

## **The future of discourse vs. cultural memory**

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The division of sciences into nomothetic and idiographic has put a great challenge to the latter. The question of looking for generalised rules, characteristic of modern European concept of science, has been put in opposition to the imperative of describing what is unique, singular, original, i.e. unrepeatable and, in fact, without any common denominator. While knowledge of nature made it possible to put the object of research in order and to verify or falsify judgements concerning rules governing phenomena, knowledge of culture remained for a long time an additive set of data on human achievements, a set that does not submit to the requirements of nomothetics.

In practice, all concepts which in the late 19th century tried to introduce a methodological order into the humanities sooner or later were criticised. Differences in the assessment of the credibility of various methods were very clear. The specification of research procedure began with the discrediting of the comparative method in favour of the functional method. Structuralism and then semiotics seemed to offer more precise analytical procedures<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the humanities turned towards arranging the central categories, around which it would be possible to organise a discourse and assign paradigmatic qualities to it. This process of looking for key words needed to interpret this or that aspect of cultural reality has been going on since the times of Wilhelm Windelband, whose proposal of classi-

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<sup>1</sup> The objective of these methods, positivist in spirit, was to find out the truth about the analysed phenomenon or at least to propose an exhaustive interpretation of it. See F.R. Ankersmit, *Historiografia i postmodernizm*, transl. E. Domańska, [in:] *Postmodernizm, Antologia przekładów*, ed. R. Nycz, Kraków 1997.

On the other hand, deconstruction, practised both in the analysis of the object/text and in the discourse on the principles of analysing the object/text, questions the sense of trying to arrive at a single correct interpretation.

fication of sciences coincided with poststructuralism, began by Jan Baudouin de Courtenay.

The penchant for reduction, characteristic of structuralism, which came to be universally criticised with time, paradoxically led – and we have been able to clearly see it since the penultimate decade of the 20th century – to special meaning being given to notions which drew the sender's and the receiver's attention to seemingly similar phenomena bearing the same name. We can easily find in the contemporary humanities a set of words which from time to time organise their discourse: phenomenon, essence, existence, system, paradigm, convention, myth, style, structure, sign, semiosis, identity, sex and gender, exclusion, face, memory, encounter, performance, turn. We find them in the titles of works by individual authors and titles of various collections. They represent notions authorising a reinterpretation of the existing reflection on man and culture. What they have in common is an entrenchment of sorts in the structuralist thought, because each of them is simultaneously closed (when used as a designatum of a specific phenomenon) and open (when functions as an interpretant of the meaning placed – like Levi-Strauss' myth – above the level of sentence and goes beyond the singularity of a phenomenon/object/text).

Looking for tools that could be used to describe and analyse an aspect of reality that has escaped earlier interpretative procedures, in its initial phase often has all the hallmarks of a discovery. Suddenly we realise that a word used ordinarily in a descriptive function and referring to a common experience carries with it a philosophical or theoretical potential, a potential which – through more or less distant contexts in which it can appear – makes us not only notice reality but also put it in order. "Encounter" was banally obvious in everyday experience until it became the foundation of the philosophy of dialogue. "Identity" initially was of interest primarily to mathematicians<sup>2</sup>, while "discourse" signified a conventional exchange of opinions. Distinguishing such periodically important expressions, then assigning to them specific features and, finally, making them, like many others, the central categories of humanistic reflection is a process which has strongly affected the humanities over the last fifty years. It does not seem that it could be treated as a closed chapter today. On the contrary. Scholars keep looking for semantically capacious and expressive formulations, breaking the clarity of old classifications and, at the same time, synthesising far from homogeneous phenomena and processes, combined into previously unknown configurations. Such experiments are signalled by, for example, the prefix "trans-" used not only in words like *transfusion*, *transplant* or *transgenicity*, but also *transgression*, *transdisciplinarity*, *transculturality* and, finally, *transhumanism*.

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<sup>2</sup> See *L'identité: séminaire interdisciplinaire, dirigé par Claude Lévi-Strauss, professeur au Collège de France 1974-1975*, ed. J.-M. Benoist et al., Paris 1977.

Such a distinctive phenomenon never has just one cause. On the other hand, a combination of causes is by no means easy – if at all possible – to reconstruct. Nevertheless, the question as to why language constructs have become a major issue in reflection on culture and society has been important for some time. We can assume that one of the reasons of their dazzling career is a desire, as it were, to be precise: by using one name for a number of designata, we in fact want to point to the same aspect in these designata, to stress the similarity previously well-hidden by the function, content and form of every single phenomenon. By choosing a word and giving it the status of a term, at the same time we propose that its previous contexts, its unequivocalness be cancelled or, at least, put in phenomenological brackets, and we reveal the potential of applicable meanings. Thus, we declare a war on idiography and/or we look for traces of nomothetism in the idographic.

