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Ivan KASSABOV

On the Double Significations of  
 the Natural Languages

Abstract

This paper deals with the problem of the two principally different types of signification in natural languages - words as signs and as "supersign" units, between phraseologism set-phrases and free phrases as a transition from language as a system to speech. - The study is based on the results of the Semantic Minimum Dictionary, concerning the principal possibility of absolute autonomy of this type of unilingual dictionary, i.e., for the semantic description of lexis by its own means. - Special attention is paid to the border area between these two types of signification. An attempt is made to extract the peculiar "supersign" units from this area and to show their role in linguistic communication.

Résumé

L'article aborde le problème des deux types principalement différents des signes dans les langues naturelles - des mots en tant que signes et des unités "supersignes", intermédiaires entre les phraséologismes et les expressions libres, en tant que passage de la langue comme système vers le langage. - L'étude est basée sur les résultats d'un dictionnaire sémantique minimum, concernant la possibilité de principe d'une autonomie absolue du type dictionnaire commenté, c.a.d., une description sémantique de la lexique avec ses propres moyens. - Une attention toute spéciale est réservée au domaine de démarcation entre les deux types de signes et une tentative est osée de dégager des unités particulières "supersignes" de ce domaine, ainsi que leur rôle dans la communication linguistique.

The problem about the place of a natural language among the other semiotic systems has stood open for discussion ever since semiotics made its first steps as a separate science. Ch. Pierce. 1) and F. de Saussure 2) were the first who maintained that it had a central position among the other semiotic systems. The sign being primarily a linguistic phenomenon makes it necessary for the linguists to make clear what distinguishes language as a system sui generis from the other semiological phenomena. E. Benveniste has recently proved that language is the system with the most pronounced semiotic character, which renders meanings in a specific and unique way. It has the property of double signification and presents the only example of a system, which is semiotic both in its formal structure and in its functioning 3).

A special investigation into this double semiotic character of the natural languages is the best way of showing the difference between language and other semiotic systems. It would also contribute to the understanding of the complex character and some of the specific features of language itself. From a semiotic point of view it is necessary to investigate the types of natural languages' significations and respectively of signs as its units bearing the meanings, as well as the mechanisms of transition to these meanings in communication.

This paper is based on a well known idea of Benveniste that the sign's world is closed and there is no direct passage from the sign to the utterance, either by means of forming syntagms or in any other way. They are separated by an insurmountable boundary, and consequently, there are two separate spheres in (natural) languages, and for the study of each of them we need a separate apparatus of notions: one for the semiotic-sign, and another one - for the semantic-speech utterance (E. Benveniste, op. cit.)

It is known that when the language (with all its difficulty and variety) becomes an object of scientific research, the investigator is faced with the main and preliminary problem of the linguistic facts of the object of investigation. He has to decide which lin-

guistic facts he will accept for real, objectively existing phenomena, which are closely connected and directly dependent on the theory and the method of investigation. This has proved to be the main problem for all the major theoreticians in the field of linguistics since the beginning of the century. F. de Saussure's dichotomy langue -- parole, Hjelmslev's semes - usus, and Chomsky's competence - performance, are but attempts to overcome this difficulty.

In spite of the many differences in the basic principles and approaches of these dichotomies, they all have in common the evident efforts to distinguish quite clearly between the linguistically-systematic and the speech-unsystematic in any natural language as a language-speech universum. This distinction has proved to be necessary for the systematic study of linguistic phenomena and, respectively, of language as an abstract system, built upon evidence from the countless products of speech. The construction of any system involves by definition the problem for its basic units: which are they? what is their essence? what are the relations between them? Or to say it in other words, this is the problem of the structure of the system. All these questions are connected with the important problem of the boundaries of a system, its borderline units and their number which will be necessary and sufficient for the functioning of the system.

It is more or less generally accepted in modern linguistics that the borderline unit of the system is the word as a sign, bearing a certain meaning and sense which stands in our consciousness for a certain object. It is mainly for this property of its units - to signify - that the linguistic system is defined as a semiotic one. And as is necessary for any semiotic system, these units should be limited in number. There should also be rules of arranging them in figures. These figures should be independent of the nature and of the number of speech products for which the system allows to be created.

