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WHAT DO „AFFECTIONS IN THE SOUL” RESEMBLE?² Aristotle’s model of the linguistic sign

Abstract: In this paper, I will discuss in detail how Aristotle reconciles the polemic between conventionalism and naturalism in the theory of naming. In the opening sentences of the *De Interpretatione*, he claims that the relationship between signifying sounds and signified content is arbitrary, while the one between „affections in the soul” and non-mental objects, which exist independently of us, is explained in terms of likeness. I will argue that these „affections” are primarily thoughts, which resemble external entities by thoughts being able to conceive of the immanent forms in these external objects.

Keywords: Affections, Aristotle, Likeness, Sign, Soul, Thoughts

The outline of the first semantic,³ or more precisely, semiotic theory in the history of philosophy of language is given in the opening sentences of the *De Interpretatione*. It had a significant and durable influence especially, although not only in the empirical epistemology. In this paper, I will attempt to show that Aristotle’s „theory” of meaning is an answer to the unsolved problems raised in Plato’s *Cratylus*. Namely, Aristotle reconciles the polemic between conventionalism and naturalism in the theory of naming by introducing his own semiotic model. The relationship between the names and the things named is either conventional and arbitrary or determined „according to nature”, i.e. in terms of likeness and *mimesis*. Aristotle gives the explicit answer to that controversy by introducing an additional relation in the well-known and much-discussed definition of sign,⁴ or symbol, as Aristotle puts it. It is as follows:

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³ David Sedley thinks that the *De interpretatione* is the most misunderstood text in ancient semantics (p. 88), because its central theme is not, as is most often claimed, semantics, but the nature of contradiction. Even if one agrees with Sedley’s claim that the semantic part of the *Περὶ ἑρμηνείας* is preliminary in respect to the longer part of the treatise, that does not imply that Aristotle’s understanding of sign is of no significance, or that it did not have an impact on the history of semantics. Cf. David Sedley, „Aristotle’s *De interpretatione* and ancient semantics“, y: *Knowledge Through Signs*, ed. G. Manetti, Brepols, 1996, pp. 87-108.

⁴ It seems, that according to Aristotle’s terminology, it is more appropriate to use the term symbol, than the term sign. Nevertheless, this usage can be misleading, since in modern and contemporary linguistics,

“Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections (παθήματα) in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs (σημεῖα) of–affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses (ὁμοιώματα) of–things (πράγματα)—are also the same.”⁵

First, I will differentiate and describe the elements of Aristotle’s semiotic model. In order to understand the meaning and significance of his outline of the theory of linguistic sign, I will also attempt to articulate the appropriate arguments in favor of the one among the main commentaries and interpretations.

In the above-cited section one may distinguish three elements: 1. words, spoken and written (phonemes or graphemes), 2. affection of the soul, 3. things which exist independently of us. It is necessary to elucidate the relationships among these three elements, in order to explain the functioning of human language. In the quoted passage, Aristotle has in mind two relations. The first one is between phonetic or graphic structures and „affections of the soul”, whereby phonemes and graphemes are said to be symbols or signs of the internal „affections”. Or to put it more precisely, phonic structures are signs of our internal, mental states, while letters, i. e., graphemes, are the signs of phonetic structures.

The second relation, whose members are „affections in the soul” and extra mental things, is determined by the likeness which, *inter alia*, implies that their relation is non-arbitrary. „Affections of the soul” in some way resemble things, which are the same for all; consequently, due to being similar to the things, these affections are, also, same for all.

Let us consider the first relation in detail! The terms σύμβολον and σημεῖον have the similar connotation in the cited passage. In the *Prior Analytics*, a sign is defined as something, according to which we draw the conclusion of the existence of another thing.⁶ In a similar way is to be understood the nature of phonemes, which do not have their own semantic value. Only by referring to the various „affections in the soul”, they do become able to mean something. They are signs, established by the „convention” or „agreement” (συνθήκη in Greek), that become more or less constant by a long and stable usage in a speech community. The nature of this „agreement” or „convention” is not to be understood as if, once in the distant past some individuals had decided and agreed what was going to be the meaning of certain words, because this „agreement” or „convention” also has to be conveyed by certain words. Additionally, it presupposes that language existed before it had been established or decided to be established, which is absurd. It seems also that language did not intentionally „come into being”.

