Meaning, Discourse, Text and Translation. An Overview and Recapitulation of Linguistic Concepts

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Abstract

An article deals with the issue of language and its main concepts of meaning, discourse, text and translation. It is assumed as the recapitulation of these main concepts and is intended to present these terms as necessary for the understanding of modern branches of linguistics and philosophy, such as e.g. transhumanism. The problem of language is treated here as an integral part of the discussion on conscious being and as a precondition of an understanding of its nature. The author finds, in contrast to some modern currents in linguistics, that the issue of language still constitutes the irreplaceable element of the consideration of the nature of the individual and its relation with the outside world

Keywords: language, meaning, discourse, text, translation.

Streszczenie

Znaczenie, dyskurs, tekst i tłumaczenie. Przegląd i rekapitulacja pojęć językoznawczych

Artykuł dotyczy problematyki języka i jego głównych pojęć, takich jak: znaczenie, dyskurs, tekst i tłumaczenie. Jest on pomyślany jako rekapitulacja tych pojęć i jest nakierowany na przedstawienie ich jako koniecznych dla zrozumienia współczesnych dziedzin językoznawstwa i filozofii, takich jak np. transhumanizm. Problem języka jest tu potraktowany jako integralna część dyskusji na temat świadomego podmiotu i jako warunek wstępny zrozumienia jego charakteru. Autor uważa, że problematyka języka stanowi niezastąpiony element namysłu nad charakterem jednostki i jej relacji do zewnętrznego świata.

Keywords: język, znaczenie, dyskurs, tekst, translacja

1. Introduction

In contemporary philosophy as well as linguistics and disciplines that originate from it, more and more attention is devoted to the problems of artificial intelligence (Haraway 1985), processes of individuation (Stiegler [2006] 2014), posthuman ethics, robots and the point of singularity beyond which a machine becomes a conscious being (Braidotti [2013] 2014). However, in these undertakings, it seems as if the issue of language has been completely lost from sight or forgotten and when it is noticed, it is explained without proper care, as if it was of no importance. Still, we cannot overlook that the main description of the relation of the conscious being toward the world is of linguistic nature. Thus, in order to transfer the attention from linguistic to biological phenomena, as it happens in contemporary philosophy, it is essential not to discard the former ones, because they constitute the very foundation from which we can deduce the subject's further description only a posteriori. Language constitutes an integral part of the subject and it cannot be dispensed with as an irrelevant element. Hence, linguistics must be treated as a field of science necessary for proper understanding of the subject, also, understanding modern, popular currents of philosophy needs linguistic explanation, e.g. it is impossible to talk about transhumanism without taking into account the fact that what constitutes the subject most and makes it truly unique is exactly its language and the way of communicating. Thus, I would like to provide a necessary and sufficient explanation of the crucial language-derived notions and to recapitulate problems that are most useful in understanding the irreducible linguistic character of the subject

2. The way to language

In the middle of the 20th century, philosophy and social sciences experienced a major transformation referred to as the "linguistic turn", which inaugurated a shift from classical, subject-oriented thinking to a focus on issues concentrated more on the problem of language. Language came to play the main, transformational role in the humanities and social sciences, and it was treated as the main object of reference for different areas of study.

In my article, first, I would like to provide the reader with the information about the phenomena that accompanied the processes of the emancipation of the problems of language. What is important here is that initially it had been the subject, and metaphysics organized around it, that had played the main role in the theory dealing with the relation of the human being with the outside world. Interestingly, in the beginning of the discussion about linguistic issues the essence of the human being was not conceived as linguistic at all. On the contrary, the

supremacy of the idealized "I" was visible. The idea that the human being is essentially language and that his overall relation with other beings and the world is linguistic in its nature appeared only much later. To introduce the reader into the issues of language and discourse, I would first like to provide the necessary information on the processes accompanying the emancipation of the issues connected with language.