In specific studies this procedure shifts the focus from attempting to describe the specificity of a phenomenon to following the “difference and repetition”, to a deconstruction of conventional senses and finding new ones, sometimes even producing them deliberately. Discovered senses are those a trace of which has been left in the existing analytical practices, despite the fact that their position has previously been marginalised. Produced senses would be associated with the creation, by means of words (and, indirectly, their cultural designata), of new mental configurations which would be then given new meanings.

New mental configurations are often mechanical effects of a transgression of the boundaries of linguistic monosystems. Thus, it would seem that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous remark again becomes relevant. The “limits of my (mother) language” cease to be relatively fixed limits of my world. Every day previously unknown phenomena enter “my world”, and “my language” is invaded by expressions which previously did not fit in its lexicon and which are not always well adapted to the new system. To be more precise: there emerge in my language lexemes the etymology of which refers us to different associations, while domestic lexemes, lifted out of a once fixed context, begin to acquire new meanings never generated by the system before.

This apparent interpenetration of codes making it possible for lexemes from other languages to take over functions of terms seemingly more precise is a prerequisite for the already mentioned production of senses. Since, acting as translators, we begin to decide individually on linguistic borrowings introduced into the collective discourse, it is difficult to speak of only “discovering” meanings that are there. In addition, it is difficult to control them, hence the thesis that they “proliferate” seemingly independently once seemed obvious.

If our research interest includes the consequences of occasional bringing together in one set of phenomena hitherto seen as belonging to separate systems – but now collated on the basis of similarity of aspects and named by means of the same approximant – at the same time we produce new semantic configurations, which are sometimes prematurely regarded as cultural phenomena. While

our predecessors saw the sense of cognitive practices in activities focused on the object and its description, today we are told to stress the primacy of the relation between the object (or an aspect of it) to voluntarily chosen (selected) elements of the more or less immediate context. The emphasis on the prime role of the relation also stems from structuralism; in poststructural practices relations stabilise the dynamics of contemporary culture so that its changing phenomena could be put in words (described) as completely new but at the same time recognisable.

The type of intellectual practices presented here seems to be drawing on epistemological disputes, which have a very long tradition in European culture. The question of the relation between the content and the form, settled by Aristotle in favour of a harmonious co-existence of both, remained (and probably still remains) controversial in modern European scholarly discourse<sup>3</sup>. The source of the dispute seems to be lying beyond the free choice of participants in these discussions. Perhaps it should be sought, among others, in traditionally diverse European linguistic-cultural systems. Of course, any attempt to legitimise this intuition, which does not even deserve to be called a thesis yet, requires honest reflection and separate studies<sup>4</sup>.

What emerges in contemporary reflection is a conviction that there exist neglected or prematurely abandoned areas of potential epistemological exploration. The idea of modernism as an “unfinished project” is also a call to stand up for

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenski stressed the significance of diachrony in the shaping of this relation. Their concept of a division into “cultures of the text” and “cultures of the rules” is clearly built on the content-form opposition. See J. Lotman, B. Uspenski, *O semiotycznym mechanizmie kultury*, transl. J. Faryno, [in:] *Semiotyka kultury*, ed. E. Janus, M.R. Mayenowa, Warsaw 1977, pp. 156-161.

<sup>4</sup> However, looking at the problem from a certain perspective, we can see that, for example, reflection in French, a very rigorous language, but also one aiming at formal aestheticisation of utterances, has been trying since Descartes' times to maintain a balance between the content and the form. M. Montaigne's essays are an excellent example of this. But already the Baroque, quickly transforming itself into classicism in France, clearly begins to favour the form. The source of this privileged treatment seems to be lying in aesthetic considerations. Emphasising the beauty of an utterance turns the beauty into an autonomous category, with time enabling an “empty form” to exist. Descartes, who with his *Discourse on the Method* intended to point to the value of an *a priori* order in each epistemic process, paved the way for reflection on epistemic methods, i.e. formal determinants of epistemological reflection. In France there began at that time a period of exceptional care for the linguistic form, the sophistication of which became a symbol of individual cultivation. But at the time words began to lose touch with objects. The process, well described by Michel Foucault, was quickly extrapolated to the whole European chirographic culture at the time. Epistemic progress was measured by pointing out metaformal issues. The potential found in language, in every language with a script, definitely made it possible to reveal new layers of reality, the status of which was far removed from any tangible “object”. Formal analyses began to focus on abstractions, metaphors, semantic approximations, used to attack epistemological cracks in search of a new truth. Postmodern practices became, in a way, a culmination of these kinds of experiments.