Saying that phonemes are conventional implies that the relation between them and what they signify is purely arbitrary. Whether this or that phonetic unit signifies certain

and in the philosophy of language, it is commonly accepted that the term symbol is not an entirely arbitrary sign. For avoiding unnecessary confusion, I will use the contemporary term of sign referring to Aristotle’s symbol.

⁵ Cf. *De int.* 16a3-8. I use the John Acrill’s translation of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*, in: *Aristotle: The Complete Works* is The Revised Oxford Translation of *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 25.

⁶ Cf. *APr.* 70a7-9.

„affections” is determined neither by the nature of these phonemes, nor by the nature of the semantic unit, it signifies. Due to the fact that phonetic and graphic structures are conventional signs, they are not the same for all, but they vary from one speech community to another.

Therefore, the existence of different languages and synonyms in a language is explained by this conventional character of linguistic sign. The same applies to writing: letters are signs of phonemes, meaning that their relation is also conventional, and that the one and the same phoneme can be written down by the various graphic signs. Nothing in the nature of a certain phoneme predetermines what kind of letter will represent it. Consequently, as there is a multitude of different languages, there are plenty of various systems of writing in use.

Due to its conventional character, a word can be changed by another one, without changing the meaning they are conveying. Nevertheless, such changes are very rare in a certain speech community, confirmed by the fact that linguistic standards have a high degree of stability. What has been changing in a language are not the grammatical and syntactical norms, but the vocabularies that have been constantly updated, enriched or eliminated.

The conventional character of linguistic expressions is particularly noticeable in the case of naming children and new structures, and in coming up with new names for some classes of things that had not been previously named. In the works of Aristotle, very common are the examples of naming newly discovered phenomena, as well as the cases of ascribing a new meaning to the already existing term. On the other hand, he warns that it is necessary to limit the complete arbitrariness in the invention and use of new words, if this kind of linguistic inventiveness is reduced just to the production of words, regardless of whether they signify something distinct or not. In Aristotle's view, it is worthless to create a new word, if it does not designate a separate thing different from all the others.⁷

Our entire discussion shows that Aristotle, in the intense debate taking place in Plato's *Cratylus*, clearly opted for the conventional understanding of language sign, which is noticeable both in his vocabulary and his manner of arguing. Moreover, Aristotle rejects a very important claim of the naturalistic „theory” of naming, as it was described by Plato in the *Cratylus*, according to which the name is a kind of tool. Additionally, he rejects the naturalistic belief that the same „natural” name can be realized in a variety of letters and syllables, in a similar way that one and the same instrument can be made of different materials.⁸

One may, however, pose the question whether Aristotle brought through the back door an aspect of naturalism in his philosophy of language, by introducing some aspects of likeness between „things” and the „affections in the soul”? What does it mean to claim that our mental „affections” are similar to external objects? At first glance, it appears that the term „ομοιώματα” is inappropriate to explain the relationship between „affections in the soul” and „things”, i.e., between what we understand by words and objects to which our words refer.

⁷ Cf. *Rhet.* 1414b15-18.

⁸ Cf. *Crat.* 389d-390a.

To better understand this relationship, it is necessary to closely consider what are „τὰ παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς”. In the history of interpreting Aristotle, there is a huge debate concerning the interpretations of this term and the general role that παθήματα have in the functioning of language. The debate goes back to the time of Andronicus of Rhodes, who published a new edition of the works of Aristotle. He interpreted them as thoughts. Since this interpretation is not found in the *De Anima*, as Aristotle pointed out Andronicus concluded that the author of the *De Interpretatione* is not Aristotle.⁹ This conclusion was rejected; nevertheless, what remains is a problem concerning the understanding of what is permanent in Aristotle’s semantics, due to its likeness with the non-linguistic entities.

The term πάθημα literary means an affection as the result of a mental activity. Since Aristotle connects the mental activity of φαντασία – which enables the presence of mental images of perceived objects when perception is over –with a certain meaning, some commentators interpret παθήματα as the results of φαντασία or the mental pictures of the objects, which accompany every voice articulation. One should always keep in mind two connotations of this term in Aristotle’s epistemology and philosophy of language. Namely, τὸ πάθημα is both a certain mental state, as well as what it contains.

