

1. Aristotle, De Interpretatione

On the Means Of Meaning

I.

I am in not the first time in this restaurant, they make these adorable mouthwatering steaks here. I sit down with two friends and order a steak, looking forward to this combination of eating and talking together, that makes us calling each other “friend”. Some minutes later, the dishes are served, and I get a ragout. How can I explain, that something has gone wrong here? I want my steak! What makes me sure, that communication and language can help me to make anybody understanding what the mistake is and how can I hope that it will be corrected? I have to trust in the ability of the waiter (and the cook) to understand, what a “steak” is. So I am telling him about the mistake, that happened: I am telling him, was my intention was, when I ordered a steak. I am telling him, what the actual thing is that I wish. He takes the ragout back to the kitchen.

II.

Wittgenstein said, criticising our perspectives of interpretation, that the limits of our language are the limits of our thinking, and we have no “sentence outside the world” that makes us sure that language is a proper medium of understanding. Aristotle tries to validate this function of language in his work “De Interpretatione”. Therefore he tries to explain understanding through symbolic reference and signification. There are different signs and words, he says, but the actual world that every sign has to relate to, guarantees the understanding of language.

Therefore his interpretation of meaning can be used as a theory of translation. Because we have a real tree in nature, you can translate “arbor” (latin) to “tree” or to another language. And he is even more optimistically: Because every person knows sadness, you can translate a work like Ovid`s “tristia”. The actual things, the affections of the soul, that people have both in common, they are a bit like Wittgensteins “sentence outside the world”: They make us sure that we understand one another.

III.

My thesis is: If Aristotle would be right, we would not need many languages, we just could learn Esperanto and cut all jobs that in university working on topics like “philosophy of language” or “hermeneutics and translation”. If the affections of our souls and things in the world are the same for all of us, different languages are just a unnecessary luxury.

But we have many complex languages and everyone who tries to translate literature can tell, that it is very difficult to translate a word with all its connotations into another language, what stands against Aristotle`s concept. And even how a person speaks in his/her mother tongue, differs between all of us. It seems that we need different languages to express ourselves.

But what does this term “express ourselves” mean? One could say, this alternative description of language leads into solipsism: every person has its own language to express his very own affections, and all the work on understanding and interpretation is not necessary and a helpless try to come from one person to another: A philosophy of meaning would not be necessary, too. Everyone would be alone with his words. But how can we explain, that our everyday life works when we talk to one another? Our complex and language-based society could not be as solid and structured if no common basis for understanding would exist.

So I will try to find a solution: A concept of language that does not lead us to an universal language on the one hand or to a private language or pure idiolect on the other.

IV.

Let`s understand language the same way Chomsky tries to do it: Looking at a little child. She goes to this thing she sees, she touches its rough surface, is impressed by the big brown and green thing she has in front of her. She is into a relationship to this thing, into an act of discoverance. Also, slightly in an act of understanding power in the way a child does: She can climb on this thing, but this thing cannot climb on her. Some months later she will call this thing a *tree* and some years later she is able to understand how this tree could grow so big.

So we see: The act comes first, the word comes next and then she can refer to the tree as a “thing”. But when she hears the word “tree”, she is not aware of the thing “tree” in itself, but of an act. For one persons this act might be experiencing the beauty of the woods, for another the money that one can make by selling them. This associations are not “the same”, and they do not refer to the thing “tree” (although we think this in our everyday life), but to our specific *relationship* to a tree. This is of much importance, because it damages our understanding of language as a “signification” or “symbolistic” system.

V.

At this level of confusion I want to introduce a unconventional thought of Hobbes. He wrote that the origin of language is *the order*. The commander needs to make his slaves bringing him, what he wants. So they have to agree on a spoken sound with the meaning “Bring me an apple”.

Orientated towards this thought, one could say, that the thing language and communication are about is not “signification” or “symbolism” but “evocation”. The commander uses language not to bring the actual thing – e.g. the apple – to the mind of his slave, but to make him run and fulfill his master`s wish. The sound evokes an act, not signifies a thing.

This “evocation” makes understanding both: universal and private. It is universal because language enables the slave to understand what his master wants. But it is very private too, because the order means “running and carrying the fruit” for the slave and “getting something to eat” for the commander. It refers to the same thing: An apple. This is the point Aristotle is making. But the effective meaning of this apple is very different for the communicating persons, and so the apple cannot be the basis of understanding. The reference and understanding of the word that both includes in one situation of communication, but in their very own ways, is shaped by their general relationship to one another.

VI.

Now we have mixed up the question of interpretation and understanding with the terms of commander and slave, “Herr und Knecht” (Hegel) – with politics. And that is not just because of a randomly chosen example. “Self expression” (cf. §II) and “evocation” (cf. §IV) are political because they are linked to wishes, hopes, fears, utopias, social orders and the experiences of power and force. Interpretation is an act of violence, as Nietzsche claimed radically, because it depends on social and political situations how you have to interpret a sentence or a word.

Saying this I have to disagree with Aristotle in order to stay in touch with the interest of “De Interpretatione”: Explaining how we can understand one another. What makes understanding each other so easy (in the common experience) and so difficult (in the philosophically reflection on understanding, in the work on proper translations), is not that language refers to “actual things”, but that it evokes “relational acts”. This term shows us, that we speak of experiences in special relationships and that the structures that “make us understand” are shaped first by (political) power. After making experiences of power humans are coming to language that gives them a good way to simplify these experiences in words that can evoke intended experiences or acts in other people, and we deceive ourselves when we simplify it another step and understand this as “talking about real things”. There is much more.

When I say “I am sad” and want to be understood, I implicitly express my hope that the other person has experienced sadness too and knows, what I mean and will also react to my words. I am coming from my individual act of being sad to a thing that we could have in common. This

seems to be privately, but is in fact a political situation, because whilst saying “I am sad” I am not just signifying what I feel, but making the other person feel something too, so my language has power to evoke something.

VII.

What I have worked out is a concept of language not as private or universal language. It is in between, because it makes understanding an interdependent thing that takes place in political structures and refers to relationships and not to things.

I have shown that in my opinion Aristotle's concept of language is not as aptly as a concept of language as “evocation”. But then I wrote about the hope, that we have things – e.g. “sadness” – in common – or “affections of the soul – are the same for all”, as he expresses it.

So I have to relate to his concept in a new way. Not as a proper concept of language for our world today, but as an utopia.

As long as power – economical, political and psychological dimensions are included – shapes our understanding, I have to agree to the provoking claims of Hobbes and Nietzsche. That we are understanding one another, is not because we “share the same world”: It is because humans want others to do, what they want, and some have the power to do this and shape understanding by using meaning as mean of power. But Aristotle's optimism, that we have things in common because as humans we are all the same (and so we are able to be friends and work together on politics) leads me to the hope, that in a world of equal humans, in a world that overcomes structures of violence, understanding could be completely different from today.

But as long as the thing most of us have “in common” is to understand a thing by its economical value – and value is not a thing, but a specific interdependent relation too – understanding language cannot be validated by the argument, that for all of us the affections and actual things are the same.

VIII.

The waiter has made his excuses and I am eating my steak. But it tastes bitter. Maybe he really does not even know, what this steak is, how it tastes in this upper class restaurant, because he has not the money to buy one... How can he really understand the mistake, when he just has to understand my anger... Maybe he corrected it not because of his insight but because I – as guest – have more power than he – as simple waiter...

Suddenly I remember how delicious ragout is. Maybe I could eat one together with him...