

# LINGUISTIC GLOSSES TO GOLDSTEIN'S 'WORTBEGRIFF'

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The initial section of chapter one in the first part of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique generale*<sup>1</sup> (5), published posthumously, teaches that any verbal sign is a two-faced entity: "Both constituents are intimately united and summon forth each other." The sign in its totality is generated by an association between the two constituents—*signifiant* (signifier) and *signifie* (signified). In Saussure's opinion, "The latter terms have the advantage of marking their opposition to each other and to the whole which they build together."

Some interpreters of Saussurian doctrine are prone to believe that his theory of the two-fold structure of linguistic entities is a novelty, but Saussure's approach to the sign both in concepts and terms originates, in fact, from a tradition lasting over two thousand years. His definition of the total *signe* as a combination of *signifiant* and *signifie* literally corresponds both to the Stoic *semeion* consisting of two primordial aspects—*semainon* and *semainomenon*—and to St. Augustine's adaptation of the ancient Greek model: *signum* = *signans* + *signatum*. This conception was inherited by the schoolmen and was, furthermore, revitalized by the semantic theories of the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries, particularly by Bolzano and his followers.

The *signans* is perceptible, the *signatum* intelligible. Or to put it more concretely and operationally, in Charles Peirce's terms: the *signatum* is translatable. Thus we perceive the sound-shape of the word *tree* and, on the other hand, we may translate this word by other verbal signs with more or less equivalent *signata* but each with a different *signans*: for instance, by the technical synonym *arbor*, by the paraphrase *woody plant*, or by corresponding foreign names like the French *arbre*, the German *Baum*, the Russian *derevo*.

Saussure illustrated his thesis with a diagram of the *signum*, a circle divided by a horizontal diameter into two semi-circles, the one below representing the *signans* and the one above the *signatum*. Two verticle arrows—one, to the left of the circle, pointing up, and the other, to the right, pointing down—mark the reciprocal implication of both aspects of the sign. The italicized sequence *tree*, symbolizing the "sensory part" of the word, is inscribed in the lower semi-circle, while a drawing of a tree, placed in the upper semi-circle, represents the conceptual aspect of the same word. Actually, however, both items—

<sup>1</sup>Accents omitted because of limitations of printing.

the word tree and the pictorial representation of a tree—are correlated signs: each of them has a different *signans* and both signs can replace each other because they have a similar *signatum*. The first sign is a 'symbol' and the second an 'icon,' according to Peirce's classification of signs.

A symbol may be translated into an icon and vice versa, but of course only with a certain approximation. Any symbol is endowed with general meaning, and the general meaning of any symbol, and of a verbal symbol in particular, has a generic character. Any further segmentation and individuation of the symbol is determined by its context. Thus *tree* means any species and any individual instance of a kind of plant, and only a context may adapt this word to one single species or to one single specimen.

Even in proper names the 'sign-design' always has a broader meaning than any single 'sign-instance.' The context indicates whether we speak about Napoleon in his infancy, at Austerlitz, in Moscow, in captivity, on his deathbed, or in posthumous legend, whereas his name in its general meaning encompasses all those stages of his life-span. In the same way, the contextual meanings of *Roma* may be confined to antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or the present day, while the general meaning of this name covers all the phases of the Eternal City. Like the metabolic insect in the sequence *caterpillar-pupa-butterfly*, a person or a town may acquire different names for different temporal segments, 'momentary objects,' in Quine's terminology (4, p. 70). Married name is substituted for maiden name, monastic for secular; a town is re-christened: St. Petersburg-Petrograd-Leningrad. Of course each of these named stages could be further segmented. Petersburg of the eighteenth century, for example, had a landscape different from the landscapes of Petersburg under each of the last Romanovs.

As to the icon, it is able to present an individual landscape, a single spatial and temporal instance (a sample of a given species of trees in a certain part of the year—a maple tree during the warm season, as in Saussure's illustration). If the meaning of such an icon is generic, its generic sense is achieved through the synecdochic device of a *pars pro toto*; the icon becomes an 'iconic symbol.'

