

# Mythological Thinking and the Formation of Mythological Notions. Myth and Language in the Concept of E. Cassirer

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**Abstract**—The article is devoted to the comparison of principles of linguistic name-forming and the formation of mythological notions. On this basis the characteristic features of mythological thinking become clearer. The theoretical basis of the research is the ideas of E. Cassirer. The author of the article does not consider the philosophy of culture E. Cassirer and focuses on the topic of myth and language. The object of research is mythological thinking and its structure. The subject is the principles of the formation of mythological and linguistic notions. Through the analysis of the principles of linguistic name-forming and the formation of mythological notions, the author believes, it is possible to approach the clarification of links between myth and language in modern culture. The formation of linguistic signs and notions is regarded as the basis on which further spiritual activity is possible. The author highlights general principles of linguistic name-forming and the formation of mythological notions. First principle is the function of "noticeability", the function of separation characteristic moment from the undifferentiated whole of sensory perception. Second principle is the function of linguistic and mythological classifications. Human body is a reference point for these classifications. Third principle is that linguistic and mythological notions are formed in accordance with their practical and teleological significance not in accordance of the objective properties of things and phenomena. The similarity of the principles makes it possible to study mythological thinking based on the study of the linguistic thinking. And in that, and in another case, it is a manifestation of a non-rational mental function, which E. Cassirer calls a language fantasy or metaphorical thinking.

**Keywords**—*myth; language; mythological notions; language fantasy; metaphorical thinking; mythological thinking; E. Cassirer; logic; name-forming*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Myth and mythology have been subjects of comprehension through the whole history of philosophy. In this article I turn to ideas of Ernst Cassirer as in my point of view they haven't been contemplated enough. What have also been frequently missed are - all the possible heuristic conclusions concerning the nature of mythological thought and the means of studying it. This bearing in mind that the

first review of Cassirer's work "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms" appeared in Russia as early as 1926 and was done by Alexei Losev. The Russian theorist of symbolism built his own concept gauging it with and against Cassirer's ideas. This dialogue can be found in Losev's works "Theory of Cassirer's mythological thinking", "A subject and a name", "Philosophy of a name", "Problems of a symbol and realistic art". Comparing concepts of symbol as seen by Alexei Losev and Ernst Cassirer is not the matter of this article and would lead us astray. But I'd like to point out that I chose Cassirer's vision over Losev's as the basis for analysis of mythological thinking. Both philosophers dealt with similar problems, but their approaches were radically different.

I'd like to concentrate my analysis on gnoseological angle and solve a definite problem: clarify Ernst Cassirer's similar principles of forming mythological notions and words in a language. He didn't chose language and myth as his subjects for study over other symbolic forms by accident. Language, according to Cassirer, has a unique place in cultural system and "peacefully coexists" with other symbolic forms. Language is the only form that passes through all stages in its development: from the chaos of sensual impressions to full freedom of actual situation, whereas other symbolic forms are always in a certain range of this scale. Myth — is the primal phase of spirit's artistic movement and for this reason has a particular interest for us. Myth is a lesser known quantity for a modern person. By this I mean that now we deal with new "evolved" forms of it: modern myth masks itself as a piece of science, ideology etc. A more comprehensive research of quasi-science phenomenon, mythological form that "masks" itself as science, was done on a collective monograph, edited by Vyacheslav Naydysh "Science and quasi-science" [1].

If we understand the archaic myth, clear out the nature of mythological thinking, we will be able to better analyze and understand its modern "evolved" traits. I'd like to concentrate on gnoseological rather than historical-philosophical angle and clarify the principals on which Cassirer's mythological terms are formed. Thus I put aside Cassirer's philosophy of culture and deal with pretty narrow but in the same time critical theme in Cassirer's body of

work – myth and language. The aim of this article is to compare principles of linguistic naming and formation of mythological terms. Ernst Cassirer is not the only one who pointed out the connection between myth and language. This is a consequence of etiological analysis of the word “myth”, which derives from greek “mythos” = “tale”. Cassirer himself mentions some previous myth-language concepts. For example in his works he mentions Johann Herder’s ideas, who claimed that lingual notions are primarily mythological in their essence. Also mentioned are: Friedrich Schelling, who sees “bleak mythology” in language; Max Mueller, who used etymological analysis for finding the nature of mythological visions; Herbert Spenser, who claimed that mythological and religious honoring of natural events stems from the wrong understanding of the events’ names. Lastly, Cassirer describes Hermann Usener’s ideas as a promising experience. Usener made an attempt to analyze the stories about gods as if they were based on their own unique law. This law is to be discovered and studied by philosophy of mythology, thought Cassirer [2].

I hope that this analysis will clarify the peculiarities of mythological thinking. This is required in order to reach a major theoretic goal, which is beyond this article but still serves as a guideline for me – understand and interpret myth as a mandatory element of communicative space of current culture. I fully agree with Boris Markov’s forecast: he wrote that today we see the start of future history which stems from contemplation of Cassirer’s “Philosophy of symbolic forms” in the context of mass-media [3].

