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Unlocking the nature of the linguistic sign: in-between motivation and arbitrariness

1. Introduction

It is probably true that if we were to think of the common denominator for all the major paradigms of 20th century theoretical linguistics, this shared commonality would be the conception of language understood as a system. Yet in the 19th century, language was perceived in dramatically different terms, either as (i) a nomenclature, or (ii) a living organism, or (iii) a historical product. As the latest developments in theoretical linguistics are often presented as a revision of some of the 19th century insights[1], for better advancement of the ideas in the sections that follow, we include here a very brief characterization of the three major conceptions of language in the 19th century.

2. Language in 19th c. linguistics

Nomenclature. If seen as a nomenclature, language is an inventory of linguistic signs, each of which results from matching an element from a set of sound forms with an element from a set of prior-given and language-independent concepts, or, as Saussure[2] would put it in short, language is "a list of terms corresponding to a list of things". In Thibault's account,

> In this view, there is a direct and unmediated connection between words and the objects, etc. 'out there' in the real world. Language is simply used to name, label or otherwise refer to these. This embodies the assumption that language is a transparent and non-semiotic medium which simply reflects or refers to the extralinguistic reality

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[1]   W. Croft, *Typology and Universals*, 2nd edition, Cambridge 2003, p. 290.

[2]   F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, London 1983, p. 65.

which exists outside it. Language, in this view, plays no role in the construction of the social reality of its users[3].

This, in effect, reduces language to a labelling device, or schedules language to play the role of a passive name-giver that cannot do anything but capture, with its names, the qualities of the objects the names are supposed to refer to.

Living organism. What the conception of language as a living organism imports in the first place is that languages are objects of natural development/evolution. They remain a play of natural, if not just biological, forces, and, thus, as Darwin[4] would later put it, "can be classed in groups under groups; […] classed either naturally according to descent, or artificially by other characters". A clear example of this conviction comes from Müller:

> We can collect [languages], we can classify them, we can reduce them to their constituent elements, and deduce from them some of the laws that determine their origin, govern their growth, necessitate their decay; we can treat them, in fact, in exactly the same spirit in which the geologist treats his stones and petrifications, – nay, in some respects, in the same spirit in which the astronomer treats the stars of heaven or the botanist the flowers of the field. There *is* a Science of Language as there is a science of the earth, its flowers and its stars[5].

There should be no surprise that with the emphasis on making comparisons, discovering analogies and producing typologies, the conception of language as a living organism flourished within the framework of so-called comparative philology. Here is a reading of 'organic' that Collinge ascribes to probably the three most representative adherents of 19th century linguistic comparativism:

> […] F. Schlegel […] saw comparative anatomy as the likeliest illuminant; and to it he opposed the term 'mechanical'. […] [W]hat was 'organic' was understood to be that which in itself contained the seeds of further development. For Bopp the diagnostic characteristic of the 'organic' was above all the ability of lexical roots to change shape for syntactic purposes in ever more subtle way. […] In the case of Schleicher, whose early and abiding interest was in botany, the revelation was that languages relate naturally to one another as subspecies, but […] without any necessary expectation of progressive amelioration as an aim […]. Their forms […] evolved with a natural wastefulness, and then decreased in number over time from an overgeneralization of idioms […]; thus they were subject to a continuous decay (*Verfall*)[6].

One way or another, "the great catchword was 'organic'"[7], which went along with interpreting languages as animal or plant species, their growth and decay.

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[3]   P. J. Thibault, *Re-Reading Saussure. The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life*, London and New York 1997, p. 23–24.

[4]   Ch. Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, John Murray, Albemarle Street [quoted from the 1889 imprint], London 1874, p. 90.

[5]   F. M. Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, Longmans, Green, London 1864, lecture 1.

[6]   N. E. Collinge, *History of comparative linguistics*, [in:] E. F. K. Koerner, R. E. Asher (eds.), *Concise History of the Language Sciences. From the Sumerians to the Cognitivists*, New York 1995, p. 199–200.

