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On the Account of the Nature of Meaning: Approach Based on the Insights into Aristotle's and Aquinas' Theory of Being and Cognition

Abstract

The nature of meaning was claimed to be the central idea for cognitive semiotics. The meaning, however, has many definitions in different domains of science. In modern semiotics, there are several approaches to definition of meaning depending on the considered model of sign. At least four basic traditions may be singled out: Saussurean approach based on the ideas of structuralism; Peircean approach based on his Universal categories of Being; Morris' approach based on behaviorism, and Uexkuell's biosemiotic approach. Due to the diversity of approaches, the following problems should be considered: What are relations between the approaches? Could they be united, that is, could a general theory of meaning be proposed? Should it be applicable only for semiotics, or should it be suitable for other domains of science as well? What should be the common ground of the theory? A vast scope of research and the numerous attempts of many scientists are needed to solve these problems. In this contribution, one of such attempts is made—the outlines of the ontological approach to analysis of nature of meaning are proposed. It is based on the insights into Aristotle's and Aquinas' ideas on cognition. Proposed account presents a further development of author's ideas described in his recently published book *Sign and Form. Models of Sign as Homomorphism Based on Semiotic Insights into Aristotle's and Aquinas' Theory of Being and Cognition*. The ontological approach is not new for semiotics: Peirce defined sign as one of his universal categories of Being (*Thirdness*); centuries ago before Peirce, Poinsot defined sign as a Relational Being in his *Tractatus de Signis*. The ontological approach provides the most common ground for the theory of meaning. In this contribution, Being is viewed in terms of Aristotle's hylomorphism and his theory of cognition. Meaning is viewed as a complex phenomenon and it is placed in the framework of Being. It will be shown that proposed approach allows constructing a system of models of meaning (direct and indirect meaning; symbolic meaning; metaphorical meaning; discriminating meaning and sense). The approach also allows creating the most basic and natural classification of signs (starting from the natural division of all signs into *material* and *formal*). It is supposed further that due to its most general (ontological) ground, the proposed approach has a potential to unite other approaches to definition of meaning. The arguments to ground this statement will be provided.