Hubert Kowalewski 2016: Motivating the Symbolic: Towards a Cognitive Theory of the Linguistic Sign. *[series: Sound — Meaning — Communication 1] Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. 210 pp. ISBN: 9783631694299. EUR 46.70.*

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1. THE AUTHOR

Hubert Kowalewski is a cognitive linguist from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS) in Lublin. In 2012, he defended a dissertation in general linguistics, in which he offered an epistemological critique of one of the most fundamental and controversial statements of linguistics, namely, the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. Throughout his research career, Dr. Kowalewski has focused his attention mainly on linguistic motivation and semiotics. He is currently developing a reflection on the methodology of science and the role of intuition and thought experimentsin human sciences: he has written many articles and given many conference talks in Polish and English throughout Europe on metonymies in cognitive linguistics, indexical motivation based on semantic contiguity, embodied language in literature and comics, two-dimensional semantics, philosophy of science, and philosophy of language.

2. GENERAL OVERVIEW

Motivating the Symbolic: Towards a Cognitive Theory of the Linguistic Sign is a monograph in linguistics based on Kowalewski's doctoral dissertation. It is

a reflection on questions that belong to the field of general linguistics and semiotics: the questions are treated with the tools of cognitive linguistics and are put in perspective with prototype models of categorization. The overall argumentation aims at demonstrating that linguistic motivation can be found and described at several levels of the language structure (phonology, morphology, syntax) and requires both the synchronic and the diachronic perspectives to be satisfactorily analyzed. The argumentation starts by pointing at fundamental misunderstandings in the very definition of arbitrariness proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure and in the examples he uses to illustrate the arbitrariness of the link between signifieds and signifiers. Kowalewski goes on drawing attention to the problems with the very meanings of the words *natural*, *conventional*, *motivated*, or *symbolic*, and the way those words have spoiled the debate on the notion of arbitrariness by being understood through their connotations rather than their denotations. This part of the argumentation is extremely important for the whole work because it reveals how the formulation of this fundamental statement contains the seeds of misunderstanding and explains why it is still so hard to challenge notions coined more than a century ago.

The monograph also represents a clear and concise summary of the fundamental concepts developed in general linguistics, Cognitive Grammar, semiotics, and also of the category/prototype debate. For this reason, it represents an ideal handbook for students in linguistics and provides an overview of the major schools of linguistics in the 20th century. It also represents a very interesting example of rhetorical analysis since a whole chapter is devoted to the redefinition of simple and generally unquestioned concepts. Following Langacker's methodology, who devotes large parts of his publications to case studies, the last chapter of Kowalewski's book contains analyses of several linguistic phenomena using the tools developed throughout the volume and hence showing the explanatory potential of those new concepts. The monograph also manages to build a bridge between Langacker and Peirce's endeavours and uses the terms *conceptualized similarity*, *contiguity*, or *convention*: they are useful scientific tools that allow the reader to understand the workings of motivation and allow cognitive linguists to unambiguously explain the mechanisms of motivation in language.

3. The book's content

The first chapter is devoted to a concise presentation of some of the theoretical frameworks of this study. This chapter bears the somewhat grandiloquent title "Language versus reality", which, however, is justified, as it deals with conceptual capacities and categorical tendencies of humans, as well as with

the role of embodiment and subjectification in the creation of signs, expressions, and concepts. The chapter explains the conditions of emergence of the principles of cognitive linguistics and recalls fundamental moments of the category/prototype debate. Here, one could regret that the author presents the emergence of cognitive linguistics as a reaction against the generative tradition, hence omitting to mention the historical links between generative linguistics and cognitive linguistics. Kowalewski also defines the notions of metaphor and metonymy, their types and directionalities (as viewed in cognitive linguistics), in ways quite different from the original definitions of those terms, generally used in literary studies. Those are the concepts that are fundamental for the argumentation in this book since the tools proposed to analyze the mechanisms of motivation of the linguistic sign or expression are largely based on cognitive metaphors and metonymies.