“content” in the context of expanded formalist practices<sup>5</sup>. However, an attempt to return to simple answers to the question of “what?” has ceased to be possible. Today it seems naive to be asking questions about the essential meaning of any message. According to the official interpretation, there is no “essential meaning”. As Michel Foucault wrote many years ago:

Having become a dense and consistent historical reality, language forms the locus of tradition, of the unspoken habits of thought, of what lies hidden in a people’s mind; it accumulates an ineluctable memory which does not even know itself as memory. Expressing their thoughts in words of which they are not the masters, enclosing them in verbal forms whose historical dimensions they are unaware of, men believe that their speech is their servant and do not realize that they are submitting themselves to its demands. The grammatical arrangements of language are the *a priori* of what can be expressed in it. The truth of discourse is caught in the trap of philology<sup>6</sup>.

Today’s sociobiologists are inclined rather to look for the foundations of epistemology on the level of neurones and memes, suggesting to the humanities a new version of naturalist determinism. The increasing cyborgisation of the human world makes it possible to ask questions not so much about the *conditio humanae*, but about the condition of the *robo sapiens*. At the same time there has re-emerged on the outskirts of thinking about the biocultural, technologically-modified human the contemporary fascination with memory, defined in a variety of ways, memory, which is the fundamental determinant of arguments cited every time in the course of individual reflection and, indirectly, in the process of creating a collective discourse.

It seems that **memory**, one of the central categories known for a long time and rediscovered anew today, refers us to what was but at the same time allows us, on the basis of accumulated experience, to predict what will be. In most European cultural-linguistic systems memory is what sends us back, to the past, what tells us to look back and hinders our development. Yet, for example, the Quechua Indians believe that it is the future that exists somewhere behind us; as humans look ahead what they clearly see is the past. In this system of perceiving time, people seem to be seeking the past, they follow its trace and memory is for them a compass and signpost on this way<sup>7</sup>. This is one of those concepts in which cultural past is not only an obvious element of the present but also an irreducible foundation of potential changes.

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<sup>5</sup> This nostalgia seems significant, especially given the temporary marginalisation of the German thought, which – traditionally rooted in essentialism – today clearly tries to avoid the traps of autonomous formalism.

<sup>6</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Routledge Classics 2002, p. 324.

<sup>7</sup> Sometimes we may think that the deep structure of not only Polish conservatism is dominated by the Peruvian system of chronic valorisation, with fascination with change and progress being superficial and attractive only to the extent it translates into specific benefits. This means, of course, specific manipulation of memory and its use for specific purposes, usually accompanied by the most profound conviction that the remembered episodes are “true”, episodes extrapolated to all phenomena characteristic of a given past period.

Yet in the postmodern European thinking, the cult of various novelties is often associated with an ostentatious depreciation of their cultural foundation and disregard for older forms. Freeing ourselves from historical determinism, we fall into the trap of synchrony. We love butterflies and are disgusted by chrysalises, forgetting that there is a significant bond between them.

We can see in the humanistic discourse a phenomenon of seasonal fascinations, recently manifested, for example, in distancing oneself from the achievements of the “classics” and disregarding conclusions based on outdated epistemological premises. However, it is extremely difficult to say to what extent an awareness of this outdatedness stems from an in-depth knowledge of the subject of the dispute, how much it is an effect of the functioning of “formulaic memory” used on a short-term basis.

When talking about formulaic memory, I think about an openness to ready-made verbal formulations, preserved in a form (in speech or in writing) by someone close to us emotionally or important socially, in circumstances so special that they make us focus on this particular utterance. A remembered formula can be – both in face-to-face contacts and in indirect contacts – an opinion about an individual, an assessment of a behaviour, view, idea, an interpretation of an event, sometimes a reaction of indignation or admiration in an unusual situation. A potentially representative nature of an appearance, act or even, just like an exceptional phenomenon shocking a collective have in them an opinion-forming potential. Everyone who will appropriately describe or comment on a social or cultural fact uses this potential, often winning individual recognition as a result. An individual human being, confronted with the right formula, can remember it more or less consciously and even years later reconstruct it relatively faithfully. Frequently and mechanically repeated in universal circulation, it becomes a source of a stereotype, repeated sometimes against individual experience. But in the academic circulation, too, formulaic memory is exemplified by, for example, “fleeting words”, “common places” or “identity aura”, translated into periodic fashions or systemic paradigmatic thinking.

