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COGNITIVE LINGUISITICS AND POSTMODERNISM: IN SEARCH OF PARALLELS

Cognitive linguistics was founded and developed in the 1970s and 1980s by linguists disappointed in generative grammar developed by Noam Chomsky and his followers. Chomsky's theory focuses on the ideal language user whose language competence is based on 'pure' grammar, free of any extra-linguistic influences. In this way language can be treated as a relatively small set of rules which can generate all correct language structures. All speech-acts eluding this dry formalisation are treated as incorrect or going beyond the field of linguistics. As a result, language appears to be thoroughly predictable and every speech-act can be unambiguously proclaimed as correct or not. Thus generative grammar may be viewed as an attempt of legitimising language in one way only, of submitting it to one category of truth and thus – as an attempt of inscribing language in the general modernist outlook.

In general, modernism was a product of the Enlightenment, although its roots go back to Descartes' *cogito.* With the Enlightenment, the rationalism implicit in the Cartesian approach was taken as the foundation for a whole culture. Human understanding became a quest for the only truth and the means was Kant's *pure reason.* What could not be understood in this way, was simply dismissed as illusion and superstition. Such a pursuit of unity and order, creation of one objective knowledge and a clear division between truth and falsehood is also characteristic of generative linguistics.

Cognitive linguistics departs from such a way of thinking. It notices that in the conditions of real communication language structures proposed by generative linguistics as the only correct represent only a small part of all speech-acts. Cognitive linguists see the advantages of rigorous formalisation; nevertheless, they would like to go beyond the confines of structuralist objectivism (see Tababkowska (1995:5)). Treating language as a direct reflection of cognitive processes which take place in human mind and thus as a

phenomenon to a great extent subjective, they repudiate the possibility of a complete formalisation of language and establishing general rules reflecting the objective truth about language. In this way they accede to the paradigm of thinking that came to be known as postmodernism.

Postmodernism gives up hope for the integrating power of the absolute truth, because, according to postmodernists, there is not any absolute truth. It is impossible to reflect reality in an objective way, to establish rules governing the world, to submit plurality of knowledges to one way of legitimatizing. In the time of a global range of means of communication postmodernism discovers completely new conditions of human existence in the 'post-industrial' society and propagates the decline of a uniform, totalising vision of the world. History becomes 'decentralised' and universal history is no longer possible. Thus, space for the plurality of particular visions and multiplicity of discourses appears. The uniformity of the world is broken and the vision of chaos and entropy takes its place; individualism and diversity are raised to the rank of universal rule and rational knowledge is replaced by 'language games'.

However, the relationship between cognitivism and postmodernism is not confined to the adherence to the same paradigm. Below, I will make an attempt to present several postmodernist texts in which problems and the way of dealing with them indicate closer analogies with cognitivism.

Foucault (1992:971) describes *[...] the last ten, fifteen, at most twenty years* as *a period characterised by what one might term the efficacy of dispersed and discontinuous offensives*[1]. These offensives lack any systematic rules of co-ordination which might provide a system of reference for them and their criticism is directed against traditional morality and hierarchy, which are reflected in the established institutions and practices. They have generally local character which indicates *[...] an autonomous, non-centralised kind of theoretical production, one that is to say whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established regimes of thought* (see Foucault (1992:972)).

What is connected with this amazing efficacy of local criticisms is the inhibiting effect of global, totalitarian theories and *[...] an insurrection of subjugated knowledges* (see Foucault (1992:972)). These subjugated knowledges consist of two things. On the one hand, they are created by these parts of historical knowledge which were present but hidden in the body of functionalist and systematizing theory and which criticism based on scholarship has been able to reveal.

On the other hand, subjugated knowledges comprise also what Foucault (1992) calls popular knowledge, that is this part of knowledge that has been disqualified as inadequate to its task or insufficiently elaborated – naive knowledges situated in the hierarchy below the required level of scientificity,

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[1] Written in 1976.

that is knowledges created by people for themselves. However, Foucault (1992) does not associate these knowledges with the generally accepted common-sense knowledge, on the contrary – they are particular knowledges, local and incapable of unanimity.