[7]   Ibidem, p. 199.

Historical product. Equally Darwinism-based seems to be the suggestion that language is a historical continuum, a derivative of the endless cumulative interplay between sound change and analogy[8]. For that reason, as an alleged cause of language change, Paul[9] rejects "the conscious intention of single individuals", "the caprice of the monarch" included, in favour of "the slow, involuntary and unconscious changes to which the usage of language is perpetually exposed". He claims that:

> The real reason for the variability of usage is to be sought only in regular linguistic activity. From this all voluntary influence in usage is excluded. No other purpose operates in this, save that which is directed to the immediate need of the moment – the intention of rendering one's wishes and thoughts intelligible to others. For the rest, purpose plays in the development of language no other part than that assigned to it by Darwin in the development of organic nature, – the greater or lesser fitness of the forms which arise is decisive for their survival or disappearance[10].

Language owes its shape then to the operation of the principle of natural selection which – if allowed to operate historically, that is over space and time – presents language as a playground for the survival of the fittest.

Yet, exercised most vigorously on the grounds of historical linguistics[11], the conception of language as a product of history had also its more 'internal', i.e. language-oriented, slant, as in the programme of the so-called Neogrammarians. Collinge sees their three major tenets as follows:

> I. […][Language is an aspect of human cognition and social interaction; […] is not an 'organic' phenomenon […].
> II. '[U]niformitarianism' is desirable as a controlling subtheory: that is, 'the psychological and physiological nature of man as speaker must have been essentially identical at all epochs' […].
> III. [T]o properly formulated changes no contrary cases are admissible […][12].

The parameter of history was so overwhelming for the Neogrammarians that, as Culler (1986: 82) assesses their programme, even if they abandoned thinking of languages

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8   R. Harris, T. J. Taylor, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought I. The Western Tradition from Socrates to Saussure*, 2nd edition, London and New York 1997, p. 191–192.

9   H. Paul, *Principles of the History of Language*, London 1880–1891, p. 12–13.

10   Ibidem, p. 12–13.

11   While assigning particular dogmas to specific schools of 19th century linguistics, one should remember Collinge's (*History…*, op. cit., p. 195) warning that "it is not easy in practice to distinguish 'comparative' from 'historical' linguistics", especially if we deal with the problems of language typology and language classification. No wonder then that Koerner (*History of Typology and Language Classification*, [in:] E. F. K. Koerner, R. E. Asher (eds.), *Concise History of the Language Sciences. From the Sumerians to the Cognitivists*, New York 1995, p. 213) considers Schlegel's typological attempts to be "a program of comparative-historical research" and speaks about his impact on "subsequent development in historical or genetic as well as comparative linguistics in the nineteenth century".

12   N. E. Collinge, *History of comparative linguistics*, [in:] E. F. K. Koerner, R. E. Asher (eds.), *Concise History of the Language Sciences. From the Sumerians to the Cognitivists*, New York 1995, p. 205. It is Tenet III in particular that sets the Neogrammarians apart from earlier attempts within the 19th century strand of historical linguistics. For example, 50 years before they came up with the rigor of 'exceptionless laws', what Grimm thought about the 'law' he himself had designed was "that the correspondences were merely of high frequency and he did not fret over exceptions" (Ibidem, p. 204).

in terms of biological metaphors, they still assumed that "their science must be based on historical continuity and must analyze historical evolution", as if language were an organism living in space and time.

However divergent in their specific theoretical tenets and practical applications, these three 19th century conceptions share the general conviction that language is non-autonomous. In each of the three, linguistic motivation will, of course, come from different sources and have different patterns, yet all three agree that what must be seen in language in the first place is external forces that determine the ultimate shape of language. This thesis was subjected to radical and thorough evaluation in the 20th century.

