

The Concept and Reasonability of Pansemiotism

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Abstract—One of the main ideas of "linguistic turn" is to regard the important fields of human cognitive understanding, communication mode and the construction of meaning world as a process in which language participates and plays an irreplaceable role. If this transformation is interpreted as the "symbolic turn", then language will be regarded as the unique symbolic system of human beings, which greatly expands the theoretical visual threshold of the existed problem. With this important turn, the concept of "Pansemiotism" emerges as the times require. Pansemiotism views and standpoints have indispensable rationality compared with other propositions in human cognitive form, knowledge transmission and meaning acquisition and expression. Of course, such rationality is limited, but it is also necessary to defend it appropriately in this respect.

Keywords—pansemiotism; theory of meaning; philosophy of language; linguistic turn

I. INTRODUCTION

Sign is closely related to people's existence and activities. Such correlation not only refers to the existence of people as animals using symbols, but also points to the cognitive mode of human beings, as well as the symbolic transformation of people from a single cognitive object to nature, the world and even the universe. In the sense of humanized nature, semiosis has become a unique way of perception, cognition, understanding and explanation of the world, and sign participates in all aspects of this process. Therefore, at this level, the view that the world that human beings can understand is a world full of signs may obtain reasonable identification to some extent. On the meaning level concerned by philosophy of language, such view seems to have played a kind of supporting role in reasonably explaining the meaning acquisition of human beings and the formation of the meaning world.

II. CONCEPT OF PANSEMIOTISM

Pansemiotism, also known as "the universalism of signs", is different from "pansemioticism". According to Professor Zhao Yiheng, the main idea of the former is to think that "human beings are submerged in signs, and the world we can recognize consists of signs." On the basis of the former position,¹ the latter holds that "knowledge in the world is

within the scope of semiotics".² If we understand such pair of concepts in this way, we can roughly know that pansemiotism is a basic position and general view about what constitutes the world, while pansemioticism is a judgment about what kind of subjects should be interpreted and studied in the face of a world made up of signs. It is noteworthy that pansemiotism does not assert that the world is composed of symbols, but only affirms that the sum of the objects constituting human cognition is composed of signs. Beyond the world that human beings can understand, that is, beyond the form of human cognition, there may be a non-symbolic world, of course, which is unimaginable.

Based on the above world outlook, the proposal of pansemiotism provides a reasonable conception for the humanized world. It is true that there are non-symbolic ways of cognition and experience of the world through non-symbolic ways for people. In Martin Heidegger's view of language, it is full of instrumental criticism of linguistic signs. Under the influence of German romantic view of language in the 19th century, the slogan "let languages speak themselves" carries with it the idea of non-symbolic cognitive form and non-symbolic form of experience. As for such kind of proposition that is contrast to the idea of pansemiotism and is mainly represented by Heidegger, I don't think it's a contrary view of the former. The non-symbolic cognitive form and experiential form should be a complementary relationship to the concept of pansemiotism. Just as we cannot deny that human subjects have language, a unique symbolic system of human beings, as a form of experience, a means of cognition and a communicative medium between human beings, we cannot deny that there are non-symbolic forms in these three aspects. Taking Mentalese as an example, Professor Steven Pinker published his book "Language Instinct"³ in 1994, which fully elaborates on how the psycholinguistic internalist views the relationship between thought form and linguistic form. Mentalese, also known as "language of mind", belongs to one of the ways of thinking operation with ordinary language and artificial language, which may be a more important and broader thinking form than ordinary language and artificial language. Because from the perspective of the relationship between linguistic form and thinking form, Professor Pinker believes that the operating scope of mentalese that does not belong to the representation system is larger than that of the

¹ Zhao Yiheng, *Semiotics: Principles and Problems*, Nanjing University Press, 2016, P. 18.

² Zhao Yiheng, *Semiotics: Principles and Problems*, Nanjing University Press, 2016, P. 19

³ Cf. Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct*. New York: W. Morrow & Co., 1994.

daily language which strictly belongs to the representation system. In time domain, mentalese also comes into being before the daily language and the artificial language system.

