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A NOTE ON THE 'FORMALISM' OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

One could characterise the 'second cognitive revolution' in linguistics as a move away from Chomsky's 'formalism' towards more 'functionalist', or 'pragmatic', approaches of e.g. Lakoff and Langacker. Such a description is not incorrect but it hides the fact that 'cognitive functionalism' remains importantly 'formalist'. This is not an objection, since in this respect 'cognitive pragmatics' in its mainstream version shares the perspective of linguistics as such: it is a study of verbal *forms*. This fact does limit, however, the validity of more general claims put forward in the name of the second generation cognitive science, e.g. that it explains "what people find *meaningful* in their lives" (Lakoff, Johnson 1980: ix). I want to show here, after Gadamer (1993), that linguistics is necessarily 'perspectival' and, more specifically, that the perspective adopted by cognitive linguists does not warrant wide-ranging claims about the essence of language and human nature.

Let us start from the standard interpretation. According to Lakoff and Johnson, who are eager to distance themselves from their great predecessor:

There is no Chomskyan person, for whom language is pure syntax, pure form insulated from and independent of all meaning, context, perception, emotion, memory, attention, action, and the dynamic nature of communication. Moreover, human language is not a totally genetic innovation. Rather, central aspects of language arise evolutionarily from sensory, motor, and other neural systems that are present in «lower» animals (Lakoff, Johnson 1999: 6).

Clearly, the authors want to suggest that Chomsky's approach is pure fantasy and theirs is more 'realistic'. This is doubtful for several reasons.

First of all, their description of the 'Chomskyan person' is biased. It is true that Chomsky believes in the 'autonomy of syntax' but he would not say that language in use, 'performance', is "insulated from and independent of" the items mentioned in the quote. One can assume that the difference between both 'generations' is to some extent terminological: Chomsky identifies the essence of 'language' with syntactic 'competence', while Lakoff and Johnson (following common sense) extend the range of the term to cover 'performance'.

Of course, terminology follows methodology and in this respect, it is not obvious that the point of view adopted by Lakoff and Johnson is necessarily better

than Chomsky's. The nativist hypothesis – syntax is inborn, genetically programmed – may strike one as outlandish, but it is *prima facie* justified as a fallback position by the inadequacy of empiricist accounts of language acquisition. Chomsky argues from the 'poverty of the stimulus': when conceived as stimuli, samples of speech available in childhood are not sufficient to explain the development of linguistic competence, hence nativism is the only position left. Even though this argument is wrong – speech samples are not 'stimuli' (cf. Deacon 1997: 84–92; Pawelec 2005: 166–169) – Chomsky is right in assuming that empiricist accounts of language (both ontogenetic and phylogenetic) are inadequate. When Lakoff and Johnson claim that central aspects of language arise evolutionarily from sensory, motor, and other neural systems that are present in «lower» animals, they apparently adopt an indefensible empiricist position, as shown repeatedly in the history of philosophy, e.g. by Kant's critique of Hume or Merleau-Ponty's critique of psychology.

Finally, when viewed as a manifesto, the passage quoted above is not a faithful description of Lakoffs and Johnson's own project. They have very little to say about context [...], action, and the dynamic nature of communication in relation to the genesis and development of language. Their main focus is on perception or, more precisely, interaction with environment as the ground of conceptual evolution underlying linguistic forms. Thus, like Chomsky, they leave out of their explanations important elements. Consequently, it is not obvious that they offer a more 'realistic' account of language.

It is true, of course, that the Lakoffian approach is less 'formalist'. Chomsky has aimed at describing the 'syntactic processor' – a model of algorithmic and autonomous processes generating syntactic structures. He does not believe that such a model can explain all aspects of linguistic 'competence', since semantics is to some extent controlled by our knowledge of the world, which cannot be formalised. One can view Lakoff's project, specifically the 'Invariance Hypothesis' (this time in co-operation with Turner, cf. Turner 1990), as an attempt to verify that last assumption, in order to find out how much of semantics can be captured – less formally – by a model of 'conceptual transfers'. It is fair to say, I believe, that Lakoff tried to extend – in a Chomskyan spirit – the generative approach to semantics not only in the early 70-ties, but also in later stages of his career (necessarily giving up the assumption of autonomy and strict formalisms).