In order to make it clearer, I will introduce an example of the empirical explanation of the language learning process. We learn to use a word in a language in a way that we relate words with certain mental images, and use them in the future in accordance with that. For example, if a child sees several times a pencil, he or she can learn to associate the word „pen”, uttered by his or her parents, with a pencil as an object, so that he or she has held a mental picture of the pen. Nevertheless, the question is how we learn complex linguistic relationships. Are they connected to a mental image or sequences of mental images? It is very unlikely to suppose that we learn a language only by connecting certain mental images with lexemes denoting individual objects.

Nevertheless, it seems that this interpretation is particularly convincing,¹⁰ because it can be supported by some passages from the *De Anima*, where Aristotle discusses the role of φαντασία in the functioning of language.¹¹ Moreover, in the quoted passage, it is said that „affections in the soul” resemble external (non-linguistic) objects, suggesting that these affections are nothing but the mental images of perceived objects. I will, however, attempt to point out some of the shortcomings of this interpretation of Aristotle’s definition of the sign language, showing that it is neither sufficiently explanatory nor sufficiently supported by Aristotle’s text.

While the above described interpretation is empirical, since it determines the mental equivalent of the phonetic structure of words in terms of representation (φαντασία),

⁹ Cf. C. A. Brandis (ed.), *Scholias in Aristotelem*, in: I. Bedderand O. Gigon, 2. izdanje, IV, Berlin, 1961, p. 64; as well as, C. W. A Whitaker, *Aristotle’s De Interpretatione. Contradiction and Dialectic*, Oxford, 2002, p. 14.

¹⁰ The representatives of the interpretation, according to which, τὰ παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς are mental images of what is perceived, are: N. Kretzmann, „Aristotle’s on Spoken Sound Significant by Convention“, in: *Ancient Logic and Modern Interpretations*, ed. by J. Corcoran, Dordrecht 1974, p. 9; D. K. W. Modrak, *Aristotle’s Theory of Language and Meaning*, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 219-243 etc.

¹¹ Cf. *DA* 420b30-33.

which always precedes perception, the rival tradition in the reading these essential sentences of Aristotle's semiotics interprets rationalistically the term τὰ παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς as thoughts (νοήματα). The second tradition has representatives in all ages, starting from the already mentioned Andronicus of Rhodes, through Ammonius, Boetius and Thomas Aquinas,¹² to the commentators C. W.A. Whitaker and H. Weidemann on the *De Interpretatione* in English and German respectively.¹³

These commentators hold that the appropriate interpretation should start from Aristotle's general theory of knowledge, and not from a separate part which deals with the imagination. In their view, the claim that words signify mental images, and not thoughts in general, represents an „extreme reduction” of Aristotle's conception of language.¹⁴

Moreover, this interpretation, according to which thoughts represent the mental equivalent to the phonetic articulation of linguistic expressions, is supported by Aristotle's own text. Namely, immediately after the quoted sentence in the *De interpretatione*, it is said that simple thoughts correspond to nouns and verbs. Additionally, in the third chapter it is stated that both a speaker and a listener focus on the thought while uttering a word.¹⁵ Toward the end of his *De interpretatione*, Aristotle uses the same phrase, as in the sentence cited, when he claims that „spoken sounds follow things in the mind”.¹⁶

Let us consider Aristotle's elucidation of the connection between what is passive and the thought, for it will help us to comprehend why he means that thoughts are mental „affections”. Although thoughts are never identified in the *De anima* with the affections in the soul”, Aristotle discusses for our purpose the important concept of passive (παθητικός) reason.¹⁷

If reason is „passive” (παθητικός), which means that it is affected by external things, it also may have sense to claim that thoughts are „affections in the soul (παθήματα)”.¹⁸ Not only perception, but also thought can be affected by something external. This can explain Aristotle's use of the term „passive reason”, which implies that thinking, likewise, has a receptive character. Παθητικός νοῦς comes to the abstract, general insights based on the sense-perception and investigation of individual things.

Generally speaking, the difference between passive and active reason,¹⁹ which can be, due to its significance, a subject-matter of separate consideration, is that the former

¹² In his commentary on the *De Interpretatione*, Thomas Aquinas interprets τὰ παθήματα here as „concepts of intellect”. Cf. *Aristotle: On Interpretation. Commentary by St. Thomas and Cajetan*, ed. by J. T. Oesterle, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, 1961, p. 25.

¹³ Cf. Aristoteles, *Peri Hermeneias*, übersetzt und erläutert von H. Weidemann, Berlin, 1994, S. 135-138.