Denying the existence of mentalese and affirming the existence of mentalese will face considerable difficulties. For example, if we affirm the existence of mentalese, we will inevitably encounter the paradox between thinking form and linguistic form, that is, which come first for thinking form and linguistic form? If the form of thinking is in the first place, what constitutes the form of thinking? What is the representation of thinking form? How do we recognize "something" that if "something" cannot be expressed in words? If linguistic form is in the first place, it needs to be proved that linguistic form and thinking form are identical to each other, which makes the concept of "mentalese" redundant. The situation of pansemiotism is similar to this. The proposition of such concept is not to oppose and deny the existence of non-semiotic cognitive forms, but from perspective of the form of interpersonal communication and knowledge, only the semiotic system can undertake the function of transferring and reaching consensus among subjects. Signs widely exist in the material environment and intelligent environment of human life. Such universality does not embrace exclusiveness, so pansemiotism does not exclude such non-symbolic forms as intuition and inspiration. However, within the limits of human cognition, knowledge and rational thinking, denying the idea of pansemiotism is as hard to believe as the above-mentioned "mentalese". Conversely, the proposition of recognition of pansemiotism is also faced with considerable difficulties, which arise from the short of evidence. The accumulation of daily experience and common sense provides evidence of probabilities to prove the universality of signs, and it is contrary to daily experience and common sense to regard everything that people can perceive as signs. Therefore, the viewpoint that the proposition of pansemiotism not embraces coerciveness and exclusiveness is the rationality of it, but also is an acceptable viewpoint.

III. RATIONALITY OF PANSEMIOTISM

From the point of view of meaning, language, conformity and human relations, the following argument of three aspects can show the rationality of pansemiotism.

First, from the standpoint of naturalism, human language practice is a typical pattern in its symbolic activities. Human language is one of the most sophisticated and complex kind in many symbolic systems used by human beings, even in everyday language, let alone artificial language based on mathematical logic. According to the general opinion of Wilhelm von Humboldt, that is, "language is between man and the world, and man must understand and grasp the world through the language he generates and use these languages. Language records people's perception towards the world and experience existing in the world as well as their own organization and rules, so it gradually becomes an independent force, an object relative to users, or becomes a unique "world outlook". Every specific language is such a kind of world

outlook, which originates from human beings and in turn acts on human beings, which restricts their thinking and actions.⁴

Second, from the description of human towards their sensory experience, the subjective individual sensory experience can only be converted into an inter-subjectivity description which can be understood by other members of linguistic community through language as an intermediary. L. Wittgenstein's thesis of private language fully proves that descriptions used to refer to individual feelings are not called real language. But in fact, people often use language to refer to the current individual feelings in the process of communication, and in a less strict and rather vague degree, the speaker believes that the listener understands the meaning that he wants to express. Of course, precisely, the speaker has neither sufficient reason nor evidence to expect the listener to accurately and completely acquire the meaning that the speaker wants to deliver, nor to confirm that the listener accurately and completely acquires the meaning that the speaker wants to deliver from the listener's response. In case again that if the listeners are not just one, but many, at the same time, it even extends to the whole linguistic community, and still repeats the above process, so the situation will change dramatically. The conclusion of the so-called "thesis of private language" only shows its theoretical role. The question now is what is the reason why we can understand other members of the linguistic community's description towards their feelings and expect them to understand our own description? The reason is that when the speaker and the listener are in the same linguistic community, they together use the same symbolic system, and more fundamentally, their descriptions towards individual feelings show amazing homoplasmy. Based on the explanation of weak version of the Spair-Whorf hypothesis⁵, Language used by a linguistic community will act on the way of thinking of all the members of the linguistic community. The use of the same symbolic system may explain such homoplasmy, and also prove that signs exist widely in the lives experienced by all the members of a linguistic community.

Third, from the perspective of the persistent acceptance and correction of knowledge by human beings, knowledge must be carried and delivered by a certain symbolic system. Since the linguistic turn, the importance of language has not only been embodied in its unique symbolic system specifically embraced by human beings, but also embodied in the fact that language is an important medium and ways for human beings to think, express and deliver meanings. In order to express the demand of scientific propositions and at the same time as the symbolic feature of the philosophy in the new era, all philosophers who come from Vienna Circle concentrate on continuously perfecting this medium and means and making it more precise so that they can realize the goal of reaching unambiguous consensus among multiple subjects, and jointly adopt logical analysis of language to clarify the meaning of propositions. Regardless of whether such thought is biased,

⁴ Refer to Chen Guangming: Sapir Wolf Hypothesis: Misreading and Rereading [J]. Journal of Xi'an International Studies University, 2011 (4): 21-25.

