

language and reality. some aspects of realism in the philosophy of language

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Taking into account these Wittgenstein's ideas, I shall discuss the details of the problem of the relation between language and reality in the case of two known philosophical points of view, which are represented directly or indirectly by some critics of Realism

In the 20-th century we witness a true “linguistic turn” in philosophy; to which one can associate the tendency to tackle almost any philosophical theme from the philosophy of language perspective. The problem of the relation between language and reality is one of the fundamental themes of the philosophy of language and it refers to many particular aspects such as the relation between meaning and reference, between truth and information, the inscrutability of the reference, the ontological relativity and the problem of the universal language.¹

In the analytical philosophy we can see the presence of two poles, of two opposite perspectives of the relation between language and reality.² One of them represented among the others,

¹ For a good perspective of the main themes of the actual philosophy of language see Ion Ceapraz, *Probleme actuale ale filosofiei limbajului*, Annals of the University of Craiova, Filosofie-Sociologie-Științe Politice, No.1-2/1999-2000, pp.5-24.

² Hugli, Anton, Lubcke, Poul (coord.), *Filosofia în secolul XX, Vol 2 Teoria științei, Filosofia analitică*, Editura All, București, 2003, p.396.

by Frege and Wittgenstein in his early philosophy, states that language is a means of presenting and representing the reality and the main function of philosophy is to explain the way in which the language represents the reality. The other perspective, which transpires from Wittgenstein's late philosophy, as well as from Austin, Strawson and Searle, states that the language must not represent at first a reflection of the reality but point out different actions and forms of social interaction. According to these philosophers, language must not be opposed to reality, but it must be seen as a part of it and, thus, the philosophy of language must be the study to describe the different functions of the language.

Wittgenstein's case is a good example for sustaining both perspectives of philosophical approach. On the one hand, in his early philosophy Wittgenstein sustains the existence of an isomorphism between language and reality, and in his late philosophy, on the contrary, he states that our language is made up of a series of language games. As John Searle observes, according to Wittgenstein, we are not engaged into a single language game in which there are universal standards of rationality and where everything is intelligible to anybody, but into a series of language games, each of them having its own standards of understanding.³ In *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, both language and reality have a similar structure.⁴ Language consists of propositions, compound of what is called "elementary propositions", and these are compound of names, which represent the last elements of our language. In its turn the world is made up of all facts; facts are made up of "states of affairs" and these states are made up of objects. Each level from the structure of the language corresponds to a level from the structure of the world. Thus, the last elements of the world (the simple objects) correspond to the last elements of the language (the names). By

³ Searle, John, *Mind, Language and Society. Philosophy in the Real World*, Phoenix, London, 2000, p.4.

⁴ See A.C.Grayling, *Wittgenstein*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2006, p.56 and next; see also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2001;

combining the names results the elementary propositions. In the structure of the world, the states of affairs correspond to these elementary propositions. The next level deals with combining theme in propositions, *i.e.* facts. Thus, language appears as a representation (picture) of reality. To this point of view one can associate a theory of meaning: “the meaning of a sentence is its criterion of truth” this principle is the basis for the first perspective mentioned in the philosophy of language. But, if in *Tractatus* Wittgenstein states that the meaning of a word refers to the object it denotes, in the late philosophy –especially in *Philosophical Investigations* – he considers that the understanding of a word represent its use in one of the language games.⁵ This principle could be re-formulated in: “the meaning of a word is its use” and it could be the basis for the second perspective mentioned. Naturally these two principles are not compatible.

Taking into account these Wittgenstein’s ideas, we shall discuss the details of the problem of the relation between language and reality in the case of two known philosophical points of view, which are represented directly or indirectly by some critics of Realism, too. One of the critics of Realism from the perspective of the philosophy of language is Michael Dummet. His theory is different from the others in the sense that it is built on the two principles mentioned above. According to Dummet the division between Realists and Anti-realists occurs inside the theory of meaning. According to Realists the meaning of a sentence depends on the correspondence to a state of affairs in the world, which might transcend our ability to detect it. According to the Anti-realists the meaning of an assertoric sentence is given by the reference of a recognizable situation that warrants its use.⁶ This is an epistemic theory of meaning. Although, Dummet seems to have a neutral attitude towards the debates between realists and anti-

⁵ Ion Ceapraz, *Similarities and Differences between L. Wittgenstein’s and W.V.O. Quine’s Philosophy*, in Mircea Flonta, Gheorghe Ștefanov (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein în filosofia secolului XX*, Polirom, Iași, 2002.