At the beginning it is worth observing that the supremacy of this idealized "I" became more clearly visible when Friedrich Nietzsche ([1886] 1997) deprived this "I" of the revitalizing powers coming from a metaphysical "God", who personified all the things that human beings wanted to do but could not, so they transferred the responsibility for not being able to actualize these desired state of affairs to the supernatural powers of this metaphysical "One". When Nietzsche ([1886] 1997) cut the connection with this supernatural idea, the subject was left on the scene devoid of God and strengthened by its independence from exterior powers. Yet this subject still performed the role of God and stood for the power of the independent substance of Being, a Being that was metaphysical in the classical, Platonian sense: the subject was the Being that was one, independent Substance, which cannot be declared about other, secondary beings, but only may be declared and determined by them.

This situation changed when Martin Heidegger in his main work "Being and Time" ([1927] 1994) substituted the traditional question about a metaphysical Being with the question about particular, individual beings fixed in time. These beings are not founded on metaphysical substance, they last in their individual shapes as understanding and interpretation. Since this moment, understanding and interpretation have no longer been regarded as methods for gaining knowledge about the world; they have become the main ontological traits of human beings, so we can say that human beings do not use understanding and interpretation to acquire knowledge about the world, but they rather are understanding and interpretation: human being is interpretation, this is its main attitude toward the surrounding world, it cannot refer to the world in a different way. To describe this new understanding of particular beings Martin Heidegger ([1927] 1994) introduced the notion of *Dasein*, which means that humans as finite beings are, ontologically, understanding and interpretation, they are 'right here', thrown into the world, and nothing more explicit may be told about their basic linguistic situation. Thus they are language. This is a dramatic change from the time when the metaphysical, substantial subject ruled in the theory of philosophy.

This Heideggerian shift from the epistemological to the ontological understanding of the subject prepared the ground for further analysis. While sustaining the main transformation introduced by Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer ([1975] 2004) added conversation as a way of

producing a fusion of the horizons of knowledge. This fusion was the precondition for understanding, interpretation and translation (*Auslegung*) and finally played a decisive role in the creation of a new area of philosophy called hermeneutics. According to hermeneutics, in the process of gaining knowledge, the notion of hermeneutical circle is used, which means that in order to understand the whole of the given meaningful extract, the subject has to start from its parts, and only later, on the basis of these parts, it projects the meaning of the whole. The same works for the extract: if the subject wants to understand the extract, it has to look at it from the perspective of the whole text. This circle is the main notion of both theories: Heideggerian and Gadamerian. We can also say that for both of these theories, but especially for hermeneutics, it was language that became the main actor on the scene of philosophy.

Despite this change of focus from metaphysical subject to language, language was still employed in the enterprise of building a more suitable form of subject and did not yet involve the examination of its processes and values. This change was not inaugurated until the writings focused exclusively on language had appeared; Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Gottfried Herder and Ferdinand de Saussure contributed greatly to the achievements in the area later called linguistics. However, it was not until Michel Foucault published his first work that the notion of discourse itself appeared on the scene.

3.   Language and discourse: definition

In order to introduce the reader into studies on discourse and translation, I would like to explain the notion of discourse, as it is the core problem around which different analyses were organized. The discussion of discourse was initiated in the 1960s by Foucault. In 1966 he published his work titled *The Order of Things* (Foucault [1966] 2002) where he formulated the notion of discourse as "a way of speaking, arranging and presenting representations of the world in a logical order" (O'Farrell 2005: 41). The analysis of discourse undertaken in the works of Foucault introduces the reader into the structuralist and poststructuralist understanding of the notion of meaning and its setting in the social context, which were the main assumptions of this new idea of language. From the time of the publication of Foucault's first works, the newly emerging field of research called discourse linguistics presented the problem of meaning from a different angle. Meaning ceased to be understood as a separate unity possessing individual sense, but came to be understood as an element of the larger phenomena called context. An important prerequisite to this new understanding of meaning was the notion of a game introduced by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, its workings were formulated as follows: "the

