

Short Incursion into Aristototele's View of Natural Languages

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Abstract:

The opinion that the theory of the linguistic sign starts with Ferdinand de Saussure, who defines this unit from a different perspective than the formal perspective adopted by Linguistics or the content perspective, adored by philosophers is not unanimously accepted. More than two millennia ago, Aristotle meditated *in nuce* on the mechanisms of human language, of the conventional rapport between *language* and the *objects* of the outer world, but also on the parts of speech – noun, verb, connectors etc. It is the general objective we start from in our study. Of the derived objectives we propose to study the relationship between *language* and *thought*, the status of language in the thinking process, the relationship between *language*, *Logic* and *knowledge* processes etc. The descriptive-linguistic method, the comparative, analytical method are among the research modes used in our study.

The first conclusion drawn is that, despite the advanced, innovative concept, language in Aristotle's view remains an *ancilla* of Logic.

Keywords: Aristotle, language, thought, Logic, ontology

In the Aristotle's philosophy, who was Plato's disciple, posterity discovers a first classification of signs opposing natural and conventional signs. Metaphors are added – a third class of signs belonging to Rhetoric, whose signified is different from the conventionally established one. Playing a special role in knowledge, metaphor presupposes passing a name from an object to another, a process that offers its transposed sign status.

The Stagirite researches, without prior systematization, the problems referring to language, that he subsums to Logic in two of his works on Philosophy, in the treaty *On Interpretation* and *Poetics*, chapter

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XX. We need to add other writings, which formulate in a non-unitary form certain ideas referring to the status of natural languages, among which, *The History of Animals*, *Organon*, *Politics*, *Metaphysics* etc. The role of language is to express thought, verbal expression becoming the *sine qua non* condition of thinking. It pertains to thinking: “everything that is to be established in utterance. Thinking is made up of: proof, rebuttal, awakening emotions, as pity, fear, anger and all other similar passions, plus the greatness or pettiness of a subject” (Balmuş, 1957: 62). Anticipating Ferdinand de Saussure, Aristotle intuitively sees the relationship between thinking and language, in the sense that thinking can only be expressed based on linguistic patterns, even if in the relationship *thinking – logic – language*, language is seen as an *ancilla* of the latter. For example, verbal inflexion (considered to be relative) is important for the function of expressing a logical relation. This conception of the role that language plays in the aforementioned trinary relationship and in the process of knowledge does not prevent the Greek philosopher from admitting the major role of linguistic expression in the formulation of logical judgement. *Language* and *thought* form *Logos*, and the relation between the two is of the type *content – container*, as modern Terminology would put it, the former being the sound, the material (language is the container) of the latter (thinking = content). In *On Interpretation*, hermeneia (communication of a thought or sense, *vox significativa*, according to Boethius) as the category mirrors “the intimate connection of thinking to language” (Florian, 1957: 195).

It is considered to be innovative to think about the relation between thinking and the objects of the outer, physical world. As a psychic, cognitive and logic process, *thinking* is manifested internally in the mind and expressed in reasoning, judgement, as we would put it today. Aristototele’s view – the world, the objects of the real are reflected in *thinking*, each representation mirrored by our mind being the image of an *object* – a relation where *language* plays the role of expressing *thought*.

The problems referring to the stability and variability of the *linguistic sign* derive from – in the linguistic conception of the 20th century – the ideal and material character of the communicative function (synchronically and diachronically), the functions of language, formulation and expression of thoughts. *Language* establishes complex relations to society, of dependence and interdependence. As a categorial entity, as a capacity, language is a human dimension – conceived as a social being. As a conventional and conventionalised semiotic system, with a paradigm (partially open, partially closed), *language* has immutable character, in Ferdinand de Saussure’s view: “If, in relation to the idea it represents, the signifier appears as freely chosen, in relation to

linguistic communication where in use, it is not free, it is imposed. Social mass is not consulted and the signifier chosen by the language could soon be replaced by another. This seems to imply a contradiction, which could be called the imposed card to play (Saussure, 2003: 87). Nearly two millenia ago, Aristotle approaches - with a “universal, unquenched thirst to know reality at its most detailed” (Florian, 1957: 15) – aspects regarding the relation between *sign* and *object* – arbitrary and motivated – between the *natural* and the *conventional* character of language. He counts among the supporters of the conception the human language has a conventional character, a feature by which the thinker justifies the wide variety of natural languages. Despite the time-defying ideas, posterity identified what is lacking from Aristotelian thought, in certain instances: “what Aristotle is overstating is the fact that he considers the surrounding reality to have as many acceptions as it has categories, utterances or expressions” (Zvanč-Ştef, 1963: 96).