3. Language as a system

Indeed, at the beginning of the 20th century, Saussure questioned all three of the conceptions of language discussed above. And thus, instead of the nomenclaturist convergence between the name (in language) and the object (in the world), he postulated the arbitrariness of the association between the signifier and the signification within the bounds of the linguistic sign. The comparativist thesis of language as a natural object was replaced with a conception of the social and conventional character of language. And the historical notion of language as a continuum was rejected in favour of the synchronically delimited relations within idealized language states. Saussure provided the following definition of language:

> […] A language is a system of pure values, determined by nothing else apart from the temporary state of its constituent elements. […] A language is a system of which all the parts can and must be considered as synchronically interdependent[13].

Consequently, if this system is neither a derivative of natural constraints (but a product of social conventionalisation) nor an outcome of historical influences (but a result of arbitrary pairing of sounds and meanings), then it must be autonomous, independent of external influences, alienated from the rest of human experience. Indeed, this is precisely how Saussure argues about language:

> The language itself is a system which admits no other order than its own. This can be brought out by comparison with the game of chess. In the case of chess, it is relatively easy to distinguish between what is external [non-systemic] and what is internal [systemic]. The fact that chess came from Persia to Europe is an external fact, whereas everything which concerns the system and its rules is internal. If pieces made of ivory are substituted for pieces made of wood, the change makes no difference to the system. But if the number of pieces is diminished or increased, that is a change which profoundly affects the 'grammar' of the game[14].

With this analogy Saussure expresses deep concern about the appropriate terminology to be used. At no point does he appear to suggest with the terms that he employs that language could in the least be dependent on cognitive conceptualization, symbolization,

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13   F. de Saussure, *Course…*, op. cit., p. 80, 86.
14   Ibidem, p. 23.

or metaphorization. This is, for example, why in search for the right name to be given to the basic linguistic unit, he rejects *symbol* in favour of *sign*. As he believes,

> Th[e] use of the word *symbol* is awkward, for reasons connected with our first principle [i.e. of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign]. For it is characteristic of symbols that they are never entirely arbitrary. They are not empty configurations. They show at least a vestige of natural connexion between the signal and its signification. For instance, our symbol of justice, the scales, could hardly be replaced by a chariot[15].

In other words, symbols remain in a justified, or at least transparent, relationship with the objects they refer to, whereas language – as a system of arbitrary signs – is deprived of this motivated relationship. Saussure continues,

> One can […] argue about whether monogamy is better than polygamy, and adduce reasons for and against. One could likewise discuss the pros and cons of a system of symbols, because a symbol has a rational connexion with what it symbolizes. But for a language, as a system of arbitrary signs, any such basis is lacking, and consequently there is no firm ground for discussion[16].

Saussure, it seems, could not make his point clearer and more forcefully than in this passage. Even a cursory review of some of the post-Sausurean definitions and conceptions of language shows how deeply rooted in 20th century linguistics was the view that language was a system, or rather, as Verschueren aptly describes it,

> an autonomous system in which all elements are functionally related to each other and derive their significance entirely from the functional relationships with other elements[17].

To give some examples[18], Bloch and Trager[19] make it clear that "a language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates". Robins' definition is equally unambiguous: "[languages] are symbol systems [..] almost wholly based on pure or arbitrary convention"[20].

A systemic slant can also be ascribed to Hall[21] when he writes that "[language] is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols". Though Hall does not make use of the term system itself, yet the very fact that he compares language to an institution suggests that he envisages language as an entity that is not only heavily structured

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15   Ibidem, p. 68.

