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FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN SYMBOLIC SPACE – INTERPRETATION AND IMAGINATION IN UNDERSTANDING MEANINGS[1]

The symbolic space of a community identifies itself with what in a broad sense we call culture or a social whole in its linguistic dimension. It imposes and preserves meanings functioning in social life, constituting the basis for rules of communication and its real processes. The meanings fixed in the symbolic space become cultural codes understandable for all, which function in everyday use.

How does language function in the symbolic space, how are meanings understood in communication processes? The answer to these questions will be presented from the perspective of philosophical reflection on language, the most recent discovery of which is to bring its rhetoric to the foreground.

The rhetorical nature of language means that meanings are not understood literally, that they are constructed according to their mutual relations. The way in which rhetorical language is understood will be presented on the example of the metaphor as a basic rhetorical trope. The analysis of metaphorical meaning illustrates that it emerges only

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from mutual relations between the meanings of words that make up a metaphorical expression, and that its understanding requires both fixed language codes as well as the contribution of subjective interpretation and imagination. The rhetorical nature of language in the symbolic space will also be shown by the analysis of other forms of language, such as symbol and image, whose meanings also emerge only in the process of interpretation and thanks to the use of imagination. Symbolic meaning is not literal, but, as in the case of metaphor, figurative, so its understanding requires both reliance on cultural codes, as well as commitment to interpretation and imagination. An image is also a form of language, which has a non-literal meaning, of figurative character, close to a symbolic meaning. The rhetoric, symbolism and imagery of language indicate that it does not contain literal meanings. Such an understanding of language can be described not only as rhetorical, but in a broader sense as entirely figurative. By analysing the understanding of metaphorical, symbolic and image-based meanings, we will show how language functions, how figurative meanings are produced and interpreted.

THE RHETORICAL TURN IN LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

The understanding of language, as well as highlighting its rhetorical character, is a consequence of philosophical reflection on language, which in the 20th century took the form of a "linguistic turn". The term "linguistic turn" in humanities and social sciences is attributed to Richard Rorty, who in 1987, during the symposium *Rhetoric of Human Sciences* in Iowa City, USA, stated that the linguistic and constructivist breakthrough, which occurred in the 1960s, placed language, understood as discourse as well as sign, and its meaning at the centre of reflection on culture or the society. The essence of this new understanding of language, known as the linguistic turn, is the loss of adequacy of the relationship between the *self* and its thought or image, the loss of adequacy of the relationship between an object and its representation. As a consequence, meaning becomes ambiguous and dependent on other meanings, so it requires interpretation or becomes only an interpretation. This linguistic breakthrough, which determines further reflection on language, includes, as Rorty shows, three successive turns: linguistic turn, interpretative turn and rhetorical

turn. As a consequence of these turns, language, i.e. systems of signs and meanings, together with the thesis of its ambiguity, is accepted by humanities and social sciences as the basic way to understand social and cultural reality.

The linguistic turn occurred in 1967, which coincided with publishing of the book, whose chief editor was Rorty, entitled *The Linguistic Turn*[2]. This turn emphasizes the fundamental role of language, discourse, text (and their meanings) as active factors in the creation and understanding reality, especially that of the society. The second turn described by Rorty is an interpretative turn, which is implemented mainly by contemporary representatives of hermeneutics (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Stanley Fish, Charles Taylor, Clifford Geertz, also Charles Sanders Peirce) and introduces the central role of understanding as text mediated interpretation. As a result of the interpretative turn, the meaning of a sign is perceived as dependent on its interpretation, complementing each other within the meaning. The meaning of a sign is thus complemented by the process of a specific interpretation, which requires the involvement of a subject, as well as a reference to the context of a given symbolic space. The understanding of meaning is therefore based on some prior knowledge, preliminary assumptions, which means that interpretation requires knowledge of cultural codes, rules and meanings of a specific symbolic space. However, understanding of the meaning is at the same time its formation, which depends on the interpreting subject and is therefore subjective and creative.

The most significant for further considerations is the third most important linguistic turn, described by Rorty as the rhetorical turn (rhetorical constructivism). The authors of this turn highlight not only the fact that all knowledge is a construct of language, because access to the world or our experience of the world is possible only through discursive forms of knowledge and representation, but also emphasize the functioning of rhetorical mechanisms in discourses, i.e. the role of tropes, rhetorical figures and argumentation techniques. The rhetorical turn develops the methodological perspective, oriented towards the interpretation of society and culture, in which the mechanisms

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[2] See *The Linguistic Turn. Essay in Philosophical Method*, ed. R. Rorty, Chicago 1967. In this book Rorty presents ponderings of proponents of philosophy of language, mainly belonging to the group of analytical philosophers (Rudolf Carnap), but also its opponents (Willard Van Orman Quine) and thinkers who went beyond that analytical paradigm (Max Black, Jerrold Katz).

and tools of rhetoric play a significant role. The process of understanding is therefore mainly tropological in nature, and the interpretation captures and takes into account the conventions of rhetoric. This rhetoric turn is connected with the thought of Jacques Derrida, who in his work *Margins of Philosophy* presents the metaphorical nature of philosophical concepts[3]. Its main theoretician is Paul de Man, who in the book *Allegories of Reading*[4], according to the concept proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche, emphasizes the rhetorical character of language. As the source of his theses, he points out that language is entirely rhetorical, i.e. it is rhetoric[5]. The symbolic space itself is structured not only as text or sign systems, but also in a rhetorical way.