⁶ Michael Dummet, *Realism* in Michael J. Loux (ed), *Metaphysics, Contemporary readings*, Rutledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London-New York, 2001, p.460.

realists, his point of view changes, suggesting that we should take seriously the anti-realist's theory of meaning. First Dummett defines the Realism of the theory of meaning on the basis of three theses about the concept of meaning: the thesis of objectivity, the thesis of the truth conditions and the thesis of Realism.⁷ The last one sustains that each statement has a very well determined truth value and that it doesn't depend on the fact that we know or we could know that a sentence has this quality. This thesis is contested by the Anti-realists because, to them, the truth value of a statement depends only on the achievement of our truth criterion. Secondly, in order to sustain the anti-realist's arguments, Dummett uses Wittgenstein's idea from his late philosophy about the relationship between meaning and use. According to him, the meaning consist of the understanding which the speaker has for a certain expression and it depends on his capacity of using that expression. Rephrasing this principle of Wittgenstein's, Dummett will criticize Realism from a semantic perspective. First, he traces the difference between two kinds of statements: effective decidable statements and undecidable statements. For the former type of statements we can state, at least in principle, their value of truth. A statement such as: "My neighbour's dog weighs seven kilos" can be checked in a very simple way: we go to our neighbour, we ask him to give us his dog and we weigh it. If the statement confirms our truth conditions, then it is true, otherwise it is false. But statements such as: "Caesar had five skin-spots", "John has got a tooth-ache" or "If Hitler had invaded England in 1940, then Germany would have won the war" –they can not be checked because we don't have a criterion to decide their truth value. These are called undecidable statements. According to Dummett, this distinction between effective decidable and undecidable statements creates difficulties for realism of the theory of meaning. If in the case of effective decidable statements we can say that we have the right to consider that a statement is true or false, if it satisfies or not certain conditions of truth, we can't say the same

⁷ Hugli, Anton, Lubcke, Poul, *op. cit.*, p.399.

thing in the case of the undecidables. That is why Dummet asks the Realists which are the practical capacities which make him to attribute the truth value to some statements about which we can't say that they satisfy or not certain truth conditions.

Although it would seem that Realism is at deadlock, in the case of undecidables, there are authors who consider that Dummet's theory can't be sustained because it is based on certain wrong suppositions. Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny sustain that, in fact, Dummet wrongly identified the dispute of realism.⁸ He uses, as the positivists did, the principle of the verifiability for the replacing the metaphysical problem of realism with a problem of language and to demonstrate that realism is false. Although Dummet identifies the dispute of realism with a semantic one, a definition such as: "the physical entities of the common sense are objectively mind independent" given by the realists does not imply anything about language. It does not state anything about linguistic entities either, it is a doctrine about "what it is and how it is" and not a theory of language.⁹ Under these conditions, we could say that Dummet has an absolutely different vision about realism. All the above mentioned authors consider that is a mistake to reduce the dispute of the realism to one about meaning, because, in the end, it will become one about the nature of reality.¹⁰ On the other hand, Dummet tries to imply the idea that statements don't have other conditions of truth than those which can be verified. According to current of the verifying, the competent speaker must be able to verify the statements he (she) uses and to identify what the words refer to. For example, if we look at the word "Bănescu", in order to be capable to verify a sentence such as „Bănescu is bald", we must identify Bănescu first. To this idea based on a theory of identification the mentioned authors come with an opposite

⁸ Michael Devitt, Kim Sterelny, *Limba și realitate. O introducere în filosofia limbajului* Polirom, Iași, 2000, p.222 and next.

⁹ In other words, it is an ontological theory and not a semantic one. Thus, it should be remarked this tendency to reject the arguments against realism not only by bringing counter-arguments, but also by eliminating them under the motivation that they are based on confusion: Realism does not presuppose them!

¹⁰ Michael Devitt, Kim Sterelny, *op.cit.*, p.224

argument: a person can use a word even when (s)he makes a mistake or when (s)he is totally ignorant about the referent of it. So, I can refer to Bănescu when I use the word "Bănescu" without knowing him or have ever seen him, not even on TV.