16   Ibidem, p. 73.

17   J. Verschueren, *Understanding Pragmatics*, London 1999, p. 9.

18   As Fawcett [*A Theory of Syntax for Systemic Functional Linguistics*, (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 206), Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2000, p. 33] writes, "Saussure's ideas have influenced most theories of language developed in the twentieth century, though this is not always overtly acknowledged by their progenitors". Once properly acknowledged, however, Saussure indeed appears at least as much of a reference point as once reflected by Firth [*Personality and language in society*, [in:] *Papers in Linguistics 1934–1951*, London 1950/1957, p. 179] in his fourfold classification of linguistics: Saussureans, anti-Saussureans, post-Saussureans, and non-Saussureans. This, as Harris [R. Harris, *Saussure and his Interpreters*, Edinburgh 2001] has shown, can well include such recognized names as Bloomfield, Hjelmslev, Jacobson, or Chomsky.

19   B. Bloch, G. L. Trager, *Outline of Linguistic Analysis*, Baltimore 1942, p. 5.

20   R. H. Robins, *General Linguistics: An Introductory Survey*, London 1979, p. 9–14.

21   R. A. Hall, *An Essay on Language*, Philadelphia and New York 1968, p. 158.

and socially sanctioned (institutionalized), but also based in its functioning on its own unique and internally defined relations. This indeed brings an image of a system as both a self-defining and self-regulating mechanism.

Equally systemic, though not as straightforward, is the definition put forward by Sapir[22]: "[language] is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols". At first glance, it may seem that, for Sapir, language is more of a practical tool ("method") than an abstract system. Yet, Sapir ascribes the phonemic character to language and claims that

> between the articulation of the voice into the phonetic sequence […] and such symbolically significant entities as words, phrases and sentences there happens a very interesting process of phonetic selection and generalization[23].

This hidden process causes that "speech is no longer an expressive flow of sounds, but becomes a symbolic composition created out of limited material, or a limited number of elements"[24].

Moreover, if Sapir were really prepared to reject the conception of language as an autonomous system, he would not speak of linguistic predetermination and interpenetration of human existence:

> It is important to realize that language may not only refer to experience […] but that it also substitutes for it in the sense that in those sequences of interpersonal behaviour which form the greater part of our daily lives speech and action supplement each other[25].

Indeed, the autonomy of language is for him so extensive that what he sees in language is, in the last resort, a substitute for reality. "Man's life as that of an animal shaped by culture is dominated by the verbal substitutes of the physical world"[26].

With regard to Chomsky, though there is evidence that he would define language as a set, rather than a system, nevertheless, he directly continues Saussure's idea of language self-sufficiency. As Jeffries writes,

> Linguists in the early part of the twentieth century concerned themselves with describing what de Saussure called 'language', the system of language from which all actual occurrences of language were drawn (he named this use of the system 'parole'). The distinction between the abstract language 'system' and the practical use of the system in everyday life has remained very important in language study. Even when Chomsky was changing the face of linguistics the distinction only changed slightly in emphasis[27].

Indeed, even if we limit our attention to Chomsky[28] where he claims that "from now on [he] will consider a language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite

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[22]   E. Sapir, *Language*, New York 1921, p. 8.

[23]   E. Sapir, *Language*, [in:] H. Hungerford, J. L. Robinson, J. Sledd (eds.), *English Linguistics. An Introductory Reader*, Glenview 1933/1970, p. 16–17.

[24]   Ibidem.

[25]   Ibidem, p. 16–17.

[26]   Ibidem, p. 24.

[27]   L. Jeffries, *Meaning in English. An Introduction to Language Study*, London 1998, p. 27–28.

[28]   N. Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, The Hague 1957, p. 13.

in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements", we can safely expect that for Chomsky, language is organized according to a set of rules which generate an infinite number of structures out of a finite number of elements. What we in effect obtain is a system of relations that are called here rules and/or transformations.

There is, however, an interesting difference between Saussure's and Chomsky's ways of presenting language as a system. Taylor sees this divergence as follows:

> With the advent of Chomsky's generative-transformational paradigm, […] language was no longer regarded as a self-contained system, independent of its users; rather, the object of investigation is a 'system of knowledge' […] residing in a person's brain. In Chomsky's work, this mentalistic conception of language goes with the much more controversial claim of the modularity of mind. […] Language is autonomous in the sense that the language faculty itself is an autonomous component of mind, in principle independent of other mental faculties[29].

