Wolfgang Theis

LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND SYMBOLIC FORMS

0. Abstract

As Ernst Cassierer introduced in his "*Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*" in 1923, he specifically mentioned "language" as well as a way of symbolic forms. In 1991, the self declared "researcher on human sciences", Norbert Elias, published his work called *"The Symbol Theory"* where he mainly writes about language as an application of symbolic forms and symbols. Elias does not make any reference to Cassirer at all, but states that languages are a part of a civilization process and part of culture[1].

1. Speak and Sing

Human sciences and even nature sciences put the human in the focus of their research interests. All their ideas and views circle around the human being, philosophical anthropology even dares to ask "what is the human being?". When trying to give an answer to this question from the biological evolutionary theoretical side, then it is clear: The human being is the highest developed mammal so far, but what is the difference of a human and an animal? For the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach this is clear: it is awareness. Awareness is what makes the big difference between the human and the animal, because for him awareness is the base for recognition and science and no known animals have developed anything like science[2]. Science is the base of knowledge – and the other way round - and knowledge can only be transported by languages. Eventhough Platon criticizes writing quite heavily as an useless way to transport knowledge and it would make the brain lazy[3], using a system of symbols, also known as alphabet, to transfer knowledge from generation to generation has proven to be handy. Chinese whispers effects by transporting information and knowledge are too well known to corroborate Platon's critique. Therefore often the original meanings of words are covered by centuries of language development.

Animals have developed all different kinds of signs, but their sign systems are very transfixed. It is known that blue whales "sing" in order of signalling to each other, but it is still unknown if this is really a kind of communication code, which can be understood by other members of the same species. If blue whales ever try to communicate or signal with other whales, for example sperm whales, is also an unknown mystery of nature. Any kind of human language is also a

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[1] This paper is partly based on the article by Wolfgang Theis, Language and Culture as Symbolic Forms, in: Курганова, Н.И., Культурное разнообразие в эпоху глобализации / Cultural diversity in the epoch of globalization, Murmansk, 2008, p. 114 - 115

[2] cf. Feuerbach, 1960

[3] cf. Platon, 1993

system of codes, of symbolic phenomena. If a member of the human race can not decode these symbols, then he or she will never be able to understand the message that is transported by it, but for this human it is not impossible to learn a new language, in order to be able to decode this special symbol system. If a lion would ever be able to understand the roaring of a tiger is questionable. Both are members of the biological family of felidae, but up to now it has been impossible to prove that they are able to understand each other's signals.

2. Language, experience and development

One of the biggest achievements of the human race is to have developed codes of communication, which are understandable to other humans. Actually there are numerous written and spoken languages and lots of languages have not survived orally. Only their relic written documents show their once existence. Such dead or extinct languages involve the languages of Latin, Pictish, Arua or Azari. The reasons for their extinction vary. Some languages simply have been forbidden by law of some superior (military or political) power and so their existence slowly vanished through oppression. Other languages simply died out, because the peoples who spoke these languages were either extinct by military actions or their cultures were assimilated by other peoples.

The function of a language can be narrowed down to the term of communication and information transport, but this works only by the usage of an external system of symbols. No human is born with the ability of speaking or writing any kind of language right from the beginning. A language has to be learned from scratch and it is taught by others, who have been speaking this language before this birth, "a group of speakers exists before the individual act of speaking"[4]. So the ability to speak a language is not an a priori given one, it is a classical a posteriori. This is also stated by Immanuel Kant, who declares that "all our recognition starts with experience"[5]. So the ability to recognise something is related to experience and the experience of learning a language until someone is able to handle it properly is a process of recognition. Experience and recognition go hand in hand, so do language and symbol.

The function of assertiveness of a single language makes it possible for it to achieve what it achieves. This means that because of its function of objectification, the assigning of meanings to persons, things, places and so on, a language can reproduce the meanings of attribution. A language owns the character of a system[6] and this system has the ability to structure the reception and recognition of the world. Therefore this system needs a structure in itself

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[4] Elias, 1991
[5] Kant, 1974, B1
[6] Göller, 1988

and this is only possible by a constant reduction of the "primary-present experimental reality of the single human, as well of the concrete-sensually cognition situation"[7]. Signs and sign systems are a correlating unit, no sign can stand alone for itself, and the same goes for language. Language and its symbolic character are a correlating unit as well.

