TALK - CREATION OR DESTRUCTION OF MEANING

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Abstract
The present paper aims at demonstrating that human interaction lead to the creation of new meanings, to the creation of a new language. Whereas the authors of the theatre of the absurd consider that language cannot render meanings, that the word is crushed under the heaviness of misunderstanding and uselessness, believers in the power of the spoken word formulate other opinions. Eugeniu Coşeriu, Mikhail Bakhtin or H.P. Grice are some of the advocates of the value of language, of the importance of dialogue and interaction in the construction of new meanings in human contexts.
Keywords: meaning construction, interaction, talk, understanding, context.

1. Introduction

Talk is at the same time creative and destructive: the spoken word is given, and by the simple fact of being uttered, it is endowed with an exceptional value, so much so that it becomes powerful enough to forge relationships, bring about peace and war, create love or hatred, build, give life or take one.

The present study focuses on the power of the spoken word and on the way meaning can be built or lost in interaction. Various writers have mused on the importance of verbal communication. Some authors, such as the creators of the theatre of the absurd, consider that language cannot render meanings, that the word is crushed under the heaviness of misunderstanding and uselessness, whereas believers in the power of the spoken word formulate other opinions. Eugeniu Coşeriu, Mikhail Bakhtin or H.P. Grice are some of the advocates of the value of language, of the importance of dialogue and interaction in the construction of new meanings in human life.

Amélie Nothomb in "Métaphysique des tubes" muses on the importance of the spoken word, upon the tremendous power of language; she uses the metaphor of a child who realizes how things come into being or get greater or lesser importance by simply uttering their names. A god-like, fantastic child who, during the stage prior to speaking, has knowledge of the whole world, starts building reality through her first words.

From early childhood we do things with words as Austin said, we build and destroy things and ideas. Human interaction through conversation can be a way of building the world, but also, as the authors of the theatre of the absurd demonstrate, a way of destroying understanding and language.

2. The theatre of the absurd

Eugen Ionescu together with other writers like Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov signal a crisis of civilization, of language, of literature, demonstrating that all the ways of expression fall into nothingness. Ionescu tries to explain that the falling apart of language, the stereotype of conscience and the consequent dehumanization are forms of death. Ionescu does not consider the word an instrument of action and he unveils the powerlessness of art, of speech, of language, while human existence altogether seems to disintegrate. As the theatre cannot do

without the word, Ionescu exploits it in order to make the shortcomings of language explicit. An example in point is the play "The Chairs", a visual play, where the pointless chat of the two characters tells us infinitely less than their anxiety expressed through body language, through their impossibility to compose themselves. The death of language that happens owing to a stereotype is in fact the death of meaning and of humanity eventually. An example is "The Bald Soprano", where human life is deeply artificial and false; the lives of the two couples, lost in banality and cliché, have lost meaning; boredom comes out of repeating over and over again the same speech patterns that have no meaning any longer. What they utter is the negation of the word, an attack against ideation content, a murder of meaning, a simulacrum of life, while what they do is a parody of action, their agreements are misunderstandings, their relationships are faces of acknowledged alienation and indifference. Words, instead of bringing people together, pull them apart. There is no idea to be communicated, characters are enclosed inside the frontiers of their experiences as they would internalize a sense of failure and any human action is performed out of ridiculous self-importance, ending in uselessness, within the disconcerting mixture of tragedy and comedy. A proof in point is the orator's suffering moan at the end of "The Chairs", with no words to reveal the cause of his ordeal.

3. The construction of meaning

Whereas the authors of the theatre of the absurd consider that language cannot render meanings and that that the word is crushed under the heaviness of misunderstanding and uselessness, believers in the power of the spoken word formulate other opinions. For example, Eugeniu Coşeriu (1996), Mikhail Bakhtin (1982) or H.P. Grice (1975) claim that the value of language and the importance of dialogue and interaction in the construction of new meanings in human life are crucial. From here, the dialogue has been considered revelatory for discovering and creating new meanings connected to unraveling personalities.

Eugen Coşeriu, who introduced the notion of integral linguistics, gives tremendous importance to dialogue in understanding one another. Human interaction is at the basis of language evolution and social change. Grice also asserts, in the Cooperative Principle, that in dialogue, participants tacitly cooperate with a view to creating meanings. From Bakhtin we find that it is not only the voices of the actual participants that make meanings in conversations, but that one single line hides two different voices.

These views on language and interaction are fascinating and throw a different and somewhat positive light upon the concept of conversation. They come as fresh and healthy ideas as opposed to the gloomy hue that the authors of the theatre of the absurd cast upon dialogue and life.