The concept of *verbal expression* comprises in the Greek philosopher’s conception: the letter, the syllable, connectors, names, verb, inflexion and the sentence. In defining the letter, it is understood to be an undivided sound, which for the first time in European thinking highlights the difference between articulated and unarticulated sounds (a difference approached by Émile Benveniste at the beginning of the 20th century), but also an empiric definition of what we call *phoneme* with significance in modern terminology. About the extralinguistic signs with a recognition function, proper to human nature, Aristotle remarks: “among these signs some are intrinsic, as the sword that sees the sons of Earth or the stars in Thyestes by Carcinus. Others are (...) or on the body (...) or outside the body” (Balmuş, 1957: 51), (...) Iphigenia is recognised thanks to the letter” (Balmuş, 1957: 52) etc.

The opposition of *articulated* versus *unarticulated sounds* is inherent to the philosophical conception that *Man* differs from *Animal* through *language* and *thinking*, the former understanding the difference between right and wrong, just and unjust etc from the triple quality – of thinking being, social being and political being (to Aristotle, Man is a political animal). The auditory perception of sounds, considered to be material is not mistaken for the content of language. In the *History of Animals*, the philosopher considers that language is “the articulation of sounds with the help of the tongue”, while in *On interpretation* he states: “Articulated sounds using voice are symbols of inner states and written words are symbols for spoken words” (Florian, 1957: 206). Two ideas can be seen in this context and they are that terms to be defined are verbal sounds, while *sounds* are *signs* or *symbols* of inner states, *writing* thus becoming a *symbol of speech*. *Speech*, which in *Organon* is especially placed in the sphere of quantity together with number, is

eliminated in *Metaphysics* from this sphere. Aristotle writes: “speech is a quantity, it is obvious; as it is measured in long and short syllables. And I hereby understand that voiced speech (...) its components do not have a common limit. Since there is no common limit by which syllables are joined, but each is separate and distinct from all the others” (Florian, 1957: 138-139).

Of the classes of sounds, the philosopher has in view vowels, semivowels and the so-called silent ones. Classifying vowels according to openness, consonants and semivowels according to the place of articulation, aspirated ones according to the ending in *h*, sonorants, classifying vowels into *short* and *long* – having length in view, accent (acute, grave, circumflex) – these are but a few of the aspects that agree with the principles and rules of current Phonetics and Phonology, even if Aristototle approached them from a less grammaticalised perspective and more functionally, by comparing them to logical thinking and communication processes. As regards the relation *content-form* in language, Felicia Zvanț-Ștef made the following observation: “articulated sounds constitute in fact *the voice of sound complex*, which does not coincide with language (...) Aristotle is certainly referring to the form of language that is indeed the *voice*; he has in view only one aspect of language. The proof that Aristotle did not mistake language for the sound complex (or the voice) is found in other passages from his writing, where it is stated that language has another component beside sound, and that is content” (Zvanț-Ștef, 1963: 7). Some of the observations are close to the rules of modern Linguistics, while others lack backing. For example, Aristotle understood each continuant to be a semivowel and by syllable he means “a sound without meaning, made up of a silent one and a letter with sound”, meaning an occlusive and a vowel or an occlusive and a continuant, a fact that does not concur with modern views” (Balmuș, 1957: 65).

Linking words or what we call *connectors* constitute another subject to analyse proposed by the Greek philosopher in *Poetics*. We do not wish to dwell on the subject because, as the Academy member Constantin Balmuș observes “the entire passage regarding the connecting particle and the article is uncertain, corrupt, interpolated and possible interpretations are hard to set in line, in detail” (Balmuș, 1957: 66). We note, if only in passing, a few aspects that Aristotle considers regarding *connectors*. The first class of *linking elements* is that of particles from Greek, illustrated in examples, such as *οί* (without doubt), *μέν...* (on the one hand), while the second class contains prepositions of the type *ἀμφί* (around), the third one being the class of conjunctions, with no examples found to illustrate the category. The aforementioned classes of

connectors are void of sense and judged independently from context, they are not to designate concepts, according to the thinker.