If for Saussure language is a system independent of the user, then for Chomsky, language is a system independent of the user's cognitive faculties. If we were one more time to use the chess analogy, we could say that for Saussure, language resembles a game of chess in this sense that no matter who it is to sit and play, he/she must get to know and learn the internal rules of the game and the values of the pieces. The chess player is not in a position to do anything about either the rules or the values (i.e. nothing like impose/ introduce his/her own motivation, explanation, change, modification) but has to accept and use them in an actual situation on the chessboard. For Chomsky, there is no such compelling necessity or pressure upon the player, because language, with its rules and values, already resides in the human mind. This time language resembles the game of chess in the sense that one's knowledge of the rules, pieces, and their values is an arbitrary function of the mind. Yet, one way or the other, in Saussure as well as in Chomsky, we have language as an encapsulated entity independent from the rest of human cognition and experience.

4. Language as a symbol

The conception of language as an autonomous system was truly challenged only with the advent of so-called functional linguistics which, as DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman[30] see it on the grounds of applied linguistics, "focuses more on appropriate use of language, that is, on how language functions in discourse". Here is how, respectively, (i) Givón, (ii) Copeland, and (iii) Chafe understand the descriptive and explanatory appeal of functionalism:

> (i) All functionalists subscribe to at least one fundamental assumption *sine qua non,* the non-autonomy postulate: that language (and grammar) can be neither described nor explained adequately as an autonomous system[31].

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[29] J. R. Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization. Prototypes in Linguistic Theory*, Oxford 1995, p. 16–17.

[30] J. DeCarrico, D. Larsen-Freeman, *Grammar*, [in:] N. Schmitt (ed.), *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*, London 2003, p. 21–24.

[31] T. Givón, *Functionalism and Grammar*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1995, p. xv.

(ii) [W]hat unites functional linguists is an implicit belief that language cannot be conceptualized or described separate from its functions in discourse; that autonomy of form or formal categories separate from function is a misguided myth, a myth that ultimately constrains progress in the understanding of language as a dynamic human phenomenon[32].

(iii) There are two kinds of linguists. One kind finds something in language that has no apparent reason for being there and says, "Hurrah! I've found something that's unmotivated. Language must be innately wired into the human brain, because otherwise there is no reason for this thing." The other kind finds something in language that *is* motivated, either cognitively or socially or […] historically, and this person says, "Hurrah! Here is something that has a reason"[33].

While in 20th century linguistics language was predominantly seen as a determinant of how humans perceive the world, thus assuming a dominant and objective role with regard to cognitive faculties, in functional linguistics, language is a derivative of how humans, among other things, conceptualize the world, thus assuming a subordinate and subjective position with regard to cognitive tensions and forces. In short, as Saeed[34] sees it, "linguistic knowledge is part of general cognition".

We can see that in what might be regarded as Langacker's definition of language:

Language is symbolic in nature. It makes available to the speaker – for either personal or communicative use – an open-ended set of linguistic signs or expressions, each of which associates a semantic representation of some kind with a phonological representation[35].

First of all, let us notice the clear contrast between the communicative and expressive (here: "personal") functions of language, the latter being specified, symptomatically enough, as the first one[36]. Langacker, then, seems to make room for such a dimension of language that consists of individual, relative, expressive, and subjective linguistic projections. These can no longer come from an arbitrary system, but result from motivated conceptualizations that are, by definition, symbols of human experience.

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[32] J. E. Copeland, *Introduction*, [in:] D. G. Lockwood, P. H. Fries, J. E. Copeland (eds.), *Functional Approaches to Language, Culture and Cognition. Papers in Honor of Sydney M. Lamb*, (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 163.), Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2000, p. xv.

[33] W. Chafe, *Putting grammaticalization in its place*, [in:] I. Wischer, G. Diewald (eds.), *New Reflections on Grammaticalization*, (Typological Studies in Language 49), 394–412, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2002.

