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DIALECTICS OF WORDS AND IMAGES

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Publications:

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Abstract

Both images and words are able to carry meaning. Yet prevailing theories (at least in modern linguistics, Analytical philosophy, and cognitive science) are notoriously unable to deal with image-related meanings, let alone to provide a general overview which would explain how images are related to word meanings.

A dialectical approach, inspired by Hegel's remarkable theory of grammatical subject and predicate, is sketched which shows that there is a layer of preconceptual (or, rather, aconceptual) meaning where both visual meanings and verbal meanings dwell as primal experiential contrarities. This layer or stream of elementary meaning is not fully conceptualizable and remains partly unconscious. Yet assuming such as a layer offers the only credible way to understand how perception, including visual perception, is related to concepts.

Any serious view of meaning (semiotics) has to be able to deal with both verbal and visual meaning, and, in addition, be able to relate these spheres of meaning with one another. For instance, verbal meaning is perpetually modified and reordered to accord with visual experience and mental imagery. This, however, cannot be understood and explained if language really is what modern linguistic theory, cognitive science, and Analytic philosophy of language claim it is.

According to Hegel's unconventional view of grammatical subject and predicate, presented mostly in his *Wissenschaft der Logik* (see Hegel. G.W.F., 1812/1831/1986; or Miller's English translation, Hegel, G.W.F., 1812/1831/1969) every sentence is able to change (redetermine, *bestimmen*) the meaning of the words that occupy the roles of subject and predicate in the very sentence. And he went much further: not only do the words change their meaning as they are uttered in a true sentence, but the *object* which is represented by the grammatical subject is altered too; and, respectively, the process which is represented by the predicate is modified to comply with the altered object.

Unlike what the prevailing theories of verbal meaning are capable of doing, this allows a verbal discourse, like a dialogue, to change, even radically, the meanings of the used terms, and, through that, introduce new entities for consideration. This is how natural language sentences participate 'making worlds,' as Nelson Goodman put it in his *Ways of Worldmaking* (1972). In case of trivial sentences of ordinary language, the meaning change of terms may remain quite slight, and the modification or redetermination of objects inessential. But in scientific, aesthetic or philosophical revolutions the meaning change may be radical and accompanied with the emergence of a variety of unforeseen entities.

Even if Hegel's neglected dialectical frame work for verbal meaning is more flexible and reflects meaning change better than most of the present-day theories which proclaim themselves as 'scientific,' Hegel doesn't tell us much of what really initiates the meaning change within the human *Geist*. The main reason for this is that Hegel's phenomenology for imagery, mental images, imagination, verbal figures of speech, metaphors, and for aconceptual experience in general, is not adequate. Therefore, visual experience and mental imagery as a major source of verbal meaning change cannot really be represented in Hegel's system. No help is to be expected from Goodman either because his semiotics seems to lack the phenomenological (experiential) dimension altogether.

Fortunately Hegel's singular conception of grammatical subject and predicate can be supplemented and modified to deal with imagery and imagination. This can be accomplished by introducing an aconceptual and unconscious source of experience, which I have sometimes called *Potamos Akheron*, and which provides energy and material for *all* human meaning generation. This source of meaning energy works prior to all semiotic systems because its content is not yet conceptualized or structured by rules or norms. Its experiential content consists of preconceptual (aconceptual) *contrariedades* which move in two directions between perceptions and concepts. By

resorting to this kind of approach we are able, not only to explain radical meaning change and the role of imagery in it, but to understand also why translations over linguistic and cultural boundaries often fail: aconceptual experience, visual experience in particular, is not universally commensurable or translatable. Cultures and languages, especially if they are not closely related with one another, may approach each other only bilaterally, and translation attempts may never hope to reach more than interpretations.

But in order to present this dialectical view of the meaning of words and images, and modify ('phenomenologize') Hegel's theory of subject and predicate, we must be ready to make acquaintance with his strange view of negation (for which see Henrich, 1976), contradiction, and, in particular, his remarkable theory of objects (for which see di Giovanni, 1993). Negation with Hegel is not the normal formal negation of classical logic which modifies sentences or propositions by switching their truth values to the opposite; instead, the Hegelian negation can be directed to practically any grammatical or logical unit whatever, including negation itself.

Because the Hegelian negation expresses primordial energy of change, transition (*Werden*), prelogical opposition and contrariety which is active in every object and sentence, contradiction cannot be defined as it is defined in standard logic, namely by the sentential or propositional schema 'p and not-p.' Contradiction is the energy source of all movement, change, meaning, meaning change, and life. Contradictions are, strictly, everywhere.

Hegel had described already in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hegel, G.W.F., 1807/1970; for Miller's English translation, see Hegel, G.W.F., 1807/1977) how things, in order to emerge, have to resort to two kinds of unifying processes: in the mode of *Für-sich-sein* (inclusive unity) objects emerge toward determined existence by trying to remain identical with themselves; in the mode of *Sein-für-den-Anderen* (exclusive unity), objects seek determined existence by being contrasted with others. The modes are both inherently and mutually contradictory, but it is the energy of this contradiction that helps the object to transform itself constantly to something that it yet isn't (*Werden*). In perpetually on-going cyclic movement between the modes of existence, a process called *Aufhebung* unifies the opposite modes and allows the determined object to arise.

Furnished with the aconceptual and partly unconscious dimension of meaning, the Hegelian view of grammatical subject and predicate, and the related theory of objects, can supplemented with a credible phenomenology, and we may succeed in up-dating the dialectical tradition to deal with the neglected and highly problematic relationship between words and images.

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