In this place one cannot but think about the return of cognitivism to the nineteenth century classics of Indo-European linguistics and about its admission of great importance in language of the personal creativity of every language user. These two shifts postulated by cognitivism, however, do not mean a departure from the fundamental rules of Saussure's structuralism. But an insurrection of subjugated knowledges is not a call for ignorance, either – it does not negate knowledge. It is the insurrection of knowledges, as Foucault (1992:974) puts it:

[...] that are opposed primarily not to the contents, methods or concepts of science, but to the effects of the centralising powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organised scientific discourse within a society such as ours.

It is an attempt of freeing discourses from the yoke of a unifying theory which tries to level all oppositions to general forms of thought in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what creates knowledge and its subject. Subjugated knowledges do not bend things to a common denominator (as generative grammar does, trying to cram the whole language into the rigid framework of its system), but try to find common ground in the way of describing them. As observed by Tabakowska (1995:13), cognitivism acts similarly when it tries to establish correlatives between

[...] perceptive [...] and conceptual [...] processes; between what is innate [...] and what is acquired [...]; between the world and mind; between seemingly chaotic disorder of language which we know from experience and rigorous elegance of language data presented by "pure" theory[2].

The next text I am going to link to the cognitivist theory of language is Barthes' (1986) *From Work to Text*. In this article Barthes writes about a change in the approach to products of culture. In this new approach the *work*, for example a work of art, which is a self-contained, closed entity whose meaning is presupposed before all the acts of perception, is replaced by the *Text*, whose meaning cannot be described univocally as it depends on the context in which it occurs. Such a differentiation between the *work* and the *Text* is, to some extent, parallel to the differentiation between the 'mainstream' linguistics and cognitive linguistics. What is more, many features which, according to Barthes, characterise the *Text* can be directly linked to some features characterising language in the cognitivist approach.

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[2] Translation mine.

One of the main characteristics of the *Text* is plurality. Barthes (1986:60) compares the reader of the *Text* to someone having a stroll:

[...] what he perceives is multiple, irreducible, issuing from heterogeneous, detached substances and levels: lights, colours, vegetation, heat, air, tenuous explosions of sound, tiny cries of birds, children's voices from the other side of the valley, paths, gestures, garments of inhabitants close by or very far away; all these incidents are half identifiable: they issue from known codes, but their combinative operation is unique.

Cognitive linguistics sees language in a similar way: language cannot be reduced to a small set of rules. Each language user has access to the same language material but he uses it in a unique way, characteristic of him only.

The next thing peculiar to the *Text* is, according to Barthes (1986:59), the logic governing it. This logic *[...] is not comprehensive (trying to define what the work "means") but metonymic*. The meaning of the *Text* cannot be defined univocally (which happens in the case of the meaning of the *work*), but only through associations, the impression of closeness.

In this place it is not difficult to see resemblance to the cognitive categorisation by prototype and the network model of categories. Classical theories of category assume invariability and clearness of boundaries between individual categories, internal definability of categories and binarity of defining characteristics (see Tabakowska 1995:38). These categories are to reflect categories existing in the surrounding world. They have clearly defined boundaries which are not dependent on the context, therefore every phenomenon can be univocally ascribed to a particular category on the basis of an appropriate definition. Thus one can say that the logic governing classical theories of category is comprehensive.

However, according to cognitive linguistics, such a way of categorisation does not reflect reality, where most of the phenomena have scalar character. Let us quote Tabakowska (1995:39):

First of all, cognitive categories created by human mind generally do not agree with the "real" categories of the world which surrounds us: they create the image of the world which we see and believe in and not the world as it is in reality[3].

Therefore, according to cognitivism, categorisation by prototype and the network model of categories is much more adequate. In such a categorisation the role of the prototype is assumed by a specimen which seems to embody 'the best' features of a given category. The remaining elements are included in the category on the basis of their resemblance to the prototype. Included, they themselves can in turn become prototypes for the next elements. Thus a network is created. One of the main types of such a resemblance to the prototype which places an element in a given category is the metonymic resemblance. So one can

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[3] Translation mine.

venture to claim that the logic governing the cognitive theory of category is, at least partially, metonymic.