The second chapter is devoted to a very precise and detailed summary, analysis, and critique of the definitions and classification of linguistic signs proposed by Saussure, Peirce, and Langacker. It begins with Saussure, whose definition of sign has often been reduced to a very short statement (namely, "the sign is arbitrary"), which is often so drastically deprived of its original context that it almost sounds like a slogan preventing any scientific discussion to emerge. This section recalls the notion of "value", based on differential and negative properties, the notion of "link" between the signifier and the signified, based on positive properties, and the notion of the "linearity of the sign". It explains Saussure's metaphors and recalls the asymmetry between arbitrariness and motivation (due to the distinction between relative and absolute motivation). Then, Kowalewski summarizes Peirce's definition and classification of signs. He explains in detail the American scholar's triadic structure, including a historical perspective and the evolution of his findings. The notions of "firstness", "secondness", and "thirdness" (and thus of "hypo-icons" and "hyposemes") that are often forgotten but that are nevertheless crucial in Peirce's thought are described thoroughly, as is that of "sign" itself (for it can refer both to the representamen and the whole triadic structure). Kowalewski devotes an important part of this section to the distinction between dynamic, final and immediate objects and interpretants; this distinction represents a bridge between semiotics and philosophy of language, as it involves the inaccessible physical thing in reality that allows the sign to be perceived in the first place. Kowalewski also explains how Pierce's classification started with 59,049 kinds of signs and ended up with 66 and then only three types. One of the most crucial moments of this section is the last one, when symbols are compared to habits and conventions: Kowalewski's considerations and reflections are based on a redefinition of what is generally thought of when one talks about "naturalness" as opposed to "convention". The distinction between the representamen of a symbol (a general class of

objects) and the replica (the material representation of the class) is both the Peircean terminology for the Saussurean *langue/parole* distinction and the reason why the notion of arbitrariness could emerge in the first place.

Then, Kowalewski move son to the definition of the sign in cognitive linguistics. He starts by comparing Saussure's and Langacker's rather similar definitions of the linguistic sign, and then demonstrates the autonomy of the phonological layer relative to the semantic layer, an autonomy that allows plays on words to exist at all. Next, the hierarchy of semantics in relation to phonology is explained, since for both Saussure and Langacker phonology is conceptual in nature (the acoustic image is not the real sound that gets out of the mouth of the speaker). In other words, phonological space is a subregion of semantic space. Thus, Saussure's semiotic dyad becomes a semiotic tetrad with Langacker, who includes the usage event (as opposed to the semantic and phonetic units) in the conceptualization of the sign. Kowalewski then briefly recalls the different kinds of motivation that one can find in language: onomatopoeias, motivation in morphology, motivation in syntax, etc. This leads to a reflection on the notion of "naturalness". It starts with icons: there is objectively nothing "natural" in an icon. To use the author's own words: "If these kinds of signs are to be treated as motivated and natural (and there is a general agreement among linguists that they indeed are like that), we are bound to admit motivation and naturalness lie in subjective relations construed by the human mind" (p. 130).

At that moment, the monograph takes on a new dimension since two apparently opposite notions are being interpreted as complementary aspects of the symbolic unit: convention is a perfect example of naturalness. On the one hand, as Taylor (2002: 48) demonstrates, anything in language has an indexical dimension anyway since the very act of speaking one language instead of another is itself indexical (it informs about the speaker's origins). And the index is precisely the most "natural" of the signs (meaning here "independent of any observer"). Yet, "naturalness" is precisely what is intuitively opposed to "arbitrariness". What is more, if one considers that "naturalness" is what "feels right" to a speaker ("naturalness" of a form-meaning connection is a useful criterion for defining motivation, as long as "natural" is understood as "normally expected" rather than "existing in nature"), then we have two good reasons to believe that absolutely everything is motivated in language: (i) a conventional link, since it became a habit for speakers, is natural; (ii) any speech act is an index of an aspect of the speaker's life.

Now, every sign is an index of something, and even as to the structure of the sign, the link is indexical. Indeed, as Radden and Kövecses (1999) demonstrate, the link between the signifer and the signifed is an index and more precisely a metonymy: the symbolic connection between the phonological form and the concept can be viewed as a metonymy, which by definition is

based on a motivated relationship of contiguity. To explain more precisely the structure of this kind of metonymy within the sign itself, Kowalewski uses the concept DOG as an example:

> If the semantic characterization of the concept DOG relies on a frame embracing various cognitive domains, it may be reasonably claimed that one of these domains is LANGUAGE. This domain defines the phonological form used to denote the concept DOG in the native language of the speaker (and perhaps in foreign languages that she knows). Consequently, the relationship between the concept and the phonological form used to symbolize this concept is a relationship between elements of one cognitive frame, which is identical to conceptual metonymy. Since metonymic relations are considered to be motivated on the grounds of contiguity, it is only natural to accept that the form-meaning connection is motivated in the same manner. (p. 131)

The last part of this chapter summarizes the terminological problems: the terms *conventional*, *natural*, *arbitrary*, *symbolic* and *motivated* are now clearly defined, which allows the author to conclude that "linguistic signs are symbolic, because they are pairings of a phonological form and a concept. Linguistic signs are motivated because iconicity, indexicality, and convention bind the two poles of a sign" (p. 134).