If there is some contrariness in my remarks, they are meant to serve as a corrective of the 'standard interpretation': there is more continuity between Chomsky and Lakoff than the latter would like to admit. Both parties may disagree on many specific points, but they take for granted the perspective first developed by Chomsky – that of 'linguistic mentalism': conceptual processes are prior to and independent of linguistic 'surface structures'; language should be explained on the conceptual ('deep') level. Since Chomsky's focus is limited to the 'combinatorial potential' of syntactic forms, his hypothetical 'mentalese' may perhaps be purely formal: algorithmic and unmotivated. Since Lakoff's focus is much wider – he is interested in the semantic potential of related verbal forms – the 'mentalese' postulated by him must be much richer and motivated by psycho-

logical rules of some kind. In this respect, in spite of important differences, his approach is similar to that of Langacker (1987) and Talmy (2000).

What these cognitive linguists, then, have in common, can be summarised in two points: first, linguistic forms and structures reflect (are symptoms of) prior conceptualisations; second, the conceptualisations are motivated by psychology of perception and (more generally) the interaction of an agent with some environment. The second issue has a universalist, biological aspect: we are all agents with similar anatomy and physiology; and a particularist, cultural aspect: our environments are shaped to a large extent by our community. Thus, language is conceived as a tool of communication and expression of a primarily generic and secondarily cultural 'conceptualiser'.

The vision of language as a 'tool of communication and expression' is, of course, not specific to cognitive linguistics. It is the standard perspective of linguistics and has been repeatedly articulated, e.g. by Buehler (1965: 24–28) with the Aristotelian notion of *organon*. One could even argue that the special focus of cognitive linguistics – on the processes of conceptualisation and orientation in the world – is congruent with Buehler's view that the 'representational' function of language is primary. The cognitive functionalism remains, however, quite specific as a branch of linguistics, i.e. the study of language as a form.

The 'formalist' nature of linguistics is explained by Gadamer (1993: 439–443) in his discussion of Humboldt. His argument is embedded in the hermeneutic vision of language as 'opening up a world' for human beings, which is not easily summarised. It is perhaps enough to say here that linguistics divorces language from this primary context of 'opening up' for us a range of experience (for any imaginable 'human' function – not just communication or expression). We should realise that this argument is not conceived as a criticism of linguistics: as a set of 'methods' – controlled ways of dealing with linguistic phenomena – it must 'objectify' (i.e. focus on language as separate from the world it 'reveals'). The argument shows that language is not *just* a tool (but a way of being specific to humans) and any linguistic method is necessarily 'perspectival' – its validity is limited.

Against this background, we can characterise cognitive linguistics as an attempt to view language as a product of individual 'conceptualisers,' who have a convergent vision of their world thanks to biologically generic and culturally specific cognitive interactions with their environment. I criticised this approach elsewhere (Pawelec 2005: 2006) for neglecting the essentially social nature of language and divorcing conceptualisation from verbal expression (thus, putting the conceptual cart in front of the verbal horse). I pointed out, however, that the cognitive perspective reveals some crucial motivating factors of linguistic expression, e.g. the need for communal orientation.

To conclude, cognitive linguistics 'of the second generation' is not 'formalist' in the sense most evident in Chomsky's publications – which can be defined as the focus on the relations between syntactic elements to the exclusion of other factors constituting language – but it retains much of the 'formalism' (in the Gadamerian sense) inherent in his approach to language study, namely 'linguistic mentalism'.

References

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Streszczenie

Uwaga w kwestii „formalizmu” językoznawstwa kognitywnego

W niniejszym artykule staram się pokazać, że standardowa charakterystyka głównego nurtu językoznawstwa kognitywnego (Lakoffa, Langackera czy Talmy’ego) jako przewyżczenia „formalizmu Chomsky’ego” nie jest do końca słuszna. Choć propozycje wymienionych autorów rzeczywiście sytuują się bliżej funkcjonalnego bieguna językoznawstwa, to w sensie wskazanym przez Gadamera stanowią formalnie kontynuację wypracowanego przez Chomsky’ego ujęcia, które określa się mianem „mentalizmu lingwistycznego”.