At last, according to Barthes (1986:61), the *work* can be compared to an *[...]organism which grows by vital expansion, by 'development'* . Whereas the metaphor of the *Text* is that of the network – *[...] if the text expands, it is by the effect of a combinative operation, of a systematics* (see Barthes (1986:61)). In the generative model certain structures are created from simpler structures, which are then considered as original structures. So, it is a clear case of development. In the cognitivist approach to language there are no original and secondary structures – the variety of structures is the result of combination which does not have a hierarchical character, but just reflects different ways of seeing things.

The next text which shows similarities to cognitive linguistics due to its approach to culture is *Rhizome*, written by Deleuze and Guatari (1988). In their work the authors contrast the culture of the tree, the culture whose main pattern is that of an entity which develops according to the binary logic into a set of smaller branches, with the culture of the rhizome, an acentric and non-hierarchical system whose basic pattern is that of plurality. According to Deleuze and Guatari (1988:229): *We should no longer believe in trees or roots, we have tolerated them for far too long. The whole culture of the tree type, from biology to linguistics, is based on them*[4].

Deleuze and Guatari (1988:224) univocally criticise Chomsky's grammar claiming that it defends the tree-root as a basic image. Its main blame is that it *does not link language with the semantic and pragmatic contents of a statement, with collective instruments of expression, with the whole micropolitics of a social field* [5]. Rhizome, on the conrtrary,

[...] would not cease to join semiotic cells, organisations of power, circumstances referring to arts, sciences, social fights. A semiotic cell is like a bulb gathering various acts, linguistic but also perceptive, mimic, mental: there is no language in itself nor common speech but only co-operation of dialects, jargons, cants, specialist languages. There is no ideal pair speaker – listener, as there is no homogeneous language community[6] *(see Deleuze and Guatari (1988:224)).*

There is no doubt that this criticism of Chomsky's theory reflects almost exactly the principles of cognitive linguistics.

According to Deleuze and Guatari (1988) the systems of the tree are hierarchical systems in which the order of elements is established rigidly and the boundaries between particular structures are unambiguously determined. In the

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[4] Translation mine.
[5] Translation mine.
[6] Translation mine.

rhizome the structures are not segregated so categorically. Deleuze and Guatari (1988:225) argue that:

The rhizome may be severed, broken off at any point but it continues to move forward along some of its own or alien lines (...) Each rhizome contains lines of segmentation, according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organised, marked, etc.; but also lines of deterritorialization, which continually serve as its routes of escape.(...) These lines continuously refer to each other.[7]

Taking into consideration theories of category in language, the rhizome may be treated as an opposition of classical theories of category characterised by binarity of defining properties:

In contrast to a structure which is determined on the basis of a number of points and positions, binary relationships between these points and mutually univocal relations between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentation and stratification as the maximum dimension along which plurality moves, transforming its own nature [8](see Deleuze and Guatari (1988:234)).

Thus the system of the rhizome seems to reflect the cognitivist theory of categories, which sees the scalar nature of most phenomena – the boundaries between categories are blurred and categories overlap one another. One could say that particular categories neither begin nor end but 'are transformed' into other categories.

A similar line of argument to that presented in *Rhizome* is developed in Umberto Eco's (1984) *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. It is not a strictly postmodernist manifesto, as *Rhizome* is, but its *philosophy* is certainly postmodernist. The main theme of the work is that of the opposition between the structure of a dictionary and the structure of an encyclopaedia. The idea of a dictionary represents that model for definition which is structured by genera and species, a model which is finite and hierarchical and can be depicted as a bidimensional tree. It is characteristic of the language of traditional linguistics, understood as a closed and static system. However, this model, according to Eco, is untenable. One cannot interpret satisfactorily a linguistic sign relying on genera and species, that is – on a finite set of substances in a hierarchical order. The main fault of the model of a dictionary is that it is either reliable but its scope is limited or it has an unlimited scope but is unreliable. Therefore, in order to give the representation of the content of a given lexical item one has to resort to differentiae and accidents. If differentiae may be described as essential qualities of substantial form, accidents correspond to differentiae in their capacity as signs. As Eco (1984:67) puts it: *Essential differences cannot be known directly by us; we know (we infer!) them **by semiotic means**, through the*

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[7] Translation mine.
[8] Translation mine.

effects (accidents) they produce, and these accidents are the sign of their unknowable cause. Accidents are infinite, or at least indefinite, in number and they are not hierarchical, either. In this way the apparent order of a dictionary is replaced by an unrestricted encyclopaedia. Let us quote Eco (1984:68) at this point:

