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The silent meaning of the cognitive-performative horizon

Meaning and reference

Meaning and reference have in Polish (*sens* and *znaczenie*, respectively) very similar connotations and are sometimes, particularly in common usage, interchangeable. [In this translation, the words *meaning* and *reference* as being the English equivalents of the Polish words *sens* and *znaczenie* shall be used only as designations of the linguistic terms. When they will be applied in phrasemes, as in the following examples, the translations provided in the square brackets will use other core elements to best reflect the meaning of the Polish phrasemes]. According to the definitions of the authors of *Wielki słownik języka polskiego* the word *sens* (meaning) (from the Latin *sensus* meaning ‘a feeling’) denotes “treść, wymowa czegoś, właściwe, zgodne z prawidłowym myśleniem, z rozsądkiem znaczenie czegoś” [the content, the meaning of something, the proper thinking, with common sense the meaning of something], but also “logiczność, trafność” [logicality, aptness].¹ Then, the word *znaczenie* [reference] has three basic explanations: 1) “myśl, przesłanie zawarte w czyjejs wypowiedzi, w czyimś zachowaniu” [a thought, the message included in someone’s statement, in someone’s behaviour], 2) “wartość, waga, ważność czegoś” [the value, weight, importance of something], 3) “treść, której znakiem jest wyraz lub wyrażenie; to, co określony wyraz lub wyrażenie znaczy, sygnalizuje” [the content designated by

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¹ *Wielki słownik języka polskiego PWN*, t. 1–5, ed. S. Dubisz, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2018, Vol. 4, p. 331 [unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish].

a word or expression; that which a word or expression denote, indicate]² – however, their synonymic nature, i.e. the interchangeability of *sens* and *znaczenie*, is related to parts of all their explanations and, at the same time, with neither as a whole. If one says “w tym lub w takim sensie” [in this or in such sense] and “w tym lub takim znaczeniu” [in this or such meaning], they express the same thought. Yet the expressions “w pewnym sensie” [in some sense] and “w pewnym znaczeniu” [in some sense] express somewhat different thoughts. While the former refers to a general expression, i.e. something has a meaning in general but under some undefined condition, the latter indicates a limited extent, specific, though still not completely defined significance. A greater dissonance occurs when one says that “zrobienie tego nie ma sensu” [there is no point in doing this] or that “zrobienie tego nie ma znaczenia” [there is no difference whether you do it or not]. In the case of the former, it is not worth doing something as it would be illogical or irrelevant, and in the case of the latter, because it would be pointless or worthless.

Those variations suggest that people discuss meaning rather in reference to their general or subjective convictions or knowledge while reference in the context of specific verifiable relations to discursive objectivised knowledge (e.g. in dictionaries, which is unequivocally indicated by the third denotation of *znaczenie* [reference], while the remaining two are in this respect much more specific and objectivising than the dictionary-based denotation of *sens* [meaning]). Similar conclusions can be drawn based on the exemplary phrasemes in *Wielki słownik języka polskiego*: “Coś jest nie bez znaczenia” [something is not insignificant], “W całym, pełnym tego słowa znaczeniu” [As per the words complete meaning], “W dobrym, w najlepszym, w złym, w najgorszym tego słowa znaczeniu” [In the good/ the best/ the bad/ the worst sense], “W ścisłym tego słowa znaczeniu” [As per the words precise meaning].³ The dictionary-based set of examples for meaning indicates its individualised conviction-based nature:

Głęboki, istotny, jasny, określony, ukryty, zrozumiały sens. Sens listu, nauki, powieści, wypowiedzi. W sensie dosłownym, metaforycznym. Sens życia. Zdania bez sensu, pozbawione sensu. Domyślać się, doszukiwać się, dopatrywać się w czymś sensu. Nadać, przywrócić czemuś sens, Pojmować, rozumieć sens czegoś. Wypaczyć, zatrzeć, zmienić sens czegoś. Coś ma sens; w czymś jest sens. Coś straciło sens. [Deep, significant, clear, defined, hidden, understandable meaning. The meaning of a letter, education, novel, expression. In literal/ metaphorical sense. The meaning of life. Sentences without meaning, devoid of meaning. To induce, to seek out, to search for meaning in something. To assign/ restore meaning for something. To grasp/ understand the meaning of something. To distort/ blur/ change the me-

² *Wielki słownik...*, Vol. 5, p. 925.

