

Semantic Triangle and Linguistic Sign

Givi AMAGLOBELI*

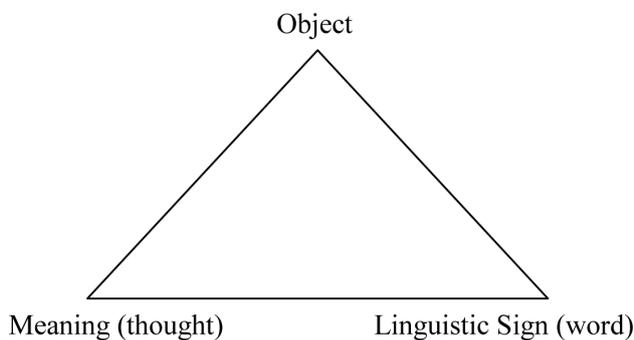
Abstract

In this given work the Semantic Triangle will be examined. This is the most important point of Semantics in general. We will discuss a modern concept of the Semantic triangle with its three basic components .They are: the Object (Referent), the Meaning, and the (Linguistic) Sign. Together with the Semantic Triangle we will discuss the ancient Stoic linguistic concept which also consists of the same three components and is very much like a modern concept of the Semantic Triangle (or the contrary). We will also explain the concept of arbitrariness of a linguistic sign within the context of signifier-signified correlation.

Keywords: linguistic sign, arbitrariness, Semantic Triangle

Introduction

First of all the three components of the triangle should be given and discussed in order to have a clearer understanding of the following points. As shown above, the Semantic Triangle relates the three basic components to each other as they constitute one whole system. These are the Object, the Meaning (of an Object) and the Sign. This can be shown in the following form of a scheme:



The Semiotic Triangle (Ogden & Richards, 1923).

Here we have a basic component – an object (1), which acquires its meaning (2) that is expressed by a linguistic sign (word) (3). The same structure and the same three components constitute this Stoic concept: Meaning (Thought), Sounds (word), and the Object. The components of this stoic concept is the same as those of the modern Semantic Concept. Three elements link to form one whole system. According to the Stoics two of these elements (Sounds and Object) are of a material form and one of them is of a non-material (Meaning/Thought). This

last element of a three-component system the Stoics gave the name “Lekton”.

1. Classical and modern interpretations of a sign

For better understanding of this concept we refer to this reference: According to Aristotle there are only two elements which are in correlation with each other – the human subject with its consciousness/language by means of which he/she perceives and designates things. As for the Stoics, they have three different components: object, subject (perceiving and designating) and some kind of intermediate element between the object and the subject, more specifically – the object of an expression and perception; By means of this very intermediate element things are being perceived and designated. (Losev, 1982, p. 170) In this given reference the distinction between Aristotelian and Stoic points of views is made.

Again, let us continue defining the nature of Lekton as an intermediate element between the signifier and the signified: Ammonius writes: “Aristotle teaches us what they (names and words) designate and that from one side there is mental representations (Noemata) and from the other side the process of naming and designation is being realized by the means of a designator (subject) and an object and that one should not add any kind of intermediate element between the thought and the object.” This very third element was given the name Lekton by the Stoics. In that way Aristotle did not understand the “signified” as an independent instance between the designator (subject) and the object. The Stoics, on the other hand used to emphasize and acknowledge the third instance and were sharply opposed to both the designating subject and the object. Ibid.

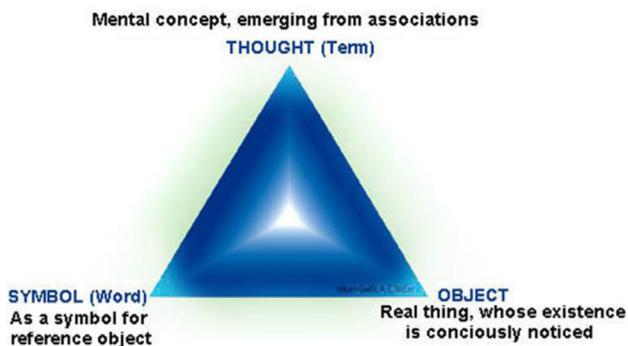
*Givi Amaglobeli is a Doctoral Candidate at Faculty of Business Management of International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. gamaglobeli@ibsu.edu.ge

Here is an example that shows the nature of a Stoic statement quite profoundly: Seneca describes the Stoic's point of view regarding the intermediate element of Lecton: "Caton is walking". According to a Stoic the expression used to describe Caton having a walk is not a body of his at all but it is rather something that indicates reports about the particular body. (Losev, 1982, p. 173).