## II. NAME-FORMING IN LANGUAGE AND MYTHOLOGICAL NOTIONS AS THE BASIS FOR LOGIC ABSTRACTING

Ernst Cassirer deals with myth from two points. On one hand – myth for him is a peculiar form of realization with its structure and logic notion-forming, a certain meditation that does not leave the sensual sphere. On the other – Cassirer deals with myth as a practical tool [4]. He researches and contemplates the social and political situation in Europe at the time. In other words the German philosopher is interested in both archaic myth and modern artificially created mythological complexes. This means that Cassirer’s ideas gain extra urgency and fill the voids in more recent myth concepts. For instance, the peculiarities of “new archaics” and the process of modern myth forming are analyzed through Roland Barthes’ semiologic paradigm. His approach is limited though, because he identifies myth with any connotations which makes finding the specific mythological messages impossible. I think that we can differentiate mythological messages from the others (appeared as a result of connotation shift) by analyzing the realization that expresses itself through myth [5]. That’s why I chose to talk about Cassirer, because his subject for contemplation is the peculiarities of mythological thinking and its nature.

From the classical logic’s point of view myth is illogical. It’s trapped in the feelings sphere which means that you cannot analyze it in a structural scientific way. In this context the question of mythological notion seems like an unacceptable rationalization. But this is only an impression — says Cassirer. Myth is on par with science both in terms

of consistency and discipline. The difference is that the logic of myth is based on its own foundations, which are different from the logic of science.

This is how Cassirer describes his theoretical goal: to analyze the ways of name-forming in language and philosophical means, also to find the principles and structure of both language and mythological realizations based on them. It’s important that the analysis should be philosophical, not limited in science. So for Cassirer the question of myth-forming is closely associated with the formation of language concepts.

Cassirer claims that the creation of a sign is the first step on the path of objective knowledge. “Sciences in essence are well organized languages. Our verbal language is in a way very similar to that. Because it’s the prime science of well-being and first showing of one’s aspiration for knowledge” [6], language is tied to describing set objects and processes even when it aspires to be the expression of pure relationships. At the same time though, it is a mean to get rid of the clogs of sensuousness. The thought of sensuous variety or in the end a clear knowing of sensuous variety are possible only after the chaos of one’s impressions is organized through language. In other words, evolving of language signs is the necessary foundation for building distinct spiritual activity. Cassirer thinks of language as a tool of spirit that makes possible the movement from feelings to contemplation and meditation.

Language and myth first appeared and now develop based by similar laws. This is why we need to get to the nature and logic of language thinking to understand the nature and logic of mythological thinking. The modern logic describes the process of notion forming as the process of catching the set subject qualities of things, comparing it and finding the common. In classic logic notion — is a form of thought, in which objects are summarized and highlighted according to general characteristics. But empiric data can be sorted in various way depending on the point of view of the researcher, says Cassirer. So notion is not the product of similarities between things but rather a condition for assumption that this similarity exists. In other words, logic notion is the result of intellectual activity not the condition. Cassirer asks the question: did the characteristics of things that we use for classifying them appear before the evolving of language? Or do they form along with the language? His answer is unambiguous: the characteristic of things first appear in language and are expressed through it. The chaos of sensual impressions is structured in the process of attributing a linguistic name. So it is due to language that the empiric variety is ordered into unity. And this serves as the basis for notion-forming. Language notions are the condition for further logic abstracting.

Knowing this certain questions arise. How do words in language form? How does the primary language sequence form if not through abstraction and comparing? Also what are conditions for that?

### III. GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF LINGUISTIC NAME-FORMING AND THE FORMATION OF MYTHOLOGICAL NOTIONS

The primary and subconscious thought function that becomes the principle of form formation both in language and myth Ernst Cassirer calls the function “noticeability”. Its point is noting in the undifferentiated whole a particular moment of a feature and pointing all attention towards it. This “drawing out” is the basis for word appearance. This way we reach the goal of fixation on subject matter, pointing it out as identical to itself, as repeating time after time in the flow of impressions. In other words, we create the basis for further learning. So naming in a language stems not from a type or family an object belongs to but to its certain feature which differentiates it from a flow. Contemplating forms in a myth a created in the exact same way.

In scientific thinking the notions are formed in a different way. Its core basis is taking a particular object and proving it to be a part of a greater whole, making it a particular case of a greater common law. That’s how Cassirer describes it: “All notions of theoretic physics have a clear and only goal: turn the “rhapsody of perceptions” (our sensual world) into a system, one bunch of laws” [7]. This principle is also valid both in natural science and social-humanitarian studies where a Particular also is not put against the whole. Instead it demands the whole as its natural addition and can be scientifically valid only in one bunch with it. So the main tendency of theoretic thinking is gradual expansion of content, movement from a particular and unique to greater whole. Whereas the principle of mythological and language thinking, which on the contrary is based on the attention towards the smaller parts, remains almost invisible for this way of thinking.