³ *Ibidem*.

aning of something. Something has meaning; there is some sense in something. Something has lost any meaning.]⁴

Then, in *Korpus języka polskiego*, two more instances can be found: “poczucie bezsensu” [sense of meaninglessness]⁵ and “poczucie sensu życia” [sense of the meaning of life]⁶, which apart from a strong subjectivisation, also indicate a reference to the etymological ‘feeling’ (Latin ‘sensus’). The individualised nature of the application of the word ‘sens’ [meaning] is also indicated in philosophical texts. ‘Sens’ [meaning] and ‘sensowność’ [meaningfulness] are terms which in philosophy denote “that thanks to which something becomes understandable, acceptable or worthy of fulfilling.”⁷ Tomasz Komendziński, the author of the entry ‘sens’ in *Słownik filozofii*, offered the following clarification: “When searching for meaning one refers to values which add meaning to actions” – the understanding and acceptance which build meaning are related to the evaluation of actions.

Therefore, what is ‘sensowne’ [meaningful] is not only that which contains a thought or content, which is logical or apt in itself, but also an action performed (or, at least, attempted) in this or another way, which one can understand as something which has value. That value can, of course, be understood as that exact content or thought, especially when it is logical or apt, yet it must be associated with action. Moreover, an action itself presupposes the entity which undertakes it. And most importantly, that entity undertakes the action as something which hold some value.

Meaning of life

The problem of the “values which add meaning to actions” was discussed by fr. Józef Innocenty Maria Bocheński OP in the essay *O sensie życia*.⁸ He posited that “the case of the meaning of life is a case in the utmost degree individual, personal, private. It is even, if I am not mistaken, doubly private. In Andrzej’s case⁹, it is about the meaning of *his* life and about the meaning of life *for him*.”¹⁰ Bocheński

4 *Wielki słownik...*, Vol. 4, p. 331.

5 *Korpus Języka Polskiego PWN*, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/korpus/szukaj/poczucie;1.html> [accessed on: 12.03.2019].

6 *Korpus Języka Polskiego PWN*, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/korpus/szukaj/poczucie;2.html> [accessed on: 12.03.2019]; *Korpus Języka Polskiego PWN*, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/korpus/szukaj/poczucie;6.html> [accessed on: 12.03.2019].

7 *Słownik filozofii*, ed. J. Hartman, KRN, Krakow 2009, p. 203.

8 J.I.M. Bocheński OP, “O sensie życia”, *Kultura* 1990, issue 1–2 (388–389), pp. 3–16.

9 He begins the essay with a story of Andrzej, who whilst having *objective* rationale for having a sense of the meaning of his life (his youth, intelligence, successes, appearances, wealth, health, etc.) concluded that his life was devoid of meaning; vide: *ibidem*, p. 4.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 4.

conducted his discussion in the style of a logic argument, where the cardinal points were consecutive statements surrounded by related arguments. In the summary, he thus encapsulated his discussion of the meaning of life:

It is my private affair, in which I can depend only on myself. A strive for a goal usually adds that meaning to my life; therefore, I must make sure that I do not lack goals. Yet meaning can be found not only in striving as it is also offered, at to a major extent, by when you use the moment. To be able to use it, to be able to find happiness in that which is given to me now, currently, is a major thing; it is befitting for me to learn it with full awareness. Human life is not one single chain of strivings – it consists of a whole bunch of small chains. One should not become seduced by The One, by the Major Issue, but rather must be able to find satisfaction in the multitude of small and fleeting satisfactions.¹¹

Similar (within the perspective assumed in this article) conclusions were voiced by Jan Hartman, the author of the entry ‘sens życia’ [meaning of life] in *Słownik filozofii*. He began his analysis of the meaning of life with a general definition stating that it is “the essence and the goal of human existence, human calling, that which justifies the efforts in life and which makes it worth living, even if it ends in absolute death,” he went on to present a synthesis of various philosophical positions, and concluded with the following formula: “human life does not so much have a specific meaning or goal, but rather humans, who create themselves through their attempts at defining their calling, struggle with the incessant problematic nature of existence.”¹²