I have been recently put on the track of such memory by an article written by Jacek Małczyński<sup>8</sup>. Using statements by contemporary inhabitants of a village in the Lublin region, the author has demonstrated convincingly how the seemingly classic stereotype of the Jew is being deconstructed in the course of individualisation of memories provoked by the scholar. Małczyński’s overriding question about today’s inhabitants’ memory of their pre-war neighbours was addressed to adults who knew the story of the Shoah either from various accounts or from their own childhood or youthful experiences. After a series of stereotypical answers and predictable reactions, Małczyński’s interlocutors, provoked by detailed qu-

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<sup>8</sup> See J. Małczyński, “To było miasteczko żydowskie”. Pamięć o Żydach w świetle wywiadów z mieszkańcami gminy Zakrzówek, *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 2012, no. 1.

estions, were themselves able to discover discrepancies between their personal empirical knowledge preserved in their memory and habitually pronounced petrified formulas, which prevented them from analytically using that knowledge.

The gap registered by the researcher did not concern only the Holocaust. It is sometimes experienced by most anthropologists, who in their questionnaire-based research try to get through the enclosure of the words and reach what is covered. But drawing attention to this gap provokes deeper theoretical reflection, because this concerns a phenomenon which appears where human memory of sound and memory of images meet. For the purpose of the present argument, I limit the memory of sound to the memory of the word, associated with the economy of message characteristic not only of traditional, often illiterate peasant communities, but also of common direct contacts. The crucial difference between the traditional and the contemporary formulaicness would consist, in my opinion, in repeating, in the case of the former, ready verbal formulations, and in the case of the latter – in repeating the structure of the most effective phrases. In both modes of using ready texts or verbal patterns, of fundamental significance is the human ability to learn. Learning known as “memorising” for years favoured sets of ready-made formulas; today the focus shifts more to efficiency: from using programmes, patterns, structures etc. to faking application of methods and imitating selected grapholects.

On the level of the humanistic discourse the use of formulaic memory concerns primarily the use of a periodically limited repertoire of references to selected works and their authors. This procedure is appreciated even by officials and specialists in qualitative assessment of research and has assumed the form of indexing citations and scoring of most often cited texts. However, the mechanism of popularity can be ambivalent: apparently Heinrich Heine, an icon of German Romanticism, was at the same time the least often read poet... A detailed knowledge of often cited works of contemporary philosophers may justifiably raise doubts, given the fact that the speed of changes in the academia makes a thorough study of them practically impossible<sup>9</sup>. A thorough analysis is often postponed indefinitely by the interested parties and temporarily replaced by fragmentary reading and search for useful quotations<sup>10</sup>. Examples of such behaviour can be seen particularly well in works by younger scholars. Names put side by side sometimes share a phonic/formal similarity of quoted categories. The speed of life prevents us from devoting more time to an examination of the author’s intentions and coherence of the source argument, and, above all, of the essence of the original contribu-

<sup>9</sup> Among authors on his reading list Bronisław Malinowski (*Dziennik w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu*, introduction and ed. G. Kubica, Kraków 2002, pp. 154-237) mentions Georg Simmel. He studied his oeuvre – not without difficulty – between early October 1911 and late October 1912. He criticised, made summaries and comparisons. Clearly, what mattered more to him was what and how Simmel had written than what could be written about Simmel.

<sup>10</sup> See P. Bayard, *Jak rozmawiać o książkach, których się nie czytało?*, transl. M. Kowalska, Warszawa 2008.

tion, which obviously cannot be identical for all cited authors. However, we have abandoned the idea of examining the intentions of the author of a text<sup>11</sup>. Barthes' "author" has been dead for over half a century, but the text itself continues to be a source of hermeneutic experiments. Thanks to particularly attractive formulas which can be found in it and which can be interpreted in a variety of ways we increasingly recognise the epistemological context of briefly presented concept on the basis of these formulas. Ewa Rewers, who, after all, also referred to a well-known formula, once wrote that today's cold societies could not keep up with hot philosophies<sup>12</sup>. I would even say that the humanist communities, too, have been recently getting strangely "cold", remaining, however, instinctively wary of appropriately formulated, flagship theses of "hot philosophies".

Sensitivity to attractive sounding phrases makes scholars adopt a uniform writing style in their works. Very few contemporary scholars can be recognised on the basis of their individual style and way of arguing; instead, the identifying factor can be found in the topic tackled by the author. The ways in which it is tackled are sometimes worryingly similar. Those who are not very skilled at using the current code are sometimes excused, because they either are only beginning their academic career or are successfully finishing it. However, it seems that all fall into the trap of formulaic memory. Its most interesting consequence appears to be neo-nominalism according to which a word repeated many times eventually becomes a being or at least acquires a mental designatum<sup>13</sup>.