⁵ Refer to Chen Guangming: Sapir Wolf Hypothesis: Misreading and Rereading [J]. Journal of Xi'an International Studies University, 2011 (4): 21-25.

radical or not, the "rebellion" of the thoughts of the predecessors or the enlightenment of the later philosophy, no matter what in any sense, the turn of language brings the unprecedented and unavoidable importance of language to people. A kind of typical way to express knowledge is scientific propositions, and analytical philosophers prefer to talk about propositions rather than statements. Even when talking about statements, they more often talk about declarative sentences, because only declarative sentences can bear the true value. From the perspective of signs, knowledge cannot be presented and transmitted in a non-symbolic way. Imagine what would happen if people carry out it in a non-symbolic way in the process of learning and imparting knowledge? Moreover, if the knowledge accumulated by human beings in history for thousands of years is not inherited by symbolic forms, and then we will not even see the progress of human civilization and the prosperity of art.

One of the most obvious refutations to such justification is that knowledge is not necessary for a single individual that can survive only by common sense, and there is something much more important than knowledge in addition to the knowledge expressed through language. From the perspective of refutation, the paradox included in it is self-evident, an individual "has" or "knows" a non-verbal "thing", but cannot tell others, it is difficult to confirm its consistency even at different time points by himself, so how to prove that it really has or knows? This is hard to justify.

IV. THEORY OF MEANING BASED ON THE POSITION OF PANSEMIOTISM

If "the linguistic turn" is regarded as "the semiotic turn", and then because we regard human language as a symbolic system, it will greatly expand the linguistic philosophy research, especially theoretical visual threshold of the significant problem research. Based on the position of Pansemiotism, we can increase a large number of new contents for the research of significant problem in a broader scope. Although C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards have made a detailed analysis of the meaning concept in their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, but up to now, there is no completely satisfactory and acceptable theory in the existing meaning theory. How can human beings make external objects into meanings that people can understand, explain, think and talk about when facing themselves, others, things and phenomena? In this process, how can external objects be symbolized and form human meaning through modeling? Whether such problems can be discussed and researched by some operable and concrete way, which we can explore the meaning world of human beings and the activity of meaning acquisition from the perspective of signs.

Thomas Sebeok who is an American semiologist put forward the theory of symbolic modeling system to explain the formation of meaning in his book *The Form of Meaning: Modeling System Theory and Semiotic Analysis*⁶, and to explain the form and formation of meaning in human symbolic

system in an operable way. Based on this theory, we can carry out discussion around such aspects as the main line of meaning-sign-explanation, the meaning of the concept of meaning itself, the formation mechanism, the conditions for determining the content of meaning, and the standard for judging whether meaning exists or not from the perspective of semiotics and linguistic philosophy. For example, the word "cat" can be used in situations where real cats are present or in situations where no cats exist. In the primary modeling system mentioned by Sebeok, cats are first recognized through singularized modeling, in this process, cats are transmitted to the human brain in a unique form of various sensory organs, that is, appearance, action, color, texture and so on, which consists of the original source of meaning, but it is obviously not the meaning of cats themselves; in secondary modeling system, the word cat that is composed of letters appears through compound modeling. Cat is represented by a word consisted by three letters for the first time, but this does not constitute the whole meaning of our concept of "cat"; in tertiary modeling system, people give more connotation to "cat" in a metaphorical way. For example, the word cat in Tom is a cool cat (Tom is a trendy person) is obviously not an animal cat.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the above examples, it can be concluded that the source and form of explained meaning and the human understanding and expression of meaning are extremely complex, but the symbolic modeling method that is clear and operable is helpful to investigate the meaning of more complex sentences, texts, dialogues and even non-linguistic symbolic systems. With signs as the intermediary, the modeling towards "cat" can be transferred among the subjects and then form an understanding. Scattered signs cannot achieve the intention that the speaker wants to deliver, which can be done only through modeling based on signs. Such analysis of meaning based on the position of pansemioticism will assist us make greater progress in exploring and interpreting the process of the formation of the human meaning world.

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⁶ Cf. Sebeok, Thomas A., and Marcel Danesi. *The Forms of Meaning: Modeling Systems Theory and Semiotic Analysis*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000.