Both syntheses, though developed from radically different positions, established meaning as the individual cognitive-performative horizon to which every individual refers their actions (even if only mental). Of course, that horizon, though to an individually limited extent, also includes the previously discussed values. Values are also perceived within its context. The silent assumption of both philosophers (as the cultural habit would also suggest) is the objective existence of that cognitive-performative horizon in the form of knowledge (e.g. scientific as it is recorded in scientific studies, or common knowledge as it is transmitted in direct communication acts) or convictions (e.g. religious or philosophical) about humans and the world. In fact, that knowledge and convictions, even if they were extremely diverse, are already “present in the culture.” However, for the “sense of meaning” their objective *presence* does not suffice as the *sine qua non* of meaning to exist, the objective presence must be applied subjectively, it must be constantly referred to current actions and situations of an individual, and, most importantly, by that individual specifically. One could discuss, though, whether we live in a world which

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 16.

¹² *Słownik filozofii...*, pp. 203–204.

is standardised or which is constantly changing (in the case of the latter people could argue about the extent and detailing of the knowledge and/or convictions one would need to gather to guarantee themselves the “sense of meaning” – many such mental experiments exist in our cultural archives), but that is not the problem for every human individually, it is their own responsibility (even if they try to transfer that liability onto others, the culture, or the Great Presence or the Great Absence), undertake the effort of recognising themselves and their closest or more broader surroundings. What is then the *sine qua non* of the “sense of meaning”?

The unconscious mind

Objective cultural archives are, of course, very helpful, virtually essential, especially when one’s existence begins to encompass a bigger range of activities than could be assigned to a new-born. Also, how are we supposed to know how to use that treasure trove of knowledge and beliefs before we start using it? Despite appearances, that is not a squaring-a-circle-type of situation. That knowledge comes directly from life, from existence, and it is accumulated by every individual – probably from birth to death through continuous experiences, actions and... understanding of such actions. We do, however, argue about this matter a lot¹³, yet the moment when one starts to inquire about meaning is *in medias res*, i.e. independent of the extreme situation (or of whether it even occurs) of a major part of the cultural archive which one has already experienced (applied), and to a considerably smaller extent which one has not yet experienced. However, what is most important is another problem: how much is one aware of their experiences and their knowledge.

When commenting on the latest research into brain activity, Leonard Mlodinow introduced a new (when compared to Freud’s or Jung’s psychologies) concept of the unconscious arguing that “many unconscious processes can *never* be directly revealed” because “they transpire in areas of the brain not open to the conscious mind.”¹⁴ He also formulated a more potent argument regarding that experimentally proven type of the unconscious:

¹³ Does one’s birth and death constitute the final limit lines? Is it not that since one learns through imitation, their entire knowledge comes from the “cultural archive” transmitted from generation to generation? Or is its source not rather transcendent? Or maybe every one of us has, by the power of our genome, the ability to reconstruct the eternal cultural model? Or does only one of the many “presences” in cultural archives ensure meaning? And if so, which one? The list goes on endlessly.

¹⁴ L. Mlodinow, *Nieświadomy mózg. Jak to, co dzieje się za progiem świadomości, wpływa na nasze życie*, trans. J. Szajkowska, Prószyński i S-ka, Poznań 2012, p. 26 [English version: Mlodinow L., *Subliminal*, Vintage Books, New York 2012].

We perceive, we remember our experiences, we make judgements, we act – and in all of these endeavors we are influenced by factors we aren't aware of. The truth is that our unconscious minds are active, purposeful, and independent. Hidden they may be, but their effects are anything but, for they play a critical role in shaping the way our conscious minds experience and respond to the world.¹⁵