¹⁴ This is rightly emphasized by R. Polansky & M. Kuszewski. Cf. R. Polansky and Mark Kuczewski, „Speech and Thought, Symbol and Likeness: Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* 16 a3–9”, *y: Apeiron*, Vol. XXIII, No. 1, 1990, p. 53.

¹⁵ Cf. *De int.* 16b 20.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.* 23a 32.

¹⁷ Cf. *DA* 430a 24.

¹⁸ This convincing interpretation is given by Whitaker in his commentary of the *De interpretatione*. Cf. W. A. Whitaker, *Aristotle's De Interpretatione. Contradiction and Dialectic*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Cf. *Aristotle's De Anima*, A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary by W. D. Ross, Oxford, 1999, pp. 41–43.

grasps the general in individual, perceivable things, and the latter grasps what is general without individual perceivable entities, such as geometrical generalities like triangles and circles, etc. The generalities, which the passive intellect grasps in individual perceivable things, are the formal elements of these objects.

From the fourth to the eighth chapters of the third book of the *De Anima*, Aristotle discusses the way thoughts correspond to things. I will attempt to describe the course of his considerations, which will help us to understand what he means when claiming that thoughts resemble non-mental things.

Since the power of perception is potentially what its objects are actually, it „resembles” the things, it perceives.²⁰ Thought functions in a similar way. Before it envisages any object, the intellect is, in Aristotle’s view, „empty” – it is nothing actually until it starts to think.²¹ It is able to take the form of an object, so that the same form is actually common to both the reason of a thinker and the object. In that way, the mind presents what is „similar” to the object of a thought.²² To claim that thoughts „resemble” objects is the same as to assert that they coincide with the forms of things. Due to the fact that the form of a thing is what that thing really is, a thought about it, which corresponds to its form, is a concept of that thing or the thought about its essence.

Therefore, thoughts are formal „copies” of the things in world, and not mental images of these objects, which follow the thinking, but are not to be mixed with thoughts themselves, so Aristotle distinguishes them clearly. First and foremost, φαντάσματα cannot be connected in the way that they form complex thoughts which have a truth value, while simple thoughts form the complex ones; subsequently, the starting point of imaginative activity (φαντασία) is sense perception, and it cannot emerge without it.

There is an additional problem that needs to be clarified. One may ask what phonetic structures are signs of or, more precisely, what they are *primarily* signs of. A debate has initiated about that, in which Kretzmann’s reading²³ is salient due to his originality. He thinks that, according to Aristotle, linguistic expressions are primarily natural signs, i. e., symptoms of mental impressions; while secondarily they are symbols, i.e., conventional signs of these impressions. This interpretation is supported by the fact that producing articulated sounds is constitutive for human nature, in a similar way as some human voices, like a cry in pain, are commonly interpreted as symptoms of internal, mental „events”.²⁴

Kretzmann’s reading could be seriously criticized. Firstly, it is hard to find a place in Aristotle’s writings which would support this claim. Secondly, various screams ex-

²⁰ Cf. *DA* 418 a3 ff.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.* 429 a23 ff.

²² Cf. *ibid.* 430 a3–5, 431a1 ff.

²³ Cf. N. Kretzmann, „Aristotle’s on Spoken Sound Significant by Convention”, in: *Ancient Logic and Modern Interpretations*, ed. by J. Corcoran, Dordrecht 1974, especially pp. 3–9.

²⁴ This interpretation is supported by the fact that examples cited by Aristotle in the *Prior Analytics* and *Rhetoric* are mainly concerned with natural signs; often medical symptoms, like instances related to fainting as a sign of pregnancy, or with fever as a sign of illness. Cf. *APr.* 70 a13–15, 20–24, *Rhet.* 1357 b15–16.

pressing the internal state of one's own, like, for instance, pain, are common to both a human and some other animals. They are present in human language, but not as its representative part. From the fact that the production of voices is a natural process, meaning that the ability to talk is an essential part of our nature, it does not follow that voices, which constitute words, are natural signs. Although Aristotle, when saying that voices are primarily signs of thoughts, does not stress their conventional character, this does not imply that phonemes are not conventional signs.

