an underlying question here – how do we know that the communication is successful, that is, how do we know that a group of people really understands the written or spoken signs of another group of people? Is it, perhaps, possible that we have gotten used to misunderstandings so much that we do not notice them any more (like the air that we breathe), and notice them only when they exceed a certain limit? Could it be possible, perhaps, to avoid a great many mishaps among people, including wars, by eliminating misinterpretation of messages sent from one group to another?

No doubt, misunderstandings play an important, sometimes tragic, role in our lives. Among people belonging to the same social group or community, misunderstandings are contingent upon those subjective elements of meaning which vary from one person to another. When it comes to relations among different groups or entire communities, the causes of misunderstanding are specific, group related elements of meaning that differ from one group to another. And yet, despite all these hurdles, people do understand each other in most cases, and often work towards a common goal, sometimes involving a whole group, nation or the population of the globe. We use certain symbols: words, gestures, and facial expressions and other

people often react exactly the way we anticipate, the same way we react when the same symbols are addressed to us.

An individual can never be absolutely certain that another person looking at an object or an action (e.g. fire) with them at the same time interprets it with the same ultimate meaning. To evaluate the *qualitative* and experiential interpretation of a meaning is never easy. To attempt to grasp the meaning of another person's experience is to take a slippery road, full of unexpected turns. Immediate comprehension of another person's experience cannot be had. And yet, there are aspects of it that stand readily available via an indirect detour. To begin with, when threatened by fire, others react the same way we do. They are cautious not to come too close to it, and recoil promptly if they happen to touch it, and make a gesture or a sound that makes us convinced that they are experiencing the same sensation we would in the same situation. At a certain distance from fire, others behave the same way we do – if it is cold, their gestures communicate pleasure; if it is hot, they try to get further away from it, or, if they must stay, they begin to sweat, unbutton their shirts and look for ways to cool down. The relations between thoughts, reactions and symbols have long merited thorough and productive linguistic explorations (Whorf, 75–93).

Non-verbal communication is a reliable key for entering into the realm of their experiences and meanings. When two persons point their fingers at a stove fire, they both say "fire", but we still do not know if the word means the same to both of them. Maybe one uses the word thinking about the heat, while the other one has flame on his mind, or its colour, or the glow or the ember. Still, the iteration of the word in different situations and contexts progressively narrows down the room for ambiguity and misunderstanding. If they both use the word for an uncontrolled fire (where there is no stove, coal or wood), or in the case of a blow torch (which is blue, rather than red), or a match fire, it implies that their experiences, regardless of qualitative differences, have an identical structure, and that, structuralized and invariable, the aspect of the meaning is steadfastly associated with the fire symbol.

Experiential meaning puts forth two types of elements: constant and structuralized ones, which can be solidified and conveyed by language, and those which are non-communicable and esoteric, because they have an utterly subjective and qualitative nature. In such a constellation of elements, what can be conveyed from one person to another is an array of sensations that we experience under certain circumstances, something that can be called their *structure*. "We always understand each other" – if the apparatus that analyzes our sensations is the same. It is no longer about the "quality" of the sensation. The attempts to introduce a coherent classification of elements involved in meaningful sensations are not new (Morris, 1946: 22). What becomes more important is how it can be organized in the same way in a common system so that they can be classified the same way. It is therefore difficult to hypothesize about the existence of objective experiential meaning without having a clear, sound and axiomatic position. What we can surmise is that, under certain conditions, objective experience facilitates communication. In order for members of a community to communicate and be able to act jointly towards a common objective, there have to be structurally identical elements in what they observe, feel and experience.

IV

The notion of objective experience is a relative one. We can see it in the example of the recent war in the territories of former Yugoslavian republics, during the first half of the nineties, where the objective experience of the opposing sides, i.e. the

Serbs, the Bosniaks and the Croats is in complete incongruence. This may seem a rather inconvenient situation, as far as "objectivity" is concerned. How can three different experiences be objective? Can this relativity of the term "objectivity" somehow be overcome? Is there not, after all, an ultimate objectivity which can serve as the criterion for ascertaining which experience is objective and which is not? Before venturing into an attempt to answer those questions, one should ponder first whether there is absolute objectivity in science in general, one that soars above all the volatile relations (such as those in the said example, which involves people, timelines, and locations). That, however, should be no obstacle to contemplating levels of objectivity and clarity of meaning. There are cases where an individual can be more objective than the rest of the human kind, and can construe meanings which subsequently prove to be the right ones. Galileo claimed that the Earth revolved around the Sun. At the time, he did not care about the claims of the most influential people of his day, headed by the Pope, who rejected his views, driven by the vain belief that the place where the human kind lived was the centre of universe and by the entirety of metaphysics built on that fallacious premise (humans are not mere meaningless dust in the universe, but the children of gods, and similar). Of course, in most cases, it is difficult to evaluate such qualitative factors. The degree of cognition and readiness to soar above the desire, interests, and emotional needs of individuals and social groups they belong to, is usually only seen long after – just like in the case of Galileo, several centuries later.

