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Categorization and Meaning-Making

The paper presents general picture of meaning in its making. The picture rests on an idea of categorization-based cognition.

„To Cognize is to Categorize“ (Harnad 2005).

The beginning of categorization concur with the emergence of life - every organism makes something in this world to be of certain value, leaving everything else to be worthless; that's the essence of categorization; living organisms appear to act as institutions of categorization and, what's more, as various methods of categorization.

The criteria used for making this world divided into the initial categories are obscure, if not without logic, but results produced thereof constitute basis for the next criteria to be not baseless. They also constitute axioms for all the subsequent logic-building and premises for all the subsequent meaning-making.

To look at that, Pavlovian experiments (unsurpassed in experimental semiotics) might be used. They show how the umwelt of an animal could be expanded to include newly-formed additional areas of symbolic reality and, on top of that, they suggest ideas for bridging the theoretical gap between signs of animal communication and human language.

Let's assume the following:

1. Pavlovian-type signs of the stimulus-response reality have semantic value.
2. The aforesaid value could not be defined adequately in terms of grammatically modified words (neither noun “food”, nor the verb “to eat”, nor even the abstract adjective “good” can match the meaning expressed by the sound-induced somatic salivation; no word can match a category derived from the repertoire of animal's somatic reactions).
3. The same goes about initial pregrammatical words – their meaning is not expressible in the words of modern vocabulary; they have to be seen in the categories of the preverbal human experience besides.

The paper focuses on the last assumption and comes to the following conclusion: our words make us to live in the world that consists of things (“things in itself”); the words of our distant predecessors made them to live in the world that consisted of agent-like (“theonimic”) phenomena.

To prove this case, Homeric language, Aristotelian categories (not compatible with the modern mentality!), other reflections of ancient mind have been analyzed.

Based on that, short vocabulary of the early humans have been elaborated.

One example: “M(a) / T(a)” – markers of the basic categories “good / bad”, “vitally important / deadly dangerous”, “my own / the Other”, not the early forms of strictly personal pronouns “me / thou”.

The next issue is language-based meaning-making.

References

Harnad S. (2005). To Cognize is to Categorize: Cognition is Categorization in Lefebvre, C. and Cohen, H., Eds. *Handbook of Categorization*. Elsevier.