various members of the category 'game' do not share a set of common properties on whose basis games can be clearly distinguished from non-games" (Taylor [1989] 2005: 38). Likewise, meaning cannot be understood as an independent being whose content depends on it alone. Sometimes, something is meant in one situation, and the same meaning is something else in another. Thus, when we want to determine the content of a particular meaning we are approaching the idea of what Foucault called enunciation. As one of the most important notions for the Foucauldian understanding of the problem of discourse, enunciation means something that is stated in what has been uttered. This means that, depending on the situation, the same utterance may mean different things. That is why Foucault asks the interpreter or the translator to consider what is stated in what has been uttered (See: Foucault [1969] 2011: 124) . This question highlights the role of context in the formulation of meaning. And when we consider context, we must also take a closer look at the problem of text and textuality.

The problem of the textuality of a text originates from the works by Jacques Derrida, who, in the work titled *Of Grammatology* (Derrida [1967] 1997) , expressed his attitude toward this problem in his famous formulation: "There is nothing outside of the text" (Derrida [1967] 1997: 158). This sentence clearly states the problem of texture and textuality: if there is nothing outside of the text "there is also no outside text" ((Derrida [1967] 1997: 158) – in other words, nothing exists that could be something other than text or, to put it another way, there is no text-independent reality – everything is or can be read as a text. In this situation all textual elements are related to other textual elements and there is no original point from which these texts could originate. Everything is only a text and is readable through other texts. This conclusion leads us even further: if everything is related to another text we can also talk about the intertextuality of texts and signs. According to contemporary linguists Martin Reisigi and Ruth Wodak, whose work was presented in the volume on methods of critical discourse analysis edited by Ruth Wodak and Micheal Meyer [2009] 2014 "intertextuality means that texts are linked to other texts, both in the past and in the present. Such connections are established in different ways: through explicit reference to a topic or main actor; through references to the same events" (Reisigi, Wodak, [2009] 2014: 90). Reisigi and Wodak also state here that "the process of transferring given elements to new contexts is labeled recontextualisation (…) [which means that] the element (partly) acquires a new meaning, since meanings are formed in use" (*ibid.*). Thus, like the problem of enunciation presented in the *Archeology of Knowledge* by Foucault ([1969] 2011) where the meaning of an utterance depends on the situation in which it is expressed, meaning in the writings by Derrida depends on the context in which it is placed. As a result, the process of transferring some elements from one context to another could be referred

to as translation. The difference between Derridean and more contemporary understanding of the problem of text and meaning-formation consists only in the kind of context we are talking about. A change of context for Wodak and Reisigi amounts to a change of social situation. When different elements are transferred from one social context to another, we call it recontextualisation. However, when we treat context not as a social context but as a textual context we have to change the surrounding text in order to achieve recontextualisation. Translation then is a particular kind of recontextualization: a situation of context change, where the context, in the light of the words by Derrida that there is "nothing outside of the text" (Derrida [1967] 1997: 158), has a textual, rather than a social nature. We can treat this transference not as a transference to a different social setting, but as a transference to a different linguistic situation. And a different linguistic situation for the reader, listener or interpreter is the situation of using a foreign language and using a foreign language assumes translation.

4. Language in use: translation

The problem of text and context is even more complicated because contemporary, post-Foucauldian and post-Derridean linguists have changed the model of meaning on which the problem of translation was traditionally based. The traditional, Platonian meaning-for-itself has given way to meaning in context, where context means not the surrounding text, but the real, social production of the social actors. Thus, it is not only the text that can be treated as the context, but also the actual, social communication of social actors within the area of a given social environment. Roger Bell calls

> to relate one sentence to another and to recognize that word-meaning can only be arrived at through the study of meaning of the word in the linguistic co-text of the sentence and that sentence-meaning depends, just as crucially, on the setting of the sentence in its communicative context .
>
> (Bell [1938,1991] 1993: 103)