The object and the words (sounds) which designate them are a material form while the third component (Meaning/Thought) is a non-material character: Sextus notes that, "the sound of the utterance about the object is corporeal, and that the thing itself is corporeal, but the thing signified or, the lekton, is incorporeal. The relation of the lekta to the material process has always been, and will remain an outstanding problem." (Mortley, 1986).

The relation of an incorporeal intermediate component to two other corporeal components of a Semantic Triangle is explained systematically in this reference: "If a system of signs (designator) is a corporeal intermediate between two other corporeal material systems in that case the sign will be corporeal itself: though in complex sign systems – languages – the sign itself represents a complex element too. The point here is that the parts of both systems which are in direct correlation with the sign are in correlation with each other at the same time and all these three components constitute a specific type of a connection, a triangle." (Stepanov, 2011)

In order to have a better understanding regarding the given idea, it would be useful to examine the scheme of a semantic triangle:



Here we refer to the work of a Russian linguist Aleksei Losev. He purports that there is a "correlation of a linguistic sign with a carrier of a sign, with denoted and with other linguistic spheres which turn a sign into a meaning." (Losev, 1982, p. 65) According to Losev, the correlation between the sign and a carrier of that sign, between the sign and the designated object, the sign and the meaning is all the same. (Ibid, p. 67) This very idea resembles other ideas that are purported within linguistics and philosophy of language in general. This resemblance will be discussed later

in this article.

2. Spontaneity/arbitrariness of a linguistic sign

The linguistic sign is of a spontaneous character by its formation: Every linguistic sign by its nature is of a spontaneous character. What is meant under spontaneity is unintentionally involuntariness, arbitrariness and the fact that it does not contain in itself any of the naturality-regularity in formation. Language and signs are being formed in this very manner. Nobody has invented linguistic signs and nobody has agreed on the meaning of formed words. (Ibid, p. 72).

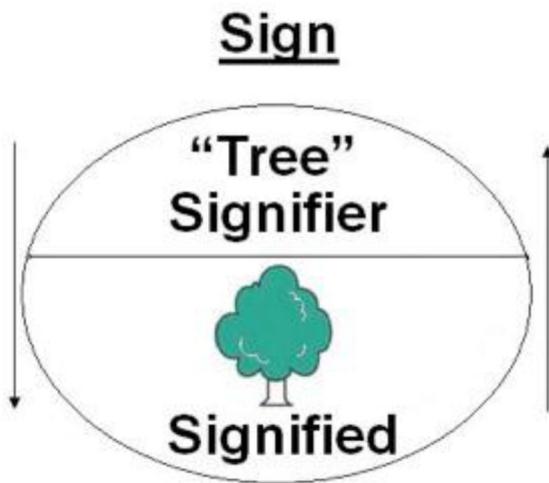
This idea reflects the following thoughts regarding the character of a linguistic sign almost completely. Aristotle has noted that "there can be no natural connection between the sound of any language and the things signified." (Chandler, 2009)

Again, the same point but with Plato's interpretation, in Plato's Cratylus Hermogenes he urged Socrates to accept that "whatever name you give to a thing is its right name; and if you give up that name and change it for another, the later name is no less correct than the earlier, just as we change the name of our servants; for I think no name belongs to a particular thing by nature." (Ibid.)

This very point constitutes a dilemma for semantics and philosophy of language which is the relation between the signifier and the signified. Is this correlation of a conditional character? Furthermore, Ferdinand de Saussure asserts the following, "What linguistic signs link is not the thing and its name, but the concept and sound image?" Saussure also propounded the idea of arbitrariness of a sign which resembles Losev's notion of a sign as a spontaneous character given above. There are different approaches to the Saussurean notion of a sign, "The arbitrariness of the sign is a radical concept because it proposes the autonomy of language in relation to reality." The Saussurean model, with its emphasis on internal structures within a sign system, can be interpreted as supporting the notion that language does not "reflect" reality but rather constructs it. We can use language 'to say what isn't in the world, as well as what is. And since we come to know the world through whatever language we have been born into the midst of, it is legitimate to argue that our language determines reality, rather than reality our language." (Ibid.)

Considering these ideas an incommensurability between signs (words) and referent (things), Aristotle commented that "There can be no natural connection between the sound of any language and the things signified" To put it clearly: "words are not things; things are other-wise than lingual and thus characterized by a certain excess vis-à-vis language." (Smith, 2000) The idea sounds very simple and yet very profound. This very notion was examined by Augustine in his "De Doctrina Christiana". Let us first give

a Saussurian model of a sign which will allow us to understand the signifier/signified correlation relatively easily:



We will now refer to Augustine's notion of a sign: "things are those that are not mentioned in order to signify something, but rather are ends in themselves, Signs, then, are those things 'which are used in order to signify something else. Thus every sign is also a thing, because if it is not a thing at all then it is simply nothing.'" (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*) This begs the question about which component of this correlation constitutes the primary one, thing (object) or sign?