Tacit knowledge

Around fifty years earlier Michael Polanyi formulated similar arguments; he introduced the notion of tacit knowledge.¹⁶ He set it against explicit propositional knowledge, which fills cultural archives and is constantly being added to them. Tacit knowledge is knowledge which one possesses yet cannot express it in any other way than through its practical application. One simply knows how to do something but not how to justify it discursively. Tacit knowledge is hard to articulate; it is unconscious – and in that respect it correlates with Mlodinow's unconscious mind. It is reflected in people's individual actions and in their interactions with their social environments. Its scope is very broad, from everyday activities (the absorbed unconscious psychomotor patterns), through social interactions (e.g. the so-called organisational knowledge¹⁷) up to creative activities in art (especially in performing arts). Tacit knowledge is transmitted directly between people, in their practical interactions. It is acquired through active participation in the broadly understood culture – apart from discursive knowledge, people also absorb knowledge which is expressible but which can be applied in practice: “the aim of a skilful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them.”¹⁸

Therefore, tacit knowledge covers mainly the practical (performative) part of the unconscious mind, which we use in a broad spectrum of individual (including social) activities. Starting with an infant which by imitating its closest environment

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 46.

¹⁶ Vide: M. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2009, pp. 3–25; ibidem, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy, Enlarged Edition with a New Foreword by Mary Jo Nye*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2009, pp. 49–65.

¹⁷ Studies into the transfer of tacit knowledge conducted at four Australian universities have shown that up to 75% of organisational knowledge is tacit in nature; vide: R. Chugh, “Do Australian Universities Encourage Tacit Knowledge Transfer?”, [in:] *Proceedings of the 7th International Joint Conference on Knowledge Discovery, Knowledge Engineering and Knowledge Management*, 2015, Vol. 1: KMIS, pp. 128–135.

¹⁸ M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge...*, p. 49.

learns the communication employed by it, clearly without awareness of all the existing rules and yet able to apply them more or less correctly, through all micro-community situations and activities which shape the unconscious psychomotor patterns, which regulate the wide array of actions based on the stimulus-reaction pattern, all until adult creative activities, which are regulated by unrealised rules. Polanyi concluded in that context quite unequivocally: “Rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims, which can serve as a guide to an art only if they can be integrated into the practical knowledge of the art. They cannot replace this knowledge.”¹⁹ For example, when a child learns to speak properly, that does not happen by it absorbing (remembering) the rules identified in phonetics, but by repeating sequences of sounds until reaching a satisfactory (communication) outcome. When a dancer learns a completely new style, it is not enough to learn the discursive rules of kinaesthetics (if such have been formulated as usually they are not written down), but she/he repeats sequences of movements until her/his master decides she/he is doing it correctly. Of course, a portion of tacit knowledge becomes in time (at least by most of its users) realised, nonetheless even then it can be verbalised only in a fragmentary fashion (in such a case it supplies our discursive cultural archives), while most of it remains non-verbalised, at least within the extent available to an individual.

NB, a significant portion of a cultural archive is transferred not in a discursive but rather a practical form, which is why it becomes for recipients the object of their tacit knowledge. Polanyi discussed the phenomenon in terms of a master-apprentice relationship: “By watching the master and emulating his efforts in the presence of his example, the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of the art.”²⁰ Clearly, that pattern does not only apply to art but all our activities: for a child its parents are its first masters; for teenagers those are their heroes and idols; for adults those are every social interaction in which we acquire new skills and competences from people who had them and who showed us how to acquire them (even if in doing that they describe it in a more or less discursive manner, just as in the case of the rules of art). Tacit knowledge transferred to an “apprentice” directly by a “master” is therefore stored in the actual used cultural traditions – most broadly speaking: in all their aspects, dimensions and extents.

Cognitive-performative horizon

Human individual activities constantly form human individual cognitive-performative horizons. Those include all human sensory and mental experiences which they subject to conscious and subconscious evaluation. Yet I do not

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 50.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 53.

refer to solely an axiological categorisation. The discovery of mirror neurons²¹ suggested that we constantly acquire or consolidate the perceived (through senses or the mind) psychomotor patterns which, subject to our evaluation, will from now on constitute our array of performative opportunities to use (conditionally or unconditionally) or avoid (conditionally or unconditionally). Conditioning has a double or interactive nature: on the one hand, it responds to the subjective opportunities and desires of an individual and, on the other, it considers aspirations and cultural expectations – depending on one's mental constitution and their current existential projects, both sides of the internal evaluation interaction either gain or lose its significance, which in time may, of course, change dramatically.