It has become a basic scientific requirement for linguistics also to be able to offer a full description of at least one natural language, or at least one of its parts - in this case, its semantics - or else to create a model, preferably working by itself, and by means of a computer. This requirement is a sequence of the principle of mathematical modelling, according to which an object can be considered to be factual only

when an algorithm for its description has been created, as a practical model, bringing together pure theory and the real object, proving thus the adequacy of the theory (hypothesis).

It is self-evident that in order to work, such a practical model needs a definite and limited (no matter how great) number of units and several simple rules for arranging them. It is also evident that these units should be structured in a sufficiently rigorous system. The system as well as the model can claim to adequately represent the complex facts of a real language only if they are in a position to adequately represent a given language as a whole. The complexity of a natural language demands their artificial limitation in the central part of the system, confronting with the requirement for necessity and sufficiency in order to preserve the specific features of the object. This limitation, of course, hinders its full and detailed description - a disadvantage, which is fully compensated for by the great heuristic power in finding new regularities and typological features of the system which characterize this model.

Research in the field of modelling has shown that semantics is the part of language in which arise the greatest difficulties, and in lexical semantics in particular. The modelling of this system requires the construction of a semantic medium dictionary as a theoretical construction, which represents the whole lexical system in its integrity. Such a Semantic Minimum Dictionary, comprised of about 850 units, has been created by the author of this paper for the Bulgarian language. It was used as practical verification of some theoretical issues concerning the semantics of the natural languages.

1. The lexico-semantic system of a language can be structured in lexico-semantic fields, forming an overall scheme. The zero field plays a central role in it, occupying in the meantime the central position. It is comprised of about 350 units, having as its core a nominative-substantival unit: the word for "man", hence the system is anthropocentric.
2. All the words in this dictionary have been described only by means of the units, contained in its alphabetic part. This proves that it is possible to create a metalanguage, capable of ensuring the autonomy of a dictionary. It should be pointed out,

however, that this is an autonomy of the lexico-semantic system of the language, provided that it includes the grammatical semantics on the one hand, and the terminological meaning of some words, such as those naming some popular animals and plants, on the other.

The problem of the so-called "semantic primitives" 4) is of particular importance. Such non-definable units (elements) are in this case several pairs of lexical items expressing modality, such as trjabya - zhelaja (must - want to), mozhe - moga (can - be able to), chuvstvuyam - vuzpriemam (feel - perceive) (perceptuality) an activity in general: stava - pravja (become - make), as well as the referential expressions kazvam - govorja (tell - speak). All of these are united around the basic verb sum (be) and can even be defined, though somewhat roughly and artificially, by means of sum 5). The verb sum, in turn, is represented by purely grammatical means as: 1. Processuality (action), 2. State, and 3. Existentiality - as abstract grammatical essences. Thus the two central units of the lexico-semantic system, the substantival chovek (man) and the verbal sum (to be), combined in an actual utterance (and not as abstract linguistic units in a dictionary) make up the elementary predicate structure "chovek sum" (I am a man) which is the most general sense of the referential predicate structure "Az sum chovek" (I am a man), from where "Az mislja neshto za neshto" (I think something about something). The subject of the structure, taken separately, bears imminently the sense of the predicate, and vice versa.

The problems of the Semantic Minimum Dictionary which we have formulated so far, show that it is difficult to talk about absolute autonomy. In spite of the fact that the headwords have been defined only by means of the units, contained in the minimum corpus, the meta-language function of the definitions is in fact a meta-speech one, and its way of signifying is different: every definition is in its essence an utterance (although a specific type of utterance) and is also based on reference, but a reference to the more abstract "object", presented by the defined word as a headword in the dictionary. The utterance itself, apart from the semantics of the words-signs, comprising it, has in addition the semantics of a predicate structure.