Returning to Aleksei Losev's reflections on linguistic signs, he distinguishes three types of existence of a linguistic sign. First of all, according to him, there is an objective reality itself which is of a corporeal nature and which creates everything within itself. It contains in itself things that exist outside and independently of our consciousness although they can be marked-designated by us within the frame of our own perception. Secondly, there is the same type of existence but reflected-represented in our consciousness. This is the same reality, i.e. the same things and phenomenon not taken in itself but taken in their forms and ideas. Thirdly, there is another type of existence which exists between objective reality and conscious-semantic existence. This type of existence is of a linguistic character that differs from the conscious-semantic type of existence because of the following feature, it is not a reproduction but is rather a specific kind of transformation of reality in order to understand it and it is not a mechanical and direct reproduction of this very reality but an original way to perceive it. This is a semantic existence (Losev, 1982. p. 89). In his notion of a linguistic sign, Losev supposes that the third (Linguistic) type of existence creates its own rules which may not always correspond to logic.

Another important concept related to linguistic sign is that of predication. According to the notion of predication

every linguistic sign is a predication of a certain type of designated objectivity. We always predicate something by a linguistic sign and this type of predication is realized on concrete things and phenomena. Predication is one of the most important categories of thinking in general. A. Losev emphasizes that the process of predication is being realized by means of consciousness and also predominantly by the process of thinking, although it is not a result of a natural correlation between things and their features. Furthermore, the profound and fundamental distinction among the corporeal objects and human consciousness is being made. The thing (object) is not a consciousness and is not thinking. It is only being reflected-represented within consciousness/thinking although by its own existence it is neither the first one, nor the second. After distinguishing between the material objects and the human consciousness the author concerns the original nature of phenomena (or things): The natural and original course of phenomena is not (their) logical course. It does not consist of concepts and accordingly, of notions but it consists only of things themselves and their causal interconnectedness. When we express something about anything it does not mean that we somehow naturally (which is a causal way) influence it. Accordingly, the sign which is a certain type of designation of objectivity, is not its result in any way. The sign is only a predicate of objectivity. The linguistic sign of an object is not its natural/original feature. (Ibid, p. 91)

As for the relation between the thing and its meaning, the author mentions the following: Firstly, there really must be an object and only after this do you name it. If there is no object there can be no word corresponding/describing this very object. But once a corresponding word for a concrete object emerges, it becomes concrete. It tries to exist with its own existence and is not at all inclined to designate those things which have created this very word and the expression of which it represents. (Ibid)

Therefore we learn that the object is the primary element of the signifier-signified correlation. It also resembles St. Augustine's notion of thing/sign correlation. In the *De Doctrina Christiana* we read, "When a sign is given to me, it can teach me nothing if it finds me ignorant of the thing of which it is the sign; The sign is not perceived as a sign until the thing which it signifies is known; or in other words, knowledge (experience) of the thing precedes knowledge of the sign (10.34). Therefore, a sign is learned when the thing is known, rather than the thing being learned when the sign is given". (10.33)

Conclusion

Accordingly we can summarize that: 1. "There is no natural connection between the linguistic sign and the things it signifies" (Aristotle) 2. "The sign is arbitrary" (Saussure), 3. "The linguistic sign of an object is not its

natural/original feature” (Losev) 4. “Knowledge (experience) of the thing precedes knowledge of the sign” (Augustine)

References

Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*. 1.2.2

Chandler, D. *Semiotics for Beginners*. (accessed on 25 September 2011). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html>

James K. A. Smith, *Between Predication and Silence: Augustine on How (Not) to Speak of God*. Available from World Wide Web: http://www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/articles/smith_james/Betw072701.pdf

Losev, A. F., (1982). *Znak, Simvol, Mif*. Izdatelstvo Moskovskogo Universiteta. (A. F. Losev. *Sign, Symbol, Myth*. Moscow University Publishing)

Mortley, R. (1986). “Appendix I.”, (accessed on 28 November 2011). Available from World Wide Web: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=word_to_silence_II

Stepanov, Y. S., *Znak. Treugolnik Frege* (accessed on 10 September 2011). Available from World Wide Web: <http://lib.vvsu.ru/books/semiotika1/page0007.asp>