There’s another noticeable similarity between language and myth. Both in mythological and language thinking the basis for various classifications is the human body. Any particular thing that receives a name in a language at first is gauged against a human body and is classified accordingly. For a thing to become conceivable it first should get a physical form. This principle Cassirer illustrates through the forming of a word “I” in different languages. In Sanskrit “I” is expressed through two words “atman” — “soul” and “tanu” — “body”. In the languages of Altai several expressions can be used instead of “I”, such as “my being”, “my body”, “my chest”. Numerals in language are formed in a similar way. They mean not just the number of objects but rather commands for body acts. In Soto language a numeral “five” literally means “end a hand”, while “six” means “jump” — skip to the other hand.

Thinking, that is expressed through language and myth, Cassirer calls “metaphorical” thus putting broader meaning in a word “metaphor” than in usual rhetoric. Usually a metaphor is a figure of speech which is built on the basis of events’ similarities, claiming that they are fully matched on verbal level. For Cassirer though metaphorical thinking is a particular kind of visual thinking. The German philosopher introduces the notion of radical metaphor, using it not for a figure of speech but for a special spiritual function — visual

forming function. According to Cassirer, that’s the spiritual function that expresses itself in language and myth. So in lingual or mythological thinking creation or a more precise description of a new notion happens through the usage of an old naming. Where rational thinking sees only a game play, mythological thinking, quintessential expression of which is a radical metaphor, discovers equality of subjects. In his “Philosophy of symbolic forms” Cassirer introduces another notion — lingual fantasy, which is another name for radical metaphor [8].

Mythological and language notions form intuitively rather than rationally like in scientific thinking. Word forming in natural language and the evolving of notions in mythological thinking cannot be explained through scientific standards, principles and logic. Their basis is not the portrayal of objective features of things but the “form of person’s activities” [9]. There’s another principle of creating names and terms which is common for both language and myth: reduction of variety of senses towards the common notion happens without taking into account the likeliness or unlikeliness of objects. What matters instead is their practical or cultural aim. This means that a person’s activity not the objective features of things is the basis for basic notions of language and myth. In the chaos of sensual impressions we notice, provide meaning and then express in words or mythological vision only those things that correlate to our activity, either it helps us or creates difficulties. People’s activities become more and more broad and differentiated and so do lingual and mythological systems.

Close connection between myth and language, common principles of forming for both words and mythological notions pushes us to this point of view: language and lingual reality on one hand and myth and mythological reality on the other — are homologous. I think that it’s a mistake. Similarities between the principles of formation for both language and myth do not mean that lingual and mythological thinking are the same. Primarily names to objects were in fact given according to myths and mythological thinking which we learn by analyzing Cassirer’s ideas. Myth and language stipulate each other and reach a common goal — prepare the basis for further intellectual activity which leads to the formation of common theoretical worldview. Cassirer does not put an equal mark between the process of lingual naming and formation of mythological notions though. Both language and myth derive from fundamental experience, but language unlike myth, give this experience a new form. Even though language is linked to the world of senses and concrete, it still can push us towards universal and logical. Myth on the other hand stays in the land of sense. Cassirer, while explaining the similarities in forming both lingual and mythological notions, at the same time insists on full independence of myth and language from one another if we talk of them as symbolic forms.

Roland Barthes is another philosopher who deals with myth. Just as Cassirer, he finds his own arguments in favor of connection between the modern myth and language [10]. Roland Barthes who likens all the modern mass realization with a myth, leaves some space for non-myth.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To sum it up, it would be a mistake to claim that language and myth, lingual thinking and mythological thinking are equal. But it is theoretically justified and even heuristically good to talk about lingual nature of myth and the similarities in principles for word-forming in language and mythological notions. The acceptance of this thesis can become the starting point in analysis of modern myth and mythologized forms of culture. The latter understood as certain messages. The former — is as an element of social communication. Firstly, both in myth and language perform a subconscious thinking function: singling out a specific feature of an object or an action and singling out attention on them. A singled out feature becomes the basis for creation of a new word in language or a mythological notion. At the same time the subject matter narrows, which is a common feature for both lingual and mythological thinking. Secondly, both in language and myth the classification start with a human body. Anything seeking for a new word in language or a mythological concept, at first is gauged against a human body. Only then it can become a class element. Thirdly, the basis for basic notions in language and myth are people's actions not the object's features. Drawing the sensual multitude to unity happens according to teleological, functional, and practical of cultural meanings. Fourthly, means for creation of lingual of mythological notions are intuitive. They are opposed to rational way of notion-forming in scientific thinking. That's why they must be studied with philosophical not scientific tools. It is highly likely that any attempts to comprehend mythological thinking by squeezing it through the Procrustean bed of scientific thinking won't allow us to get through to either its principles or specifics.

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