Communicative context is thus important in same way as the textual context, and the textuality or texture regards not only written signification, but also another text in the form of spoken discourse. Thus there is no text-independent reality, but there is social communication that is contextualized in the social rather than textual environment and may be formulated as the meaning in use. This meaning in use is based on a certain communication situation. It is described in the book *Meaning-Based Translation. A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence* by Mildred Larson (1998) as the situation in which not all information about the social environment

and the social actors that take part in it may be explicitly stated. They may be simply left implicit because they are obvious for participants of the situation and need not be stated. The communication situation embraces situational meaning more than textual meaning: it "has to do with the relationship between the author and the addressee(s), where the communication took place, when it took place, the age, sex, and social status of the speaker and hearer, the relationship between them, the presupposition which each brings to the communication, the cultural background of the speaker and of the addressee(s), and many other matters which are part of the context in which the discourse was spoken" (Larson 1998: 459). Thus, we cannot any longer treat the process of translation as recontextualisation within the context of signs because contemporary linguistics is more and more directed at the analysis of the meanings situated in the social environment. These meanings are made in use, that is in the particular social situation where the particular agents in relation to each other create meanings. Here we can also talk about translation, but it would be translation of situational events into language, not language into language. In this approach, in order to translate, or in other words transform situational events into a language, the social actor must possess certain communicative competence. Communicative competence consists of the ability to "make valid requests and to recognize valid requests in the utterances of others" and of the ability to derive "from a knowledge of the community ground rules which constrain and facilitate communicative interaction" (Bell [1938,1991]1993: 181-181). Translation is thus based on the speech acts as they were described by John Austin ([1962] 1975) and John Searle [1969] 2009). These acts do not only mean something but are the responses to the situational context and may do something in communication, e.g. promise or advise. Translation, as the integral part of communication, must render these events of doing something in situational communication, i.e. these speech acts. However, "not all speech acts are (…) direct (…) there is often a mismatch between 'sentence meaning' (locutionary force; literal meaning; semantic sense) on the one hand and 'utterance meaning' (illocutionary force; indirect meaning; communicative value) on the other" (Bell [1938,1991]1993: 178). Bell presents here the example of two sentences, where "the interrogative /question or declarative/ statement [is] heard as a request, e.g. 'can you reach the salt?' or 'I would appreciate it if you would get off my foot', where as he points out, it takes some ingenuity to imagine a situation in which these utterances would not be requests." (Bell [1938,1991]1993: 178). Here we have the situation where sentence meaning differs from what was planned to be expressed. So, we have the classical Foucauldian situation, where we can ask what is going to be expressed in what has been expressed, so we deal here with the example of

the Foucauldian notion of enunciation, meaning something that is stated in what has been uttered.

To understand this approach better we have to take a look at the problem of translation as it results from different analyses of the problem of discourse. The problem of discourse is the most visibly described in the field of research called Discourse Studies.

Johannes Angermuller, Dominique Maingueneau and Ruth Wodak in the work on the main currents of Discourse Studies in theory and analysis state that "theoretically 'discourse' can be perceived as having amalgamated assumptions borrowed from psychoanalysis, Marxism and poststructuralism, from analytic philosophy, speech act theory and pragmatics, from ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism" (Angermuller, Maingueneau, Wodak 2014: 6). Their analysis is based mainly on the writings by Ferdinand de Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin, George Herbert Mead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Austin, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, Judith Butler, Erving Goffman, John Gumperz, Dominique Maingueneau, Johannes Angermuller, Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday, Theo van Leeuwen, Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak. In *Discourse Studies Reader* we read that

> Discourse Studies is not so much interested in linguistic phenomena per se, such as certain approaches to semantic, syntax, phonology or morphology. Drawing on the pragmatic idea that language is always used in context, linguistic discourse analysts have been critical of 'pure' linguistic theory in the Chomskyan tradition which, with its focus on syntax and grammar, does not analyse or explain phenomena transcending the sentence level"

> (Angermuller, Maingueneau, Wodak 2014: 3).

These phenomena belong to the realm of the changing social context, which is responsible for the shape of meaning.

