

THE PRINCIPLE OF TRANSPARENCY OF THE SIGN AND THE PROBLEM OF COGNITIVE MEDIATION AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMMEDIATISM

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*The article consists of two parts. In the first part (I) three different formulations of the principle of the transparency of the sign are described. In the first description (E. Husserl) it is said that the sign in a proper sense (both an iconic and conventional one) is transparent for its denotations. In the second description (A. Schaff) only the transparency of its meaning is admitted. As far as the third description is concerned (L. Koj) conviction, that every sign is transparent both for a signed object and its meaning, is typical. In the second part of the article (II) we consider relationship between the principle of the transparency of the sign and traditional distinction between "transparent" and "opaque" cognitive mediator – distinction between **medium quo** and **medium quod**. The main conclusion of this article is included in a thesis that linguistic cognition and significative cognition – because it isn't a direct cognition in the sense of primary directness (perceptive) – isn't able to guarantee a source of access to a cognized object, so it is not a direct cognition in a proper sense. It means that the transparency of the sign, when it appears in the face of its denotations (E. Husserl's interpretations) a sign or a system of signs are not able to function as a transparent mediator, i.e. **medium quo**. It is like that because – as E. Husserl noticed – the sign (due to its transparency) indeed shows us its denotations, but always through the mediation of its meaning and some significative intention.*

Keywords: sign, meaning, significative intention, intentionality, the transparency of the sign, transparent mediator (*medium quo*), opaque mediator (*medium quod*), directness of cognition.

I

One of the most often discussed problems of present philosophy of language is the so-called "principle of the transparency of the sign"¹. Just at the beginning of this discussion we pay atten-

tion to the fact that a physical object (a sound or printed inscription) should direct its users to smth else and should be transparent for our intellectual operations (as determinativeness, calling or predication) to become semantic production or, in other words, a sign. It should be as transparent as a glass for the sunshine and in general for the light (the comparison by S. Ossowski) (Ossowski 1926: 30–31). Thereat, everything, that is attributed to an object, must not be attributed to a sign as a physical object.

¹ *The problem of reciprocal relationship between tone and meaning of a word was discussed by theorists: philosophers, logicians, linguists, theorists of literature and psychologists (Koj 1990a). But in the last decades experimental scientists are interested in this question more and more often (Maruszewski; Nowakowska 1970: 60–79; Osiejuk 1989: 33–66).*

Only under this condition an object (sounds or inscriptions) can be called a sign. Since in a situation, when in the centre of our attention there is a physical side of a sign (as a carrier of the meaning itself), it becomes immediately deprived of semantic function and stops “to mean”².

About this problem Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) – the author of one of the key expressions of the principle of the transparency of the sign – wrote:

Erlebt ist beides, Wortvorstellung und sinngebender Akt; aber während wir die Wortvorstellung erleben, leben wir doch ganz und gar nicht im Vorstellen des Wortes, sondern ausschliesslich im Vollziehen seines Sinnes, seines Bedeuten. Und indem wir dies tun, indem wir in dem Vollzuge der Bedeutungsintention und eventuell ihrer Erfüllung aufgehen, gehört unser ganzes Interesse dem in ihr intendierten und mittels ihr genannten Gegenstände. /.../ Die Funktion des Wortes (oder vielmehr der anschaulichen Wortvorstellung) ist es geradezu, in uns den sinnverleihenden Akt zu erregen und auf das, was »in« ihm intendiert und vielleicht durch erfüllende Anschauung gegeben ist, hinzuzeigen, unser Interesse ausschliesslich in diese Richtung zu drängen (Husserl 1922: 39–40).