At the beginning of chapter two of its first part, the *Cours de linguistique generale* repeatedly points out that in language, concept and sound-substance reciprocally qualify each other (un concept est une qualite de la substance phonique, comme une sonorite determinee

est une qualite du concept), and denies the possibility of divorcing both correlates.

In *Hunger*, Knut Hamsun, with his unusual insight into language, gives a comprehensive description of a *signans* emerging without a *signatum*. In a delirium of weakness and prostration the hero of this novel imagines that he has discovered a new word:

It is not in the language; I discovered it. 'Kuboa.' It has letters as a word has . . . . With the most singular jerks in my chain of ideas I seek to explain the meaning of my new word. There was no occasion for it to mean either God or the Tivoli; and who said that it was to signify cattle show? . . . No, on second thoughts, it was not absolutely necessary that it should mean padlock, or sunrise . . . . I had fully formed an opinion as to what it should not signify . . . . No! . . . it is impossible to let it signify emigration or tobacco factory (2, pp. 87 ff.).

Hamsun's observation is precise: as soon as a sound-sequence has been interpreted as a *signans*, it summons for a *signatum*, and, as far as the "new word" is believed to belong to the given language, its meaning with high probability is expected to be in some respect divergent from the meanings of the other words of the same language. Thus one has an opinion "as to what it should not signify" without knowing "what it should signify." Hamsun's *kuboa*, or any word one knows to exist in a given language without remembering its meaning, is not a *signans* without *signatum* but a *signans* with zero-*signatum*. In principle this difference is the same as between an absence of ending, e.g., in the Latin adverb *semper*, and a zero-ending, e.g., in the Latin nominative *puer* confronted with the real endings of the other cases within the same paradigm—*pueri*, *puero*, *puerum*—and of nominative forms like *amicus*. A word with an unknown meaning is supposed to signify something else than words with familiar meanings.

The reverse questions of *signatum* with a zero-*signans* was particularly promoted by Kurt Goldstein. In *Language and Language Disturbances* he sums up his previous studies on the disembodied 'word-concept' (*Wortbegriff*) as "an experience in principle different from sensory and motor phenomena" (1, p. 93).

There are various degrees of switching off the *signans* in our verbal behavior. Un-uttered speech may be easily externalized. Even on certain levels of silent speech or reading there occurs a phonetic innervation; kymographic records detect microscopic motions of the tongue (6). A person sensitive to verse is handicapped in silent reading of poems when he clamps his tongue between his teeth. Inner speech, strongly, often drastically elliptic, scrappy grammatically and phonetically, is readily convertible into a more explicit message.

Only in cases when there is no restitution for the obliterated *signans*, this extinction pertains not to a certain style of individual speech but to the individual speech in general. The forgetting of words in language disturbances or in the verbal pathology of everyday life may serve as illustration. One knows exactly the meaning of a word and realizes that this word exists but cannot produce it because its sound-shape has slipped from recollection. It happens that some residue of the *signans* is preserved: for instance, the person remembers that the word has some *m* or *n* and has three syllables with the stress on the penult. But often no traces remain in the memory—a complete blank.

A Russian woman with a violent aversion to worms was unable to recollect the verb *kishet*, 'to swarm,' frequently used in regard to worms. She could say nothing about the sound-shape of this verb, but she realized perfectly that it differed from the sound-shape of all the other Russian words she used. We may say that she had an opinion as to how the word should *not* sound, without remembering how it should sound. The woman was, furthermore, fully aware of the lexical and syntactic contexts in which this verb may appear; in particular she knew its different grammatical uses in constructions like *izba kishela tarakanami* ('the hut swarmed with cockroaches') and, on the other hand, *v izbe kisheli tarakany* ('cockroaches swarmed in the hut'). Finally, incapable of using this verb herself, she recognized it, when it was employed by other people.

This typical example shows that even the most radical emancipation of the *Wortbegriff* from sensory and motor phenomena actually does not abolish the *signans*; both a zero-*signans* and the rules of its relation to the verbal environment remain. One could say with W. James that "the absence of an item is a determinant of our representations quite as positive as its presence can ever be" (3, p. 584). While disappearing from the active vocabulary of the speaker, the word retains its integral *signans* in the passive vocabulary of the listener.

#### REFERENCES

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