On the basis of these research assumptions in Discourse Studies, we can formulate the problem of translation in such a way that it appears to be the "adaptation of discourse production (…) to (…) social environment" (van Dijk [2009] 2014: 66). However, discourse in contrast with text is "a far broader 'structural event manifest[ed] in linguistic (and other) behavior" (Bell [1938,1991] 1993: 162). Translation that results from the assumptions on discourse must take into account seven standards of textuality that were described by Robert-Alain de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Ulrich Dressler in the work titled *Introduction to Text Linguistics*. These standards are: cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, relevance, and intertextuality (de Beaugrande, Dressler [1972/ 1981] 1986: XV). This set of standards "applies

to all texts that possess communicative value, i.e. function in, and as, discourse." (Bell[1938/1991]1993: 163). "The 'text' which lacks any one of these characteristics is not a text but merely an aggregate of words, sounds or letters." (*ibid*.). So, one of the most important qualities of translated text is that it transfers an information load in a way that is in agreement with all the mentioned standards. The information load is related mainly "to the speed at which new information is introduced and to the amount of new information which the language normally incorporates in particular constructions" (Larson [1984] 1998: 477). However, carrying information is not the only quality of a well-prepared translation, because "any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information – hence something inessential" (Venuti [2000] 2004: 15). In other words: translation must do more than "transmit messages; it [must] recreate[s] the values that accrued to the foreign text over time" (Venuti [2000] 2004: 11). So it must take into account the history within which it is placed, the background of the given information, the roles of the speakers.

The process which governs the adaptation of meaning to different social surroundings by adapting its different linguistic expressions is also described by Teun van Dijk. He uses the notion of the context model to explain these problems of adaptation. It is the context model that governs such translation. Translation amounts to a change of a context model; however, it is not only a change of the social contexts, but also a change of the way of representing this social context. Thus, we cannot only relate to social contexts and their phenomena, we cannot only situate meanings in different social contexts in such a way that their content changes due to their different background. Neither can we be excused by saying that it is only text that is responsible for the creation of the context because we assume, together with Derrida, that there is nothing outside the text. There is a third way that can be undertaken to explain the process of meaning-making.

Wodak and Meyer ([2009] 2014: 13–14) in their work titled *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* indicate that we can translate meanings given in different contexts into texts and language, because there is a strong relation between text and context that crosses over the limitation of the Discourse Studies assumptions whose authors determine that meaning is mostly "a product of social practices" (Angermuller, Maingueneau, Wodak 2014: 3). Van Dijk in his article titled "Critical Discourse Studies: A Sociocognitive Approach" ([2009] 2014) proposes a different understanding of the problem of translation when he assumes that "the relation between discourse and society is not direct, but needs to be mediated by so-called context models" (van Dijk [2009] 2014: 73). Here, context models do not refer exclusively to either the social environment or to other texts. Van Dijk points to an indirect relation between the producer

of the translation and the accessible sources and rules, which means there is an indirect relation between social context and language. Norman Fairclough ([1995] 2010) supports us here with the concise explanation of the problem of translation where "the relationship between what is semiotically possible (as defined by semiotic systems) and the actual semiotic features of texts is mediated by orders of discourse as filtering mechanisms which select certain possibilities, but not others" (Fairclough [1995] 2010: 74). Thus, the content of meaning is determined twice: once by its relation to the social situation, and secondly by its adjusting to the existing rules of a given language. However, as the target language has different governing rules, hence the meaning that we want to achieve in this language will always be slightly different from its original representation. Fairclough stresses that "recontextualisation of meanings is also transformation of meanings" (Fairclough [1995] 2010: 76). When we transfer the meaning from its original context and change its articulation to a foreign language, the target meaning is also changed. So, it is not only the context that changes – the meaning changes together with its actual realization by transferring it to another language with the help of mediation techniques. These mediation technics take into account exactly that which differs in two assumed discourses: the original discourse where translation starts and the final discourse where translation terminates. Thus, the mediation toward the target language is not only the invisible way or method used to gain the result of translation, it also must be relevant with regard to the discourse it wants to achieve.