It transpires then, that there is a certain discrepancy between the two notions of objectivity of meaning. In order to avoid the confusion which can ensue from that kind of perplexity, it is only logical to operate with two, rather than one, terms. The term "objective experience", which is of fundamental importance for the *explanation of genesis and existence* of an inter-subjective language, should therefore retain its inherent meaning: existence independent (of structurally different experiences of a social group) from the conscience of individual subjects. That may lean towards it being more appropriate than the term "objectivity of experience" in terms of its relatively high cognition value, and in terms of its independence from those subjective factors that lead to experiential errors – using the term "*adequacy of object*" or shortly "*objective experience*" – which is a precondition of *language existence*, and, on the other hand, "*experience adequate for the object*" ("*adequate experience*") – which is a precondition of *effective use of language*. Analogically, one should differentiate between the *degree of experience objectivity* and the *degree of experience adequate for the object* (that is, the degree of its cognition value).

V

Language is a multifaceted tool. It does not serve for outward expression of objective experience alone. It also exerts influence, in a roundabout way though, on its very formation and structuring. Consciousness is mostly diffused in the rudimentary phase of its development. The only intelligible and yet constant elements in it are related to a handful of everyday practical relations with objects. The first elements of language, certain screams that underlie practical acts of a community, already at that stage play the role of the organizer of objective experience. Without language, the scarce and identical elements of experience of individual members of a community would remain marooned and incoherent. Besides, the setup of consciousness is such that the positioning of isolated elements from different timelines becomes cumbersome since there would be a sequence of unrelated meanings with-

out any binding material in between. Without binding relations, it becomes difficult even to spot the same element occurring in a different context at a later stage. Positioning of meaning would be rendered impossible if there were no prior selection and allocation – and that is the very role that language takes over.

To attach a language sign to an element of experience under certain conditions, means to extract the element from its context. We, thus, build a bridge between the diffused, inarticulate primordial consciousness, and articulated awareness, which shapes the first distinctions between the identical and the different, the constant and the variable, the generic and the individual. Extracting one experiential element and attaching a sign to it, is not only facilitation of its recognition when it occurs again, but is also a sort of a leverage and a criterion for discernment of the relation with other elements. It becomes a pillar in the centre of crystallization of other elements of experience, selection of those which are of importance (similar and adherent), from those which are irrelevant. Without explicit meaning in the contemplation process, language signs would be mere abstractions whose accuracy would become elusive under any conditions. While those sentences that include language signs with an inadequate denotation are false, those whose constituents are signs without any denotation cannot convey anything about the real word and their cognition value is totally void. [1]

Language signs can express objective experience directly or indirectly. In the first case, a sign is attached to a certain experience without any approximation, as is the case with descriptive symbols (such as "light", "dark", "water", "stone", "bird").

There are, however, symbols which have no constant liaison with experience. What is expressed by words like "truth", "justice", "photon", "irrational number" can in no way be visualized regardless of immediate personal experience. And yet, these words are related to experience too, albeit via a more distant and more mediated linkage. The role of the mediator is played by the symbol, or a whole plethora of symbols which we can array in a series conforming to the degree of their abstraction. That conforms to Korzybski's general semantics which implies that abstractions always seek to be exemplified (Korzybski, 1948: 82).

If a language sign expresses neither immediate nor indirect objective experience, it is unintelligible, and, consequently, cannot perform its communicational function. That further implies that any symbol or language sign that has a certain meaning expresses an objective experience of a certain group of people, and can therefore be deemed communicable, and able to convey meaningful content from one person to another. Common language is product of long history, and the meanings of its words are engendered and crystalized from the experience of a host of generations. By being translated into common language, a language sign establishes the essential link with objective experience, which enables other people to understand it, and that is the ultimate verification of its communicability.

VI

Languages are home to multitudes of meaning, some of which are filtered out by the elimination of ambiguity, or brought into existence by fresh introduction. A new meaning can be introduced with a definition, or by bringing the term in relation with other terms of the language. Such definitions typically provide rules for their utilization – as a matter of fact, most defi-

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[1] "Void", here, refers to lack of any scientific meaning. Scientific criteria, on the other hand, are not universal. A scientifically void statement or expression, can be perfectly meaningful in a literary work.

nitions implicitly entail such rules. In artificial languages (like those used in computer languages and information systems), the use of language signs is fully circumscribed by either bringing undefined terms in relations with axioms, thereby providing an implicit explanation of their meaning (logics terminology refers to them as: *use definitions*) or all other terms become part of the system via explicit definitions. In either case, there is an analogy between the rules for the use of symbols and features of the real object they refer to. The rules for using chess symbols such as H4, F2, G4, are analogic to the functions of pertinent chess figures. The rules for using the „Σ" symbol are analogic to the logic properties of an objectively given relation. Alteration in the way we perceive an object necessitates changes in the use of corresponding symbols. And vice versa, alteration of the use indicates that we have changed the way we perceive the concept of the symbolized objects, sometimes even unconsciously. When this discrepancy of the object perception and the function of its language sign is clearly formulated, there is always an imminent tendency of its elimination in one of the following ways:

a) certain uses are deemed incorrect;

b) necessary corrections are introduced in the perception of the object to bring it in line with the use of the symbol;

c) we become cognizant of the fact that another symbol has come into circulation to mark the same object. In this case, another process commences simultaneously, one that subsequently leads toward making distinctions between the two meanings.