When we take a closer look at language as such, then we can see that everything in a language can have several meanings[8] and this is the basic deficit a language has. You can try to describe a certain action in one language, but as soon as you are translating this to another language, then you experience the borders of linguistic systems. When trying to translate the English word "timing" to German, then you don't find any German equivalent at all. A proper term would be "*zu zeiten*", but this simply doesn't exist in German[9]. The German standard dictionary Duden has not thought about adding "*zu zeiten*" to its pages, as it's not commonly used in the German language. Only these words that are written in the Duden dictionaries officially exist in German. New word creations find it difficult to survive for a longer period and it is a long process to find its way inside this dictionary. In English dictionaries you will definitely find the expressions "to time" or "timing" and you will also find an explanation what these words mean. They are actually representing something. That means they are symbolizing a process. One single word symbolizes a whole process, it is a symbolic form.

As languages usually consist out of words, a language is also consisting out of symbolic forms, it is a symbolic form in itself. It's this symbolic form, that determines its common character and this character establishes homogeneity among its users[10], at least this homogeneity is noticed from outside this closed system. This is what Vilem Flusser defines as an "abstraction of reality"[11]. The more reality is abstracted, the more a codified world comes into existence. This experience of a codified world is very individual and a lot depends on the individual receptions of the surrounding environment and how the single human can decode these codes. The five dimensions of the Flusserian understanding of decoding is based on history. The 5th dimension is assigned to the "natural human", who lives in a four-dimensional environment of concrete experience. In the 4th dimension, the human's interest for a three-dimensional space can be found. The 3rd dimension is based on a two-dimensional environment, which has its impact on culture. Traditional images place themselves between the human and its environment. In the 2nd dimension linear texts influence the culture of the human. Images and texts are in a constant battle against each other, which leads

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[7] Göller, 1988
[8] cf. Cassirer, 1983
[9] cf. Elias, 1990
[10] cf. Cassirer, 1977
[11] Flusser, 1996

to the 1st dimension: the dimension of the technical images. These images are results of apparatus and computers, indirect results of scientific texts[12]. According to Flusser, the development of the human culture goes towards a zerodimension: the post-script era.

From the outside the native speakers of a language seem to be an united mass. They are able to code their own decode the vocalization of the other. When being a member of this system, reality looks very different. Then differences in the vocalization become notable, dialects and regional lingual idioms get clearer and turn out to be factors for cultural differentiation. With the auxiliary function of culture, humans have created a codified cover, which acts as a mediator between the human and the world and shields the human from the world at the same time[13].

3. Textual cultures and symbols

Culture and language are partners and antagonists at the same time. Very often cultures are defined by the language. Therefore it is often forgotten, that eventhough it might appear as the same language, there are differences in the cultures of its users. When we take English as an example, which is becoming a worldwide lingua franca, the native speakers of this language still differ in their cultural behaviours, habits, customs and rituals. In other words, the habitus of an Australian differs from an American and from a British. Still, all of them have English as their mothertongue. It's a matter of socialization and cultural heritage, which determines some kind of national and cultural habitus. So when we take a closer look at what culture is supposed to be, we find that "culture" is a term, that is very difficult to describe, but everybody seems to know what is meant by it. Vilem Flusser wrote "everything is culture" (translation W.T.). Each culture or even subculture sees itself as "culture", with unclear definitions. Each subculture has its own system of signs, symbols and codes as well. Non-members of this cultural system find it very hard to understand them and have to learn these codes and symbols as some kind of language, if they want to be able to understand the habitus and the cultural specifications of this subculture.

A symbol can be any kind of sign or action that is loaded with a special meaning and this meaning has to be uploaded over and over again, otherwise the symbol loses its original content and meaning. With that loss, the symbolic form gets lost and the sign is becoming empty. That way, a culture always needs to identify itself newly so that it doesn't lose its meaning and self-identification. "Culture" is a symbolic form, it consists out of many different symbols and symbolic actions. They may differ from country to country, from nation to

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[12] cf. Flusser, 1999
[13] cf. Hartmann, 2006

nation, but all in all it's a combination of other symbolic forms. It's these symbolic forms which define culture as a culture[14] (cf. Cassirer, 1977).

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[14] cf. Cassirer, 1977

- FAMILY NAME: Theis
- FIRST NAME: Wolfgang
- Institution: University for Art and Industrial Design Linz
- Address: Hauptplatz 8, 4020 Linz, Austria
- E-mail: wolfgang.theis@ufg.ac.at
- Title of the presentation; the desired direction, the presentation relates to.
  Language, Culture and Symbolic Forms, Philosophy, Cultural Theory