And further E. Husserl ascertained:

Was den deskriptiven Unterschied zwischen der physischen Zeichenerscheinung und ihrer zum Ausdruck stempelnden Bedeutungsintention an-

langt, so tritt er am klarsten hervor, wenn wir unser Interesse zunächst dem Zeichen für sich zuwenden, etwa dem gedruckten Wort als solchen. Tun wir dies, so haben wir eine äussere Wahrnehmung (bzw. eine äussere, anschauliche Vorstellung) wie irgendeine andere, und ihr Gegenstand verliert den Charakter des Wortes. Fungiert es dann wieder als Wort, so ist der Charakter seiner Vorstellung total geändert. Das Wort (als äusseres Individuum) ist uns zwar noch anschaulich gegenwärtig, es erscheint noch; aber wir haben es darauf nicht abgesehen, im eigentlichen Sinne ist es jetzt nicht mehr der Gegenstand unserer „psychischen Betätigung“. Unser Interesse, unsere Intention, unser Vermeinen – bei passender Weite lauter gleich bedeutende Ausdrücke – geht ausschliesslich auf die im sinngebenden Akt gemeinte Sache (Husserl 1922: 40).

On the same matter Adam Schaff (ur. 1913) wrote:

“The translucence” for meaning, so characteristic for language signs, appears only when (except for something disturbances of normal communication process) when **we stop** perceiving material shape of sign **at all**, and we have in mind only its significative side (Schaff 1960: 290).

Concluding, we can say that something is a sign only if it has a special feature: it must not hold our attention on itself (as only or main object of different mental operations: determinativeness, calling, predication, expression, etc), but it has to direct our attention to smth else. So it has to be intentional.

The principle of the transparency of the sign may be interpreted differently. Even quoted statements of E. Husserl and A. Schaff allow us to see that the transparency of the sign – considering that a thing which a sign directs to – generally can be understood twofold. One says (E. Husserl, S. Ossowski) that every sign directs our attention towards an object external to the sign and its users, which means isolated and general objects, status, events, processes, features, reports. However, according to other

² *Against physicalists, psychologists and objective idealists (platonics) I assume that a sign in a proper sense (iconic or conventional) especially a word-sign is a sensual perceptive physical object (possible to see, hear, touch). With typical appearance of a sign special functions and/or contents of mind (thoughts) are connected. Sign as all intentional objects is two-ply creature (double-sided). One side is carrier of meaning, which means some intersubjective accessible object, for example, inscription, or sound took in its typical appearance or tone. The second side is its meaning, so series of functions and/or psychical contents, which thanks to decision, habit or agreement between users of signs became assigned some physical objects, for example, sounds or inscriptions.*

philosophers (A. Schaff), “the transparency of the sign” means only that sign exposes its meaning³.

This twofold interpretation of “the transparency of the sign” appears because, I think, in semiotic analyses some appreciate cognitive functions of a sign (a sign as a way of cognition), others pay attention to an expressive and pragmatic function of a sign (a sign as a way of expressing thoughts or a way of communication). In other words, in semiotic and philosophical reflection about language one attribute is primacy to denotation, another – to communication.

When we think about the transparency of the sign, basically we can bear in mind either relationship “sign – reality out of sign” or relationship “sign – thinking”. However, as it seems, there is also a possible intermediate position, and this is the way of compromise. The view, that both of these functions are inalienable and necessary, guides us to this compromise: every sign is both “a sign of something” (a referential and semantic function of a sign) and “a sign for someone” (a pragmatic function). Every sign widely comprehended, both a conventional and natural one, has got an objective reference and subjective reference. So a sign directs to something which it signs and also to the consciousness (a human being) that gives a meaning to it, consciousness which pays attention to an object, but because of the absence of an object (for example, in perceiving) an alleged object in a special way – in a way which gives a meaning to some other object which has to represent perceptively an inaccessible object – in this way

this another object becomes a sign. Indeed, every sign – because it signs (denotes) and also means (has got a meaning, a sense) – is twofold representative: it is representation of a signed object (its denotations) and also representation of psychical contents (thoughts), which are evoked in a conscious subject by these objects, and which because of immediation of signs (= meaning production = carrier of a sense) might be communicated to another conscious subject. The theory of the sign is founded on such an understood principle of transparency. Close relationship between semantics and pragmatics was specified, worked out and even axiomatized by a well known logician from Lublin, Leon Koj (1929–2006) (Koj 1990c: 10–37; 1990b: 38–79).