Coşeriu pleads for a start from the authentic product, namely speech, since there is nothing in language that did not exist prior to speech (1999: 28); although the object of linguistics is 'langue' (the linguistic system), the researcher cannot ignore 'parole', the activity of uttering words. Coşeriu uses the two Saussurian terms to show that the linguistic act does not exclusively belong to one individual, but it is both an individual and a social act. It is an individual act since the individual renders in spoken form a novel intuition that is exclusively his or her own, and it is a social act since the speaker recreates the way of expressing him or herself according to previously existing models.

Conversation analysis is not supposed to study rigid text samples that linguists can create, because language is changing continuously; language means freedom and creativity (Coşeriu, 1996:68). A Chomskian model of an ideal speaker and listener that leaves aside the issue of

language variety would be inappropriate here (Coşeriu, 1996:143). Language is extremely complex, with physical and physiological, psychic and logical, individual and social issues that cannot be ignored (Coşeriu, 1999).

In "Sincronie, diacronie şi istorie", Coşeriu states that language changes only to continue functioning as such (1997:27); he sees it both as 'energéia', creative process that invents and re-invents matter and as 'ergon', product, or finite act (1996, 1997, 1999). Languages are phenomena in a continuous process of creation by individuals, each speaker being a part of this dynamic process of language creation, like a grain of sand which is small but important for the pile. Within the dialogue, the speaker and the listener interact; language is an asset, and the result of speech is language again (1997:70). While analyzing dialogue, we are to witness linguistic change, since this happens through the passage of linguistic modes belonging to one speaker to the interlocutor's knowledge (1997:70).

Thus, associating these points of view with the study of conversation, we reaffirm that the basis for analysis should not be some readymade texts, but real excerpts coming from speakers of a particular language. One should not start from the rule to attain speech, but from speech, from usage to acquire the rule. It is only this way we can keep in our research language as a living unit, as 'energéia', not as a frozen unit or product, only 'ergon'. Eugeniu Coşeriu, in a footnote of "Sincronie, diacronie şi istorie", remarks: "Dacă semnificaţiile s-ar afla toate în limbă, obiectul vorbirii ar înceta să mai fie infinit şi vorbirea însăşi ar înceta să mai fie o activitate cu adevărat liberă, adică creaţie de noi semnificaţii. De aceea, eroarea celor care aspiră să construiască limbi perfecte şi complete, cu semnificate definite o dată pentru totdeauna, este totală: ei îşi asumă o sarcină absurdă şi inutilă, caci pretind să transforme vorbirea în altceva decât ceea ce este" (1997:43).[1]

The target of conversation analysis would be, taking into consideration Coşeriu's distinction between language and speech, the study of the way in which language turns into speech in order to become language again. 'The language' is incessantly being recreated, remodeled, through speech: the linguistic act is the realization of a previous language, but at the same time it is an element of a new system, slightly different, to whose coming into being it fully contributes (2004:23).

How do speakers of a certain language communicate? What is the process of correctly exchanging lines in a conversation? There is a certain social norm and speakers produce utterances according to this norm, identify utterances belonging to the norm or swerving from it. Coşeriu says that speakers are fully aware of the system and of the so-called language rules. They know not only what they want to say, but also how to express it since otherwise they wouldn't be able to talk (1997:54). Participants know how to express their own personalities within the dialogue (and here Coşeriu uses the terms 'cognitio clara vel confusa') (1997:52). We then draw the conclusion that through 'cognitio clara vel confusa' participants succeed in using the language in such a way as to reach a subconscious purpose. Negotiation of roles in the dialogue is done by turn-taking, and the latter is done with the help of language. What a complex process and still so naturally and easily used by any native speaker!

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[1]"If all the meanings would be held by the language, the object of speaking would stop being infinite and speaking itself would cease to be a truly free activity, namely a way of creating new meanings. This is why the error of those who aspire to build perfect and complete languages, with exact meanings that remain forever defined, is total; they assume an absurd and useless task, for they pretend to transform speaking in something different from what it really is" (1997:43).

Conversation Analysis settles for a purpose which is to follow the lead of this process, starting from the result, namely the authentic text, to the deepest roots, the minimal discourse units so as to discover the way in which one may reach this result.

Speakers are aware of the 'inner' language rules, of what is 'right', of what is appropriate at the text level depending on the interlocutor, as it is not the same thing to talk to a child or to an adult, to a woman or to a man, or to an elderly person (Coşeriu, 1996:19). In the same way, this 'saber expresivo' helps participants recognize members of a certain community according to the way they speak and pass judgments (most often negative ones) on interlocutors (Coşeriu, 1996: 18-20).