Another theory, which, through its consequences, could break the fundamentals of realism, belongs to W.V.O. Quine and it is about the inscrutability of the reference and the radical translation. If Dummett wanted to reject the realism in the case of the undecidables, Quine's ideas could represent a greater challenge to realism. Quine's problem goes beyond the case of undecidables by referring to everything we think or say. His theory about language begins with Dewey's ideas that language is a creation of society and we can get it through the observation of the other's behavior. Under these conditions "Meaning...is not a psychic existence: it is primarily propriety of behaviour".¹¹ The first consequence of this idea would be that we can not accept a semantics for which they are determinate, unique meanings of some words. Quine associates to such an "uncritical" semantics the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels.¹² If you want to change the language, you only have to change the labels. Quine criticizes this type of semantics in a behavioristic manner. According to him, we must not see the meanings as something able to be determined into our mind, something which could be implied into our overt behavior. On the contrary, the meanings must be understood in terms of our behaviour. In order to sustain these ideas, Quine shows us how we can get to know a word. According to him, this process has got two stages: one during which we can become familiar with the sound of the word and be able to reproduce it (the phonetic part) and the second, during which we know how to use that word (the semantic part). The last part is more complex than the former one, especially in the case of

¹¹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, La Salle, III: Open Court, 1925; repr. 1958, p. 179, apud W.V. Quine, „Ontological Relativity” in Michael J. Loux (ed), *Metaphysics, Contemporary readings*, Rutledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London-New York, 2001, p. 479.

¹² W.V. Quine, „Ontological Relativity” în Michael J. Loux (ed), *op.cit.*, p. 480.

the words to which we can't directly ascribing observable traits to things. In this case the process of learning becomes more complex and more obscure, because the learner has no other data but those of the overt behaviour of other speakers.

In order to sustain his ideas, Quine uses a well known example: a linguist must translate the language of a newly discovered people. The only evidence that the linguist has access to is the publicly accessible behaviour of the native speakers. But this is not enough to translate everything the native speakers say. The radical translation is not determined in the sense that different and incompatible translations of the native speakers' language are compatible with the behaviour evidence to which the linguist has access.¹³ The reference is, thus, inscrutable in the case of the radical translation, because the linguist is not able to settle or to determine precisely the reference of the different expressions of the native speakers' language.¹⁴ Similarly, Wittgenstein talks about the radical translation of a language totally different from ours as about a heuristic procedure use to fully understand the language concepts, meaning and understanding.¹⁵ In *Philosophical Investigations* he writes: "Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, and rebelled against them, and so on? The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means which we interpret an unknown language"¹⁶ We can see that Wittgenstein also underlines the behavioristic idea of learning a language as well as of using a language, but he rejects Quine's behavioristic method, which states that "the given" for the field linguist are the sensorial stimuli and the responses to them. For

¹³ W.V.Quine, *op.cit.*p.481.

¹⁴ Quine gives the example the famous imaginary word *gavagai* , which can be understood in various ways by a linguist, but its determined reference coming from the native speakers is not accessible to him.

¹⁵ Ion Ceapraz, *op.cit.* p. 237.

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe and R.Rhees (eds.), Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, § 206, apud Ion Ceapraz, p.237; see also the Romanian translation Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Cercetări filosofice*, Humanitas, București, 2004, p.201.

such a linguist of Wittgenstein's, this "given" represents the human forms of life. He can be able to understand the native speakers' language only through connections with the rest of their lives.¹⁷

There are some important consequences of Quine's example. It is possible that the same empirical content to bear distinct organizations of a linguistic network.¹⁸ It is also possible for a conceptual schema, which an individual has, because he speaks a language, to suffer successive transformations although the empirical content of such a schema remains the same and it is also possible for two speakers who use the same language and maybe the same words (let's say in a conversation) to differ their conceptual schemas considerably despite the fact that they have added to their conceptual schemas the same empirical content.

We must admit the relevance of Quine's theory as far as a language learning is concerned and as the different confusions that can appear during an ordinary conversation, but we must also point out the fact that a behavioristic theory about meaning does not eliminate Realism. It can, indeed, breakdown the metaphor of the museum used to determine the meaning, but referring to the idea that words do not have unique, determined meanings, we can't draw the conclusion that there are no real objects to correspond to such words.

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¹⁷ Ion Ceapraz, *op.cit.* p. 238.

¹⁸ Emil Ionescu, *Adevăr și limbă naturală*, Editura All, București, 1997, p.32 and next.

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