II

It is difficult to decide what was first. If it was thought about the transparency of the sign (especially language signs), or maybe first it was distinction between “transparent” and “opaque” cognitive mediators – distinction between *medium quo* and *medium quod*⁴. However, every relationship between the principle of the transparency of the sign and distinction of “transparent” and “opaque” cognitive mediators seems to be actually as important and natural as relationship between philosophy of language and epistemology or semiotics.

Indeed we will not consider primacy of language or primacy of cognition. We also will

³ A. Schaffs first analyses in the case of words signs (renounced words), which he defines as “meaning acoustic objects”, as “inseparable entity of sound and meaning” as *sui generis* entity of sound and meaning, where sound (as individual physical object) is “transparent” (Schaff 1960: 289–291). But few pages later this formulation is extrapolated by A. Schaff on all other language signs, and also graphical signs and written language. He declares that, “analysis of sign situation, analysis of communication by text, must be considered as an entirety, as a unity of material carrier (sound, picture, conventional picture etc) and meaning” (Schaff 1960: 302).

⁴ For regularity I remind that *medium quo* (or *per quod*), in other words “transparent mediator”, also called formal mediator, is usually understood as a mediator, which during functioning as a cognitive mediator doesn’t hold attention of consciousness. Meanwhile, *medium quod*, in other words “opaque mediator”, also called instrumental mediator, is understood as a mediator which first must be the topic for perceiving consciousness an object of cognition, to become cognitive mediator. For a more detailed information see (Stepień 1971: 100–101) and (Stepień 1976: 143–147).

not consider if epistemology precesses and conditions semiotics or inversely – if semiotics (philosophy of language or hermeneutics) precessed and conditions all philosophical reflections about cognition, and also makes all epistemological investigations possible. Instead, the most important question is if cognition mediated by signs and systems of signs (especially language signs) always and necessarily is an indirect cognition, or if it is possible situation, when the presence of sign and language doesn't limit and doesn't disturb a direct cognition at all, or at least doesn't exclude it.

If dilemma may be formulated in a more technical deadline, namely, we can ask if every sign always and entirely is “opaque mediator” (*medium quod*) or if it is possible situation when signs and systems of signs are able to be “transparent mediator” (*medium quo*) which causes direct and source formulation of its denotations?

It is easy to foresee that an answer to the previous question depends first of all on how we interpret the principle of transparency of the sign. In the last matter, as we saw, there are two topics: “transparency” (or “opacity”) in the face of an object signed by a sign, or “transparency” (or “opacity”) in the face of its meaning or sense. It is easy to accept that the sign is transparent cognitive mediator only in the first case, so when it sends its denotations directly. Meanwhile, a sign is an opaque mediator when, before sending back its denotations, firstly directs to its meaning⁵.

Of course so comprehended transparency (and adequate opacity) would admit different levels (gradation). It would admit a situation when one sign is both (or for one) transparent and also (or for others) is opaque. It is also the truth, and even fact, that in its usage and concrete cognitive acts a sign (a picture or symbol) can send its denotations and also its meaning

(sense). To understand it fully we can add that next time a sign becomes so little transparent (in an extreme case – “opaque”) that it doesn't send anything else, and its physical side becomes the central – and even the only one topic of perceiving consciousness. It occurs, for example, when we don't know a foreign language at all. Then these signs no longer mean anything and no longer they are signs.

The settlements made a moment ago, despite their simplicity and even a special elegance, contain a special difficulty. Probably it is the difficulty of every semiotic and representational epistemology. As we guess, the essence of the matter is not a question if a sign or system of signs (iconic or linguistic) sometimes allows us to perceive directly its denotations (becoming “transparent mediator”, in other words, *medium quo*) but rather a question if any sign is able to make such a direct formulation possible. In this context it is enough to pay attention to the fact that every sign – just *ex definitione* – always is a sign (so only representation, picture, trace or symbol) of something different, i.e. of something which is structurally transcendent, something which is neither a sign in itself nor a content of a sign.