Another important aspect, relevant to conversation analysis, is the notion of context with Coşeriu. Words bear various meanings in language that could be used in different ways, whereas it is only inside discourse that they refer to something specific and are given real significance (1996:56). Words become different in various contexts where they serve totally different purposes depending on who uses them and on how, when and where they are uttered. Coşeriu says that "în lingvistica textului [...] unităţile de sens [...] se combină unele cu altele şi [...] dau mereu sensuri de ordin superior" (1996:58).[2]

In conversation analysis, smaller units combine into turns that combine into chunks to reveal the meaning of the dialogue. The interpretation starts from the smallest units, such as the clause, and reaches larger units, which is why context is important for the overall meaning to come to light.

Dan Sperber, in an article entitled "How do we communicate?" states that our thoughts are revealed through the way we interact, depending on whether we do it through body language or spoken or written words; interaction shows who we are and what we want to achieve. Within the framework of a dialogue, it is only by linking the lines in a certain context that we can understand what the interlocutor wants to communicate; there is thus a difference between 'sentence meaning' and 'speaker's meaning'. The latter is always deeper than the former and richer in implicit significance or connotation. A sentence such as 'It's late.' may be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on the external circumstances of its uttering. Participants may infer the right meaning and thus understand what the interlocutor wants to communicate.

It is thus clear that meanings of lines within conversation can only be grasped when there is a context, when we become aware of the overall image, of the circumstances of the dialogue. With the help of conversation, people manage to communicate much more than they encode and decode through language, much more than they utter; thus conversation proves to be a tool of utmost importance in finding the depths of the human being.

Mey, in "Pragmatics", gives another example highlighting the centrality of making the difference between 'sentence meaning' and 'speaker's meaning'. To assess line (1) we need to be aware of the special conversational circumstances:
(1)   It's getting late, Mildred.
(2)   Are you really that bored?
(3)   Do you want to go home?
(4)   So?

All these answers may be correct in various different circumstances (Mey, 1993:250).

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[2] In text linguistics [...] the units of meaning [...] combine with each other and [...] always render superior meanings" (1991:58).

The neglect of contexts may give rise to misunderstandings at the level of participants; for example, this might be the case if a question that may have no other purpose than creating phatic communication, such as "How are you?", is given a highly elaborate answer.

This is even clearer if we consider the case of intercultural communication. Here too we can recall Grice's Cooperative Principle that presupposes that participants adopt cooperative interactional behaviors in order to facilitate communication (1975: 45).

Coşeriu also refers to this situation: "vorbitorul poate chiar să renunţe la o bună parte din 'ştiinţa' sa, aşa cum se întâmplă în vorbirea cu străinii, şi totdeauna modifică, într-o anumită măsură, realizarea modelelor sale, ca să uşureze înţelegerea, pentru ca celălalt să înţeleagă." (1997:68).[3]

Mikhail Bakhtin, in a study made as early as 1934, a long time before the advent of pragmatics as a science, underlines the fact that participants cooperate in dialogue: "Discursul viu, aparţinând limbajului vorbit, este orientat nemijlocit spre viitorul discurs - răspuns: el provoacă răspunsul, îl anticipează şi vine în întâmpinarea lui. Formându-se în atmosfera a ceea ce e dinainte spus, discursul este, în acelaşi timp, determinat de ceea ce n-a fost încă exprimat, dar forţat şi deja prevăzut de cuvântul de răspuns. Aşa se întâmplă în orice dialog viu" (1982: 135).[4]

Bakhtin puts forward the thesis that it is not language that forms the basis of conversation, but the other way round. Understanding language outside dialogue is only a part of the linguistic perception, only an abstract portion outside the living language that we find in interaction.

4. Conclusion

Language is, in conclusion, a living entity that constantly changes and helps us communicate and be a part of the interacting universe we live in. Authors like Coşeriu, Bakhtin, Grice or Austin help us understand that the word is a powerful instrument that actually performs actions and forces a new reality on us; the very message that writers like Ionescu or Beckett intended to reveal is that language is powerful, so powerful in fact that it can ruin existence. We cannot live without the word since it is the only link between our minds and the exterior world as it shapes life to the wishes in our minds.

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[3] "The speaker can even give up on a great part of his knowledge, as it happens when talking to strangers, and he always modifies up to a certain extent the achievement of his models in order to facilitate the understanding, so that the other grasp the meaning." (1997:68)

[4] "The oral discourse belonging to the spoken language is direclty oriented towards the future discourse - answer: it provokes the answer, anticipates it, and welcomes it. By being created in the atmosphere given by what was said beforehand, the discourse is at the same time determined by what has not been expressed yet, but forced and already predicted by the word of answer. This is how is happens in any oral dialogue." (1982: 135)

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