The nature of the functioning of neuron-based reflection is the reason why we acquire or consolidate not only that which we perceive through our senses as something which actually occurs, but also, to varying degrees, that about which we read or hear. The cognitive-performative horizon also covers (with appropriate evaluation "label") all the content acquired through various mental (intellectual, psychological, spiritual) experiences which together with the absorbed sensory experiences constitute an area of reference for new evaluations. The most recent findings in neurosciences have suggested that a great majority (if not all) of new experiences are correlated first subliminally with the previously absorbed psychomotor patterns, and only then (if ever) with our realised knowledge and convictions. That indicates that the compositions of our individual cognitive horizons may include patterns and content of which we are not aware but also such which we do not want to or cannot let into our consciousness and which are not entirely compliant with our consciously declared views.

The meaning-building goals and values constitute a significant component of the cognitive-performative horizon, yet even if they had existed in cultural archives, they reached the horizon only through individual activities and similarly individual evaluation (positive or negative), not necessarily compliant with their cultural evaluations. The evaluation of both proximal and distal goals and values, even if it was done with a major impact from intellectual processes, is to much larger than it is generally assumed extent based on the unconscious mind, which essentially is the tacit meaning of our activities, and consequently also of our individual sense of meaning.

²¹ Vide, e.g. V. Gallese, "Ucieleśniona symulacja: od neuronów po doświadczenie fenomenologiczne", trans. M. Trzcńska, [in:] *Formy aktywności umysłu. Ujęcia kognitywne*, Vol. 2, ed. A. Klawiter, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2009, pp. 172–200.

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Mariusz Bartosiak

Milczący sens horyzontu poznawczo-performatywnego

Streszczenie

Przedstawione w artykule rozważania wychodzą od opalizacji semantycznej sensu i znaczenia w polskim uzusie językowym, poczynając od podstawowych ujęć słownikowych i korpusowych, w których wskazana jest podmiotowa (subiektywna) dominanta sensu i przedmiotowa (obiektywna) dominanta znaczenia. Następnie przywołane są elementy dyskursu filozoficznego (J. Bocheński, J. Hartman, T. Komendziński), w których wyartykułowane są dodatkowe warunki sensu jako „sensu życia” i „sensu działania”, podkreślające podmiotowy i performatywny charakter sensu, szczególnie związany z frazą „sens życia”. Filozoficzny kontekst rozważań wspierają ustalenia nauk poznawczych odnoszące się do udziału nieświadomości i jej potencjału poznawczo-performatywnego, wprowadzonego za pomocą kategorii „umysłu nieświadomego” (L. Młodinow) i „milczącej wiedzy” (M. Polanyi). W dalszej części rozważań poświęconych przede wszystkim koncepcji „horyzontu poznawczo-performatywnego” podkreślony jest dominujący udział nieświadomianego wymiaru podmiotowej wiedzy o byciu i działaniu w świecie w sensotwórczej aktywności poznawczej i performatywnej.

Słowa kluczowe: sens działania, sens życia, nieświadomy umysł, milcząca wiedza, horyzont poznawczo-performatywny.

The silent meaning of the cognitive-performative horizon

Summary

The article presents the discussion which begins with a semantic clarification of the Polish terms of ‘sens’ [meaning] and ‘znaczenie’ [reference] in Polish linguistic usus, starting with the basic dictionary and corpus-based determinations, which indicate the subjective dominant element of ‘sens’ and the objective dominant

element of 'znaczenie'. Next, the author indicated the elements of philosophical discourse (J. Bocheński, J. Hartman, T. Komendziński), which defined additional conditions of meaning as "the meaning of life" and "meaning of action" and which emphasise the subjective and performative nature of meaning, particularly associated with the expressions "meaning of life". The philosophical context of the discussion was supported by the findings of cognitive sciences which refer to the impact of the subconscious and its cognitive-performative potential introduced using the categories of the "subliminal" (L. Młodinow) and "tacit knowledge" (M. Polanyi). The final part of the discussion was mainly devoted to the concept of the "cognitive-performative horizon", it emphasised the dominant impact of the unrealised dimension of individual knowledge about existence and action in the world for meaning-building cognitive and performative activities.

Keywords: meaning of action, meaning of life, subliminal, tacit knowledge, cognitive-performative horizon.

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