[34] J. I. Saeed, *Semantics*, Oxford 2003, p. 342.

[35] R. W. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Theoretical Prerequisites*, Stanford 1987, p. 11.

[36] 4 There is a good reason, of course, why the individual/personal aspect of language is not even touched upon in any of the definitions quoted above in Section 2. In 20th century linguistics, the whole idea of language functionality or purposefulness was limited exclusively to the parameter of communication. Within an autonomous system, that which is individual or personal must necessary be neutralized by that which is global, universal, collective, or social. Similarly to Langacker, Givón (*Syntax. An Introduction*, Vol. 1, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2001, p. 7) speaks of not one (i.e. communication), but two primary functions ascribed to language: "It will be taken for granted here that the two primary functions of human language are the representation and communication of knowledge (experience)." The personal dimension of language may not be clearly visible in these words, yet Givón's notion of knowledge (experience) representation can well be read as that of language that is used for purposes other than mere communication (i.e. exchanging or transferring pieces of information).

This is related to the postulate of an unbiased and holistic view of the word that is not only open *to*, but, first of all, is opened *by* cognitive pressures and experiential imprints. These are believed to strip the word of its illusory system-defined objectivity and present as a symbolic projection of one's subjectivity. The word comes as a production of one single mind indulged in his/her own fancies as much as exposed to the vagaries of other minds. The virtual world of meaning comes into being at the junction of the crisscrossing projections and influences[37], all being a derivative of how that which is communicated is expressed.

The meaning of the word is then an interplay of the actual content and intent. As Traugott and Dasher write,

> [Speaker/Writer] selects not only the content, but also the expression of that content […]. In the dynamic production of speech or writing, linguistic material may be used in novel ways to express that subjectivity. […] Creative writers and rhetoricians tend to be highly conscious of their selections, others less so. Choices are correlated with register […], and with degree of attention to an audience […]. In all cases choices are particularly highly correlated with strategic intent and explicit coding of that intent[38].

Similarly, Langacker stresses the importance of "how the conceptualiser chooses to construe the situation and portray it for expressive purposes"[39], or that "when we use a particular construction or grammatical morpheme, we thereby select a particular image to structure the conceived situation for communicative purposes"[40]. We still do communicate by means of using language, but because this communication is marked with our intent as much as with our content, what is actually communicated is our conceptualizations, or, for that matter, symbols of our experience.

5. Final remarks

If then a new (symbol-based) approach to language has emerged, there arises the question not only of its descriptive (theoretical) importance, but also of practical application. This concern can be found in Fawcett:

> An […] approach to evaluating the importance of a theory is to ask what effect it has on the various fields in which a model of language is required – i.e., the various areas of 'applied linguistics'. […] It is descriptions of languages – not theories – that get used to help solve problems of various sorts in fields such as the teaching and learning of languages, translation between languages, […] and the like – these being what are usually thought of as the 'applications' of the theory. But the fact is that you cannot

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[37] P. Łozowski, *Deconstructing the world-view: from actuality to virtuality in cognitive linguistics*, [in:] B. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, K. Turewicz (eds.), *Cognitive Linguistics Today*, (Łódź Studies in Language 6), Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 77.

[38] E. Traugott, R. B. Dasher, *Regularity in Semantic Change.* (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 97), Cambridge 2002, p. 20–21.

[39] R. W. Langacker, *Concept, Image, and Symbol. The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*, (Cognitive Linguistic Research 1), Berlin and New York 2002, p. 315.

[40] Ibidem, p. 12.

apply a theory of language directly to a problem; you can only apply a theory-based description of a particular language (or languages)[41].

For example, one of these applied linguistics-oriented objectives could be to try and see whether there any traces of applying a symbol-based description of English to a practical task, such as making a foreign learner's dictionary[42]. As Halliday writes,

> The principle that language is understood in relation to its environment is nowhere more evident than in the activities of language education. […] [W]hereas the environment for language as text is the context of situation, the environment for language as system is the context of culture[43].