The flexible parts of speech – name (noun), pronoun, adjective, article (considered to be demonstrative pronoun) – subordinate to the same principles of Logic are approached in *Poetics*, as well as in *On Interpretation*. In the latter work, Aristotle writes: “by name we understand a sound having a conventional meaning, without relation to time and if removed from context no part of it makes sense” (Florian, 1957: 208). By name, the philosopher understands the noun, a part of speech which is distinguished from the other morphological classes, through three characteristics – we would say in current terminology – an object, by convention or an expression of an inner state; the structural parts of the noun have no meaning, remaining simple phonetic sequences; the name does not make reference to time, this being a permanent feature of the verb, in the past, present, future forms. Unlike simple nouns, where the part does not make sense, compounds are characterised by the fact that the part contributes to the semantics of the whole “though void of meaning on its own”, as it can be deduced from the example selected by the philosopher, *pirate ship*, where *ship* “has no meaning unless found as a part of the whole compound” (Florian, 1957: 209). Words are not *natural signs* but carry conventional meanings. That explains the fact that object representations from the extralinguistic reality are the same for all speakers belonging to a population but differ from population to population. Aristotle understood another opposition too, that of the determined noun and undetermined noun, without explaining the latter concept.

If the noun is considered to belong to the most stable morphological class, a word, looked at in itself does not have the same stability, due to the differing senses (common noun, proper noun). Any “word is connected (...)” or in modern terminology, there is a relation of the concept to the “elements that are in its sphere” (Noica, 2005: 146). This is an *inner connection* of the word (at the level of its *conceptual content*). The external connections of words represent *the sine qua non condition of chaining word* in discourse – at syntagmatic level, in F. de Saussure’s terms – a level that the thinker gave special importance to.

With regard to the cases of the noun, the thinker only accepts as nouns the linguistic units that can be the subject of a judgement. In contradiction with modern grammar, nouns in oblique cases are not seen to be nouns. If Aristotle does not recognise the status of noun of these units, “the explanation is that, for him, nouns are equal to the subject of the sentence, and indeed the cases cannot be subjects. The cases express relations between representations or things, especially appurtenance (*Philon’s, to Philon*)” (Florian, 1957: 210).

The verb can be a predicate and is considered the “stable sign of the things said about something else”. C. Noica made the following observation: “at any rate, the verb is a function when compared to the noun, with a special functional horizon, make possible utterances and judgement (...). The only living and open utterance is created by the verb that elicits many empty spaces around it, not just one” (Noica, 2005: 147-148). What is the definition given by Aristotle to the concept of verb? We can read in *On interpretation*: “a verb is the word, that beside its own meaning, adds the notion of time. No part of it has independent meaning and it is the sign of something said about something else” (Florin, 1957: 210). The verb has three characteristics: it indicates time, it expresses something about something else, it indicates or qualifies the subject.

Even if we discover numerous references to the sense of words, Aristotle was not preoccupied with the problem of semantics, as it is understood in modern theory and practice, but by the problem of knowing the outer world. We read in *Categories*: “Homonymous are the things that carry the same name but the notions corresponding to the names are different (...) On the other hand, we call synonymous the things where names and corresponding notions are common. Man and ox are animals; not only the name, but also the notion are the same in both cases. As, if someone wishes to show in which sense each is an animal, they will resort to the same notion. (...) Finally, we call paronyms the things that draw their names from another name, from which they differ, usually in one ending” (Florin, 1957: 120-121). Far from being approached from the perspective of paradigmatic relations, the lexical system, homonyms are considered by Aristotle to be things.

The first conclusion to be drawn is that Aristotle reflected *in nuce* on the mechanisms of human language, the structural elements of language, and also on the process of signification, even if, as an autonomous discipline, Semiotics is only recently established. The philosopher sought to explain and demonstrate the conventional, arbitrary character of the linguistic sign, the relation that is established between the word and the reality it designates, the relation between *sign* and that which it refers to – we would say today – above all, from the perspective of the thinker. The Aristotelian concept of the parts of speech, the phoneme is modern and enticing, tightly connected to Logic, maintaining language at the level of an *ancilla* of Logic, as it usually happens in the stages of development of European culture, up to the *Grammar of Porte-Royale*.

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