The premise that the whole issue of meaning should centre upon the question "What is the use of the 'x' symbol", can be refuted by at least two objections: Firstly, seen from that angle, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to put forth a sound theory of the symbol. What are language signs outside their relation with the objects that they mark? How can we differentiate between the use of a language sign and the use of any other instrument? Be it explicitly or implicitly, every possible explanation must include certain objective elements that the language signs refer to. Secondly, such an approach renders the differentiation between the correct and the incorrect use impossible. The only criterion that remains at the disposal to those who are inclined to this interpretation of meaning is "counting heads". If somebody uses certain words contrary to the generally recognized standards, then such a use should be qualified as "incorrect". It is difficult, however, to pinpoint all the cases where such a conclusion would be wrong or right, which leads to an inference that far more complex evaluation criteria need to be used.

The principle of mutual cross-reference of experience and thinking is of critical importance here. Perception is not always a readily available vehicle for formation of meaning. Perception is always an interpretation too. Thinking is not based on experiential data alone. It is also wrought with different purposes, organizations, conceptualizations and anticipations. For example, the word "or" has a meaning as far as connotation goes, but it is devoid of any meaning when it comes to denotation. This again reinforces the notion of dualism between the empiric and the contemplative. It implies that no clear demarcation line can serve to divide the language signs with explicit (and no implicit) meaning on the one side, and theoretical language signs, with implicit (and no explicit meaning) on the other side. The word "or" and other similar words ("and", "if ... then" – "no" and numerous mathematical symbols) have no material meaning, but they do have other dimensions of meaning – mental, social, linguistic, or practical. One can therefore reasonably

conclude that any explicit meaning need not be strictly related to pure empirical objects that would be totally beyond the realm of experiential implicit meaning, and, vice versa – results of abstract thinking should be meanings that cannot be totally outside the explicit meaning sphere, since objects of perception are readily conceptualized and interpreted, while those of contemplation in most cases originate from experience.

Every step in conceptualization, analysis, classification or explanation of a named object enhances its implicit meaning. The process also goes the other way around; the use of one abstract symbol for the formation of a certain empiric opinion generates a sort of knowledge that will justify the belief in the existence of certain real objects with general features. In other words, the relation between the explicit and the implicit meanings of a language sign and the object it represents does not boil down to mere naming of individual objects and immediately perceivable properties. In reality, objects have features and relations which can only be revealed in the contemplation process. It is reasonable to argue, for example, that gravity is as real as the paper you are holding in your hands, thus satisfying certain conditions of establishing objective truth. Hence, the term "gravity" has as much explicitness in its meaning as the term "paper". And just as the function of explicit meaning is not bound to immediate experience, so the function of implicit meaning is not bound to abstract thinking and strictly logical analysis. It would be true to say, then, that going from concrete towards abstract language expressions, that is, from the sphere of empiric towards the sphere of abstract-theoretical knowledge, the importance of explicit meaning progressively diminishes as an element of knowledge, while implicit meaning becomes increasingly more im-portant. In other words, meaning relinquishes its bonds with the material world and begins to follow its own immanent laws. Nevertheless, even the most abstract symbols of portentous scientific theories entail in their meaning explicit elements of experience by implying that under certain conditions there could be some real objects which are not circumscribed by their implicit meaning. In that denotative function, they can even lead us to false conclusions and make us rely on precarious predictions which might not be delivered in the future. That would only mean, however, that they are inaccurate, and not without meaning, either denotative or connotative.

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GENEZA ISKUSTVENOG ZNAČENJA

Rezime

Značenja koja pridajemo jezičkim znacima, i simbolima uopšte, mogu imati izvorište u ličnom iskustvu. Problematika koju ovaj rad obrađuje odnosi se na pitanje kako se realnost koja se različitim pojedincima predočava kroz različito lično iskustvo na kraju uobličuje u značenjske jedinice koje spadaju u domen zajedničkog, opšteprihvaćenog sistema značenja. U nedostatku konkretnih kriterijuma za procjenu kvalitativne kongruencije značenja koja različiti pojedinci pridaju istim značenjskim jedinicama oformljenim na osnovu ličnih iskustava, preostaje nam da prihvatimo činjenicu da je iskustvo kao izvorište značenja empirijski nedovoljno definisano da bi odigralo ulogu krajnjeg arbitra egzaktnosti značenja. Iz toga proizlazi da je naznaka „subjektivno" ili „objektivno" nužna prilikom pozivanja na iskustveno značenje jezičkih znakova.

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