That is why we use a sign only when (and we have to do it) a signed object isn't present personally, in other words, directly. When an object is present in person, there is no need for a sign. When a sign appears, an object disappears, and there remains only its representation, as there is no sign – a sign in a proper sense: iconic or conventional – which has ability to make a signed object present, and even no sign wants to represent directly signed objects. Its first and basic function is only representing something which because of some reason is not present “in person”, so the only function is picturing, signing, indicating, symbolizing and signalizing. It is because of the fact that a sign (except for the so-called natural signs, in other words, some iconic signs) are usually conventional production, so something arbitrary or accepted thanks to habits. It is enough to explain why a sign doesn't

⁵ Of course, I omit an extreme situation, when an object (sound, inscription, gesture) doesn't send back at all, and the whole attention is attracted to its physical side.

make its object self-present, but only represents it in some way and replaces it.

This circumstance appears also in the case of natural signs – signs, which (differently from signs in a proper sense) are called traces. Smoke from a chimney is a trace (we can also say a result or symptom) of fire burning in a fireplace, but it doesn't show the fire itself. Perceiving a trace, for example, smoke, we can only think about fire, conclude or at least imagine it. Similarly, knowing the cause we can allege the result. For mediation its signatures objects are never data directly and in person (*originär*), they may be thought or imagined, but they cannot be directly (“bodily”) perceived. Directly perceived (and also directly present) might be only these “traces”, “symptoms”, “results” or “evidences”, for example, smoke from a chimney which allows us to conclude that there is fire in a fireplace. To get to this conclusion, to actually perceiving visual impressions thanks to which we can directly perceive smoke, many additional elements like reminders, associations, considerations, opinions and even the whole theories (the generalization of earlier experiences) should be added. Not before all the things, which are directly perceived, can be understood as a trace (a symptom or result) of something totally different – something which is not direct data, but only something imaginatively or mentally (indirectly) alleged.

Signs, traces, symptoms or results don't seem to be the same as perceived impressions, appearances or phenomenon of directly noticed things. Indeed, differently from noticed things, they don't pretend to be the thing itself. Just the opposite – they show, signalize, or mean something which is different from itself. That is why every sign – in its practical use – firstly demands to be understood (or if someone prefers – understanding perception⁶) – demands understanding in which an object might be thought of or imagined in different ways but never originally self-present, in other words, perceived⁷. So, when we talk about intentionality of a sign (its meaning intention and meaning *resp.* intentional content) then it is the right way of speech, but we have to

remember that each time it is a secondary intentionality: derivative from intentionality of “act of giving meaning” (*sinnegebender Akt*), act done by the user of the sign (the sender and the recipient). For this reason it is difficult to agree with the view that a sign – even sometimes – might be as “transparent” cognitive mediator (*medium quo*) as “transparent” are perceived impressions (*species impressa*) or even notions (*species expressa*). If it were true, denotations would not be only secondarily presented (presented mentally or imaginatively), but there would be no obstacle for denotations of the sign to be perceived.

Conclusions

The following final conclusions from the introduced considerations can be formulated:

1. To make a carnally perceptive psychical (acoustic or graphic) object a semantic production, in other words, a sign, it must get a special feature which is actually called transparency in semantics and philosophy of language.

⁶ *Interesting notes in the question of the so-called „understanding perception” (in other words, comprehension, understanding, understanding perception) and its meaning in cognition (Ingarden 1972: 105–107, 113–114).*

⁷ *In the twentieth century of philosophy and hermeneutics there were many different, sometimes extremely different (opposed) conceptions of “understanding” (Verstehen). For example, according to M. Heidegger (1889–1976) and also Landgrebe, Gadamer or Levinas “understanding” (Verstehen) is something which precedes and conditions all categorial thinking. Then in the case of “understanding some object domain by the text” sourcedness is barred, and also narrow comprehended directness. What's more, we have to do with “double indirect cognitive understanding: perceptive understanding of the graphical side, or the sonic side of a text conducts us to to direct understanding its sense (...), and this also cognitively shows something from the same domain, in which a text aims with its sense” (Gierulanka 1962: 82). On the matter of various conceptions and kinds of understanding, see also (Gierulanka 1962: 61–84, 146–149).*