We could say here that this extraordinary quality of meaning, when it changes depending on the social or textual context, has no origin. Such an expression can be formulated, because there is nothing in reality or language that could possibly serve as the origin of the process of translation. The only introductory assumption that makes the meaning mean and can be transferred from society to language and from language to language is interpretation. Thus interpretation is the process of meaning production. Fairclough formulates this as follows: "meanings move from text to text, they are open to transformation. Meanings do not simply 'circulate' unchanged between texts; movement of meanings involves both continuity and change (…) Second, the possibility of transformation suggests that mediated meanings enter the process of meaning-making as part of the resources for meaning-making" (Fairclough 2010: 73). It is context models that constitute the resources for meaning-making and are constant models for the linguistic reaction to different social situations.

That is why translation is mediation phenomena, so it is the third option between adapting the meaning to a particular social context and giving a different content to meaning by situating it within the environment of texts in the process of textualization. As a result, translation in the

writings proposed by contemporary Discourse Studies linguists appears to be a kind of "mediating cognitive device that is able to represent the relevant structures of the social situation (…) and that at the same time is able to control discourse, the mental processes of production and comprehension and its situated variation" (van Dijk [2009] 2014: 73).

Thus, Discourse Studies are not exclusively restricted to issues of language, power and ideology. Though it may not be immediately obvious, this field of analysis is also concerned with translation through constant reflection on the processes of meaning making, transference of meaning and its adaptation to new social circumstances. Though, it has not been clear from the beginning what side Discourse Studies take when they refer to translation, we are now aware that it is neither the easy way of adapting to social events, nor simple meaning circulation within the texture of the texts. Discourse Studies take the third way by invoking the mediating power of interpretation treated as the transformational device that adjusts the meaning to context and linguistic rules, saving at the same time its meaning-making power that originates from the constant circulation of difference. This is the origin of the interpretation that creates different kinds of discourses in which different views of reality are justified by their rules and their power of representation. Theo van Leeuwen, following Foucault, finally defines discourses "as socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality which can be drawn upon when that aspect of reality has to be represented, or, to put it another way, context-specific frameworks for making sense of things" (van Leeuwen [2009] 2014: 144). However, in order to make discourses work we need the secondary power that will transfer the results of the working of different discursive practices into the sphere of text and talk. This mechanism is inherent to the processes of translation. It possesses not only the power to represent the world, but it also takes part in its creation. Angermuller, Maingueneau and Wodak state that "representing the world can also mean constituting it in a certain way" (Angermuller, Maingueneau, Wodak 2014: 6) and "indeed, society and its actors, social inequality and its agents, symbolic and cultural orders and their subjects are not givens: they are made and unmade in discursive practices" (***ibid*.),** which constitutes the final connection between language and its practice: communication in the surrounding context.

5.   Conclusion

Discursive practices must consider all elements present in the processes of linguistic change; in order to be able to translate the meaning into another language, we have to take into account its discursive potential, the surrounding context, we have to place it within the area of dominant

statements of another text – so to accept its interdiscursivity and textuality. Finally, we have to understand that translation is the main mechanism that is responsible for this linguistic transformation of the social world and Discourse Studies as the main field of research that has undertaken this problem. However, even if the era of language in philosophy is coming to an end, we still produce linguistic artifacts which need to be decoded in the nearest future. Human Being is not able to communicate in different ways than by using language, be it literary language, gestures, pictures or other non-discursive formations. As for now, language and the ability to communicate in such a complex way, is the one of the most meaningful phenomena distinguishing humans from non-humans. Studies of these uniquely human traits may constitute the basis on which we can recognize when a machine gains human consciousness. Stated in this way, the problem of language still constitutes the irreplaceable element of the consideration on the nature of the subject and its relation with the outside world. If the subject as the philosophical notion disappears (as predicted by Foucault), we will still need language as something that is able to express the world. After all, it is possible that language is one of its most valuable expressions.

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