This is because, Halliday continues, "[language] functioned as the primary means whereby the deepest perception of the members, their joint construction of shared experience into social reality, were constantly reaffirmed and transmitted"[44].

Indeed, as we argue elsewhere[45], there seems to be a growing and irresistible tendency to make more and more room for, say, "human agency", to open the closed, self-regulating and self-defining system of binary lexical oppositions in favour of experientially delimited and cognitively driven considerations. These include (i) giving expression to speakers' subjective awareness, (ii) recording their relative cognitive tensions, and (iii) demystifying symbols of their experience. Next to the semantic definition of the word, a learner of English finds in the dictionary a huge dose of encyclopaedia, which is world knowledge as reflected in the language. Because it is human experience that shapes language (and not the other way round), the knowledge we find in language is precisely what human experience can actually be – unbalanced, unstable, dynamic, vague, loaded with prejudice, and marked with asymmetry. We must not forget, then, that words function as social labels and as such they draw "on social stereotypes, moral attitudes, old connotations and future possibilities – in short, ideologies of various kinds"[46]. Indeed, human experience is so much stained with the subjectivity of the one who verbalizes it that any attempt at objectivizing that experience, e.g. in the form of an autonomous lexical system, can only prove futile and superfluous.

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[41] R. Fawcett, *A Theory…*, op. cit., p. xvi.

[42] W. Grabe, *Applied linguistics: an emerging discipline for the twenty-first century*, [in:] R. B. Kaplan, (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, Oxford 2002, p. 11.

[43] M. A. K. Halliday, *The notion of "context" in language education*, [in:] M. Ghadessy (ed.), *Text and Context in Functional Linguistics*, (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 169), Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1998, p. 1.

[44] Ibidem, p. 5.

[45] P. Łozowski, *Boy, girl, man, woman* in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978–1995), [in:] A. Stulajterova (ed.), *Teoria a prax pripravy buducich translatologov a ucitelov angliskeho jazyka II*, Banska Bystrica 2014; *Lexical Semantics with and without Sense Relations: Pig Terms in EFL Dictionaries*, [in:] L. Cao, L. Jin (eds.), *New Pilgrimage: Selected Papers from the IAUPE Beijing Conference in 2013*, Beijing 2015; *W poszukiwaniu kultury realnej: definicja realnoznaczeniowa*, [w:] M. Karwatowska, R. Litwińskiand, A. Siwiec (eds.), *Wielki słownik języka polskiego*, *Człowiek. Zjawiska i teksty kultury w komunikacji społecznej*, Lublin 2015; *W poszukiwaniu (nie)dosłowności w definicjach słownikowych: między wypowiedziane i domniemane*, [in:] M. Odelski, A. Knapik, P. Chruszczewski, W. Chłopicki (eds.), *Niedosłowność w języku*, „Język a komunikacja", 37/2016.

[46] A. Wong, S. J. Roberts, K. Campbell-Kibler, *Speaking sex*, [in:] K. Campbell-Kibler, R. J. Podesva, S. J. Roberts, A. Wong (eds.), *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*, California 2002, p. 6.

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Abstract
Unlocking the nature of the linguistic sign: in-between motivation and arbitrariness

It is assumed that the radical changes that have taken place in theoretical linguistics over the last 3 decades or so has led to a rejection of the conception of language seen exclusively as an independent and autonomous system of signs. Having set this conception against the background of the major 19th century approaches to language, we claim that the autonomy postulate seems to have been giving way to the idea that language is a symbol of human experience. The article presents, then, a brief, yet systematic, historical survey of the from-motivation-via-arbitrariness-to-motivation projection of linguistics since the 19th century, and identifies some of the practical implications of this projection.

Keywords: history of linguistics, theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics, system, symbol