*The tree o genera and species, the tree of substances, blows up in a dust of differentiae, in a turmoil of infinite accidents, in a nonhierarchical network of qualia. The dictionary is dissolved into a potentially unordered and unrestricted galaxy of pieces of world knowledge. The dictionary thus becomes and encyclopedia, because it was in fact a **disguised encyclopedia.***

This encyclopaedia-like representation of the semantic competence no longer has a hierarchical structure of a tree but it takes the format of a multidimensional network and Eco himself admits that the best image of such a network is provided by Deleuze and Guatari (1988).

In an encyclopaedia-like representation linguistic signs are interpreted in relation to other signs, which in turn can be interpreted in relation to still other signs[9]. A background encyclopaedic knowledge, according to Eco (1984:68), assumes *[...] the form of a set of instructions for the proper textual insertion of the terms of a language into a series of contexts (as classes of co-texts) and for the correct disambiguation of the same terms when met within a given co-text*. In consequence the borderline between semantics and pragmatics becomes blurred. This overlapping of semantics and world knowledge is also one of the main characteristics of cognitive linguistics.

The similarity between an encyclopaedia-like representation of the semantic competence and cognitive semantics may be seen most clearly in their approach to the metaphor. According to Eco (1984:113), the format of a dictionary does not permit us to understand the mechanism of the metaphor. In this format the metaphor is explained as a transfer of semantic properties (specifying the place of a linguistic sign in the hierarchical tree of genera and species). And thus in the sentence *That girl is a birch* the word *girl* acquires the property 'vegetal' or *birch* the property 'human'. But this tells us very little about what happens in the interpretation of this metaphor. An encyclopedic semantics is therefore better equipped to deal with the metaphor. As Eco (1984:113) argues:

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[9] Eco (1972:58) understands a sign as a tripartite structure, having at its base its *symbol* linked to the *object* which the symbol represents, and at its top – its *interpretant*. Eco (1972:58) defines *interpretant* as *[...] another representation referring to the same object. In other words, if one wants to establish what is the interpretant of a given sign, one has to name it by means of another sign, which in turn has its own interpretant, which can be named by another sign – and so on. In this way a process of unlimited semiosis begins.* [translation mine]

A componental representation in the format of an encylopedia, however, is potentially infinite and assumes the form of (...) a polydimensional network of properties, in which some properties are the interpretants of others. In the absence of such a network, none of these properties can attain the rank of being a metalinguistic construction or a unit belonging to a privileged set of semantic universals.

And thus in the above example the privileged semantic property allowing us to understand the metaphor is named by the interpretant FLEXIBLE, which is common for both *girl* and *birch*.

A similar explanation of the understanding of the mechanism of the metaphor is provided by cognitive semantics. In cognitive linguistics semantic structures are viewed as related to cognitive, or conceptual, domains. A conceptual domain may be defined as *[...] an open set of attributive values with respect to which semantic structures associated with lexical categories are defined and compared* (see Kleparski (1997:73)). What happens in the mechanism of the metaphor is that some attributive values of one linguistic item become more salient than others and they, as Kleparski (1997:92) puts it, *[...] somehow translate the conceptually matching values* specifiable for the semantics of another linguistic item. And thus, in the above example one of the attributive values of **domain of physical characteristics** of the linguistic item *girl*, namely FLEXIBLE, is viewed as translatable into the conceptually matching attributive value FLEXIBLE of **domain of physical characteristics** of the lexical category *birch*.

In both the explanations of the mechanism of the metaphor certain subsections of the meaning structures of two linguistic items attain salient positions and are viewed as mutually interchangeable, in this way providing the basis for comparison.

To conclude, both postmodernism and cognitivism testify to what Lyotard (1992:999) calls the end of grand narratives, that is metadiscourses (like the project of the Enlightenment) which tried to submit the plurality of discourses to one category of truth. It is the stress on plurality that is the most striking characteristic of cognitive linguistics and all the postmodernist texts presented in the foregoing. The cognitivist plurality of language competences reflects the postmodernist plurality of knowledges, of the Text, of the rhizome, of the encyclopaedia. There is no univocal interpretation and no objective truth. There is only the plurality of views on the world.

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