Then, Kowalewski describes three factors of linguistic motivation: conceptualized similarity, conceptualized contiguity, and conceptualized convention, which are not mutually exclusive. These notions require the description of "identity" as opposed to "identicality". Identicality has a higher degree of similarity than identity. Indeed, let us compare how the participants are referred to in the following sentences: *The man behind the desk is Peter* and *This dog is a dachshund*. In the first sentence, there is identity between "the man" and "Peter" but in the second, there is identicality between "this dog" and "dachshung". Both identity and identicality involve a spatial and temporal coincidence but unlike identity, the relationship of identicalityis not exclusive (there are other dachshunds than this dog, while only one Peter is the man behind the desk).

In discussing conceptual contiguity, this monograph does not consider the problem of the ontological distinction between objective contiguity and subjective conceptualization of contiguity. Contiguity is simply treated here as something subjectively construed. Its subjective nature is particularly conspicuous in causal metonymies (EFFECT FOR CAUSE) and Kowalewski illustrates this point with the following examples (originally given by Radden and Kövecses 1999: 38):

a. *This road is slow.* (for SLOW TRAFFIC RESULTING FROM THE POOR STATE OF THE ROAD)

b. ??? *This road lacks skill.* (for SLOW TRAFFIC RESULTING FROM THE LACK OF SKILL OF WORKERS)

c. ??? *This road is lazy.* (for SLOW TRAFFIC RESULTING FROM THE LAZINESS OF WORKERS)

These examples show that the contiguity relationship between the quality of the road and the quality of the traffic is not objective and requires certain amount of subjective knowledge of the phenomena taking part in the relation.

The last chapter of this book aims at putting into practice the tools developed throughout the argumentation in a set of strategic case studies. Kowalewski begins his case studies with one of the most cited and uncontroversial onomatopoeias in the linguistic literature on phono-symbolism, namely *cuckoo*. First, the author points out a fact that is quite too often forgotten concerning the analysis of onomatopoeias, which is that they need not imitate what they refer to. Indeed, the word *cuckoo* imitates *the song* of a bird and not *the bird* itself. This is a metonymy and it plays a crucial role in the structure of the imitation. It is not true, either, that onomatopoeias only imitate what they *can* imitate, i.e. acoustic referents. On the contrary, onomatopoeias can imitate non-acoustic referents through metonymies like the *cuckoo* metonymy. Kowalewski then analyzes the word *grasshopper* in order to illustrate the importance of salience in metonymy. Indeed, the author highlights the prevalence of experiential knowledge over scientific knowledge in the creation of motivated units. A "knowledge taxonomy" is proposed, where everyday world knowledge is based on sensory experience. In *grasshopper,* the motivating relations operate on the "horizontal" semantic plane, which means that the contiguity relations connect concepts of GRASS and HOPPING with the concept of the INSECT.

The author also explores other kinds of motivation, such as morphological reanalysis in the word *bikini*, motivation based on the creation of a new constructional schema through diachronic changes of the *-punk* suffix, delves more and more into sociolinguistics with the analysis of the word *dress-out*, and finally analyzes motivation in a whole sentence, showing that the method developed in this book can also be used in literary studies.

4. *SOME CRITICISM AND FINAL COMMENTS*

The conciseness of this work makes it an excellent handbook for students or scholars interested in semiotics, general linguistics, and cognitive linguistics. However, and regrettably, the book's aim is not to provide a critique of cognitive linguistics and especially of Langacker's theory. Indeed, the fundamental claims of cognitive linguistics are taken for granted and one

could argue that the monograph lacks a critical approach to this theory. For instance, Kowalewski just asserts (without explaining why) that cognitive linguistics fulfils Kuhn's requirements, namely, to be a collection of "some accepted examples of actual scientific practice — examples which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation" (Kuhn 1970: 10). The author also asserts without any further explanation that because cognitive linguistics is semantics-oriented, this paradigm provides "law, theory, application, and instrumentation" (p. 20) for studying semantic phenomena, including motivation. Finally, the short section devoted to generative linguistics also lacks some precision on several descriptive aspects of the theory and especially on its role in the emergence of the cognitive paradigm: indeed, those two paradigms share the same origin and it would have been interesting to mention the fact that cognitive linguistics is the daughter of Generative Semantics.

Having said that, let us conclude that Kowalewski's monograph must not be taken as a critical comparison between theories but rather as a positive attempt to build bridges between Saussure's general linguistics, Peirce's semiotics, and Langacker's cognitive linguistics.

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