2. Transparency might be understood in three main ways: a) as transparency towards a signed object (E. Husserl); b) transparency towards its meaning (A. Schaff); c) transparency both towards its denotations and its meaning (L. Koj).
3. According to these three main ways of understanding the transparency of the sign, we can distinguish three main interpretations of the principle of the transparency of the sign.
4. Considering the epistemological worth of cognition mediated by signs, generally the function of signs and a system of signs (language) may be tried to lead to the role of “transparent mediator” (*medium quo*) or to the role of “opaque mediator” (*medium quod*).
5. Aside from that, whichever of the mentioned interpretations of the principle of transparency of the sign we accept, no sign and no system of signs (including language as a system of conventional signs) is able to guarantee a source of access to its denotations.
6. Cognition mediated by signs must not be admitted as a direct cognition because it is twofold indirect. First, the perceptive formulation of the physical side of a sign (its sonic and graphical side) conducts to indirect understanding of its meaning or sense (the first indirect mediation), then (next) conducts us eventually to cognitive exhibition of an object, in which this sign aims due to its meaning (the second indirect mediation).
7. Intentionality of every sign and every expression of language, whichever version of the principle of sign transparency we accept, is always a secondary intentionality. It is intentionality – as E. Husserl would say – derivative to the acts of giving meaning and it is general to consciousness of language users.
8. So source and indirect cognition is possible only under condition that not the whole cognition has got a language character or/and a signitive character.

9. If we accept that cognition of something is at all possible and only when the source (direct) cognition of that thing is possible, we can also accept that there is no cognition, where we have to do only with signs and dictation of language.

In short, effective defense of epistemological immediatism (and what follows, the conviction about basic intelligibility of the real world) is possible only when we will not let the thesis about ubiquity and cognitive omnipotention of language to deceive us on a wrong way (Dębowski 2000, 2001: 417–426). In a different way, surrendering to the tendency, which accompanies the analytical philosophy till Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1990: 5.6), we will have to accept different variants of representationism, of course with all accompanying opinions including agnosticism.

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ŽENKLO AIŠKUMO PRINCIPAS IR PAŽINTINIO TARPININKAVIMO BEI EPISTEMOLOGINIO BETARPIŠKUMO PROBLEMA

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Straipsnis susideda iš dviejų dalių. Pirmojoje aprašomos trys skirtingos ženklų aiškumo principo formulės. Pasak pirmojo apibūdinimo (E. Husserlis), ženklų tikroji prasmė (tiek vaizdinė, tiek sutartinė) yra žymėjimas (signifikacija). Pasak antrojo (A. Schaffas), jo aiškumas slypi reikšmėje. Pasak trečiojo (L. Kojus), kiekvienas ženklas aiškus ir kaip žymintis, ir kaip reiškiantis. Antrojoje dalyje autorius nagrinėja ženklų aiškumo principą ir tradicinės skirties „aiškus“ bei „miglotas“ santykį. Ši skirtis tarp medium quo ir medium quod suponuoja pažintinį tarpininką. Pagrindinė straipsnio tezė: kalbinis pažinimas ir signifikacinis pažinimas nepajėgus laiduoti pažįstamo objekto šaltinio. Taigi tai nesąs tiesioginis pažinimas griežtąja prasme. Tai reiškia, kad ženklas ar ženklų sistema, iškildama kaip denotacija (Husserlio interpretacija), neatlieka aiškumo tarpininko (medium quo) vaidmens. Husserlio pastebėjimu, ženklas parodo savo denotacijos, visada tarpininkaujant reikšmei ir žyminčioms intencijoms.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: ženklas, reikšmė, žyminti intencija, intencionalumas, ženklų aiškumas, aiškumo tarpininkas (*medium quo*), miglotas tarpininkas (*medium quod*), pažinimo nukreiptumas.

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