All these arguments are in favor of the more common interpretation, according to which linguistic expressions are primarily signs of „affection in the soul”, while secondarily they are signs of things, so that *παθήματα* somehow mediate between words and things. Since being the signs of „affections in the soul”, and these affections are determined as the copies of things, words are also signs of things. Moreover, in the *Sophistic Refutations*, it is said that words are „symbols of things”,²⁵ and in the *De interpretatione* sentences are classified regarding the kind of things the subject of the sentence refers to.²⁶ Aristotle's elliptic outline of a „theory” of meaning – presented in the sentence cited in the beginning of our presentation – would be unacceptable if it excluded external things from a semiotic model.

Since a linguistic expression has a meaning if it refers to a thing, and since the word „thing” appears in the sentence cited, as well as in the context of a thought-thing relation, it is necessary to find out what is meant here by the concept of *πρᾶγμα*. The scope of that concept is very wide. In the *Sophistical Refutations* it is said that things are infinitely numerous – in contrast to the finite number of names, which are their symbols²⁷ – and they are not only, as it may seem, individual perceptible things. Even a word like „goat-deer” does not represent a bulk of senseless phonemes, because it also means something. The very definition of a linguistic sign demands that there must be a thing which corresponds to it. In case of the word „goat-deer”, it is not something real, but something completely imagined. From the above-said, it follows that by the concept of *πρᾶγμα* we should understand not only actual things, but also everything that is the object of thinking and saying. The scope of Aristotle's concept of *πρᾶγμα* is sufficiently wide enough that it encompasses, apart from *οὐσία*, everything belonging to all the other categories, even to that which does not exist.²⁸

After I have examined the elements and characteristics of Aristotle's semiotic model, I will summarize some results of the previous considerations and their general implications on the conception of language. It is an empirical fact that various languages exist, as well as different modes of saying one and the same thing, and the philosophical explanation of this is the arbitrary relationship between a sign and the what it signifies, primarily between language and thought, and then between language and things. The

²⁵ Cf. *SE* 165a6 ff.

²⁶ Cf. *De int.* 17a38 and the following.

²⁷ Cf. *SE* 165a6–15.

²⁸ In the *Metaphysics* (Z4), the concepts of essence and definitions, which are tightly related to form, are expanded to the extent that even for something non-existent, it could be said that it exists in a certain sense. Cf. *Met.* 1030a17–27.

fact that people, although talking in different languages, do communicate is interpreted in a way that, while using different words, they think of one and the same thing.

Whereas the relation between language and thought is conventional, so that one word may be exchanged by another word, without changing the meaning named by these different words, the relationship between thought and reality is not arbitrary. Thoughts namely „resemble” things in the way that they correspond with their forms, which are „the same for all”. Just like a horse is always a horse, because all the individual horses share a common form, there is no difference between the concept of a horse for a Greek and for a Persian. To think of a horse means to conceive the formal similarity of a horse, and that similarity is determined by what a horse really is, so it does not matter though which sounds that thought is conveyed.

Therefore, Aristotle believes that linguistic and social conventions determine the relationships between phonemes and meanings, while the connection between meaning and reference is „according to the nature”, which is corroborated by the fact that it is one and the same for all people. The conventional-naturalistic debate on the nature of the word–thing relation in Plato’s *Cratylus* is resolved by Aristotle, who argues that the relationship between signifying sounds and signified content is arbitrary, while the one between „affections in the soul” and non-mental objects, which exist independently of us, is explained in terms of likeness. These „affections” are primarily thoughts, which resemble external entities by thoughts being able to conceive of the immanent forms in these external objects. By introducing a new semiotic model, Aristotle successfully determines both the logic and structure of a functioning human language, which is in accordance with his main philosophical ideas and beliefs.

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ČEMU „STANJA U DUŠI“ NALIKUJU?

Aristotelova teorija jezičkog znaka

Sažetak: U ovom radu podrobno ću raspravljati o tome kako Aristotel razrešava polemiku između konvencionalizma i naturalizma kada je reč o teoriji imenovanja. U uvodnim rečenicama njegovog spisa *O tumačenju* Aristotel tvrdi da je odnos između zvukova, koji označavaju i označenog sadržaja arbitraran, dok „stanja u duši“ nalikuju imenovanim stvarima. Moja je teza da ta stanja treba, pre svega, razumeti kao misli, koje nalikuju stvari na taj način što su u stanju da izraze unutrašnje forme u ovim predmetima koje postoje van nas.

Ključne reči: Aristotel, stanja u duši, jezički znak, misli

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