Thus the future of the humanistic and, especially, cultural discourse might depend on self-knowledge of scholars, including their individual attitude to the use of the resources of formulaic memory, especially, the use of its particular variety which for me is phantasmagoric memory<sup>14</sup>.

For it seems that when thinking about the prospects of the humanities, it is worth considering the existence and functioning of two main types of cultural memory: formulaic memory and phantasmagoric memory. Formulaic memory is manifested in mechanically remembered verbal formulas, repeated in specific situations. Using its individual resources, we can aptly comment on phenomena

<sup>11</sup> A good example of an analysis of these intentions combined with criticism of the author's premises is Wittgenstein's reflection on J.G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*.

<sup>12</sup> E. Rewers, *Zimne kultury — gorące filozofie. Trzy pytania na marginesie koncepcji kultury Jerzego Kmity*, [in:] *Kultura jako przedmiot badań. Studia filozoficzno-kulturoznawcze. Prace ofiarowane Profesorowi Jerzemu Kmicie w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, ed. B. Kotowa, J. Sójka, K. Zamiara, Poznań 2001, p. 141 ff.

<sup>13</sup> This is a situation opposite to the one attributed by Foucault to classical discourse: "The figures through which discourse passes act as a deterrent to the name, which then arrives at the last moment to fulfil and abolish them. The name is the *end* of discourse. And possibly all Classical literature resides in this space, in this striving to reach a name that remains always formidable because it exhausts, and thereby kills, the possibility of speech" (M. Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 130).

<sup>14</sup> Phantasmagoria: etym. *phantasma* (apparition) + *agoreuó* (I speak) – imaginary pictures, delusions, illusions. See *Słownik wyrazów obcych PWN*, ed. J. Tokarski, Warszawa 1971.

and processes in accordance with society's expectation, and by creating individual narratives, we can effectively include them in the supraindividual hypertext of the culture of a given time and space.

Phantasmagoric memory should be associated with ideas, images created by nature, humans or their technical extensions, and with complex assemblages of symbolic contents evoked by these images. A phenomenon like the visualisation of a verbal formula (a leading phenomenon in the context of terms organising humanistic discourse) should also be treated in terms of phantasmagoric remembering.

Phantasmagoric memory is the memory of an image or idea: blurring of the boundary between them and free passage from reality to its imitation, from perception to an idea of the perceived make it possible to create intentional beings. In universal culture the memory of myths and collective projections, turned into verbal formulas, becomes a source of seemingly individualised ideas which in favourable conditions easily transform themselves into collective reactions. In an elite culture, seemingly more critical of the chicanery of social engineering, ideas may concern, for example, the functioning of the rules of correctness, substantive quality and logical coherence of an utterance as well as other people's ways of seeing, understanding, value judging. An expansion of the semantic field of a name influences the process of its visualisation and understanding. A visualisation of an existing word reveals possibilities of its adaptation to new areas of reality. Attributing – in an arbitrary manner – new meanings to terms makes phantasmagoric memory clash with the senses in which it should habitually place the term in question. In such a situation people, attacked by new images, perform a reduction: they visualise only some of the potential meanings of the new configuration. This cognitive dissonance is not conducive to making meanings more precise and facilitating communication, but seems to be indispensable in shedding light on new phenomena. The problem is that the scope and tempo of the exchange of meanings are beginning to clearly affect the functionality of communication. An attempt to interpret, through phantasmagoric memory, phrases like “cold cultures”, “appeal of the word”, “icon”, “idol”, “symbol of national identity” etc. could bring interesting results. Unfortunately, contemporary discourse, providing arbitrary statements or disregarding inconvenient questions<sup>15</sup>, gives us scarce material for such an analysis. The disturbed humanistic discourse defunctionalises itself.

It would be difficult to assume that the two categories generated in this analysis will prove so formulaically attractive and associatively fertile that in the future they would be able to claim at least part of the culture studies reflection. At the same time I cannot rule out that an attempt to describe formulaic memory and phantasmagoric memory without taking into account their psychological and

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<sup>15</sup> The hit question of the 1970s conferences was: “But what is your main claim, professor?”. Today, this question would be at least improper.

sociobiological determinants is overly simplified and seemingly rooted mainly in functional thinking. However, it seems that we need a successively expanded reflection on how and about what we talk, generating new levels of metalanguage.

Metalanguage, which, as intended, should focus on a description of contemporary discourses and their foundations, especially ideational foundations, today also creates a rather distinctive intellectual social formation and imposes a new definition of the humanities – on the humanities and culture studies.