This is another way of proving the already mentioned idea of Benveniste (see p. 266). It follows that there is no transition from the sign to the utterance, but a realistic approach to the problem which calls for attention to the existence of the following paradox: if someone (e.g. a foreigner) has learned enough words and grammatical rules for combining them almost without any connection with the natural linguistic surroundings, he can express himself correctly. Whenever he finds himself in the natural linguistic surroundings it turns out that he speaks correctly, but unlike any native speaker. On the other hand, a child, even before it has learned how to read and write or even before it can separate conscientiously the words as linguistic units (signs), very easily and quickly learns a language in its corresponding linguistic surroundings. Even if it still makes some (grammatical) mistakes, a child speaks adequately in different situations.

It should be noted that such a paradox is characteristic not only for people who have not completely mastered a given language, but for the way in which a language is used in the society as a whole, and even for the society as a whole, and even for the definitions of all dictionaries. A critical analysis shows that apart from the use in definitions of the grammatical semantics of the utterance, the autonomy of the dictionaries is incomplete for yet another reason. Intentionally or unintentionally, they make use of some peculiar units, having the characteristic features of complex signs of both nominative and predicative type. These are language-speech units contiguous with the word-signs and the set phrases and idioms. They are comparatively stable units, such as: pri\_nuzhda (if necessary), zdrav\_smisul (common sense), v\_sustojanie\_sum (be able to), edin\_i\_susht (one and the same), po\_silata\_na (in accordance with), vuv\_forma\_na (in the shape of), za\_razlika\_ot (as distinct from), ostavjam\_nastrana (to leave aside), chista\_proba (par excellence) etc. These phrases have not been an object of research, which would have aimed at defining their type and relation to one another, as well as their relation towards the word-signs.

Concerning this type of phrases we are faced once again with the question of whether or not they are units, and if they are linguistic units whether they are signs or units of another system. We have assumed as a basic linguistic unit, the word-sign, and as a

basic unit of speech, the utterance. These forms are contiguous between the two. They are not phraseological (or idiomatical) enough to be taken as language units, and they are not freely formed referential predicate structured utterances either. They are most probably units of the *usus* or speech, which have been created in it, and have gained a foothold in the idiolect of a certain group of its speakers as a means of referring to certain situations which in time either disintegrate to their initial nominative signs or gain the status of a specific type of complex socio-cultural signs. In all probability the bearers of a language do not think of them as separate units, which may be the reason why they have remained outside the sphere of linguistic research, but it is difficult to investigate the wide range of their distribution in actual speech, both oral and written. Via literature and mass media they get a firm status in the language speech practice of the language community, creating thus the specific features of the separate genres and sociolects, starting from their models and going all the way to the clichés and the stylistic bad taste and failures. It is not unlikely that the mastering of these language-speech units brings about enrichment of the so-called standard or cultural languages. These are of course statements which require serious further study of the problem.

From the point of view of this particular aspect of the problem we are dealing with here, it is important to establish the status of these language-speech units in view of the division between the sphere of the language-sign and that of speech-utterance, especially if there is no direct transition from the one to the other. They are not "a link" of the transition of the semiotic semiology into a semantic one, but it is just as obvious that in the systematic aspect they are the transitory link between the roughly divided and separated language and parole in the language-speech universe, as "elementary" units of the genre, taken not only in the narrow sense (i.e. the strictly literary sense), but also in their wider understanding as spheres of language-speech usage.

We can even, in spite of the risk of some hastiness and insufficient terminological clarifications, assume them to be complex linguistic and socialcultural signs. However, it is beyond any doubt that their detailed and serious investigation would contribute to the understanding both semiotic and semantic spheres

of the natural languages, so as to establish what they have in common, although not in terms of a transition from the first to the second. Maybe these very units (or similar types of units) will prove to be the units of "second generation semiology", prognosticated by E. Benveniste.

#### Notes

- 1) Ch.S. Peirce. Selected Writings, ed. by Philip P. Wiener, Dover Publication 1958.
- 2) F. de Saussure, Cours de linguistique générale, 5-e ed., Paris: Payot 1955.
- 3) E. Benveniste. Obshtaja lingvistika, Ch. V, Semiologija jasika. Moskva 1974.
- 4) A. Wierzbicka, "Semanticheskie primitive". In: Semiotika. Moskva 1984.
- 5) Cf. the argumentation offered by S. Sotnikjan, Osnovnie problemi jasika i mishlenija. Moskva 1974.