RHETORIC NATURE OF LANGUAGE IN PAUL DE MAN'S APPROACH

The most important theoretician of the rhetorical turn is de Man, who in the aforementioned work *Allegories of Reading* highlights two theses concerning the place of rhetoric in discourse. In his view, the rhetorical turn does not mean a return to the old rhetoric developed by Aristotle, but it shows something more – the rhetorical or figurative character of language. Thus, as de Man claims, rhetoric cannot be understood as a specific discursive practice, but is a way of functioning of the language itself.

In the text *Semiology and Rhetoric*, which opens the book *Allegories of Reading*, de Man distinguishes between the old and new rhetoric, broadening its meaning by the definition of *tropes rhetoric* and leaving the term *rhetoric of persuasion* to describe the old rhetoric. Therefore, figures belonging to the old rhetoric should be treated as a specific case of the very way in which language functions. Rhetoric loses its former meaning as an art of persuasion and is replaced by rhetoric as a way of human reasoning.

> The dependence of eloquence on figure is only a further consequence of a more fundamental observation: tropes are not understood aesthetically, as ornament , nor are they understood semantically as a figurative meaning that derives from literal , proper denomination. Rather, the reverse is the

[3] See J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago 1982.
[4] See P. de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figurative Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*, New Haven, London 1979.
[5] See P. de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis, London 1996.

case. The trope is not a derived, marginal, or aberrant form of language but the linguistic paradigm par excellence. The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others but it characterizes language as such[6].

Therefore, in de Man's opinion, it is not possible to speak of rhetoric as a field of knowledge, there is no rhetoric in principle, there are only mechanisms once recognized and named after, which have been noticed everywhere where language is present. The "rhetorical basis of language" is brought to the foreground[7].

Adopting rhetoric as a feature of language, de Man relies on the fundamental finding for the whole linguistic turn that language can no longer be understood as a transparent medium for communication with non-linguistic reality, but on the contrary, that it always contains rhetorical or figurative elements that undermine the referential character of the utterance and that introduce ambiguity and uncertainty into the discourse. Rhetorical discourse reveals a lack of foundation of meaning and its infinite branching in the configuration of other meanings. Thus, there are no literal meanings in language that could be defined and fixed in the form of rules, established meanings of the symbolic space.

This transition from the term "rhetoric" to the term "rhetoricity" of the language propagated by de Man is supported by Friedrich Nietzsche and his thesis that "No such thing as an unrhetorical, »natural« language exists that could be used as a point of reference: language is itself the result of purely rhetorical tricks and devices. [...] *language is rhetoric*"[8]. As de Man emphasizes: "Nietzsche writes: »There is no difference between the correct rules of eloquence [*Rede*] and the so-called rhetorical figures. Actually, all that is generally called eloquence is figural language«"[9]. Referring in the text *Rhetoric of Tropes* (Nietzsche) to Nietzsche's text indirectly devoted to rhetoric, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, de Man argues, after its author, that the rhetoric of language and human aspiration to create metaphors constitute the basis for interpreting the world, that our knowledge is essentially tropological.

The literality of language is therefore an illusion, it is false, Nietzsche says. The conviction of the possible literality of the language, de Man

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[6] P. de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, op. cit., p. 105.
[7] Ibidem, p. 8.
[8] F. Nietzsche, *Description of Ancient Rhetoric*, per: P. de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, op. cit., p. 105.
[9] Ibidem.

adds, "It is a naive belief in the proper meaning of the metaphor without awareness of the problematic nature of its factual, referential foundation"[10]. The rhetorical turn therefore eliminates the distinction between literal and rhetorical language, which was pushed into the field of literature and poetry and is now shown as the proper way of functioning of language.

The illustration of the rhetoricity emphasised by de Man as a feature of language is the significance of metaphor as a basic rhetorical figure. The analysis of the meaning of a symbol and image, on the other hand, allows us to broaden the characteristics of language by these two forms close to metaphor. The analysis of these three ways of shaping meaning, from metaphor and symbol to image, brings closer the rhetorical or figurative character of language and shows the role of interpretation and imagination in its understanding. How are the meanings of rhetorical figures or figurative meanings constructed and understood?

INTERPRETATION AND IMAGINATION IN FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: METAPHOR, SYMBOL AND IMAGE

How do meanings function in the metaphor? How do we understand or interpret them?

In his theory of metaphor, Ricoeur assumes that it has a semantic character, because its carrier is a sentence, an expression, a few words taken as a whole and not a single word. Metaphor is a semantic construction, presenting a given thing as if it were a completely different thing, and yet in a certain way similar to the first one, even though the similarity concerns various concepts or meanings[11].

For the last 30 years the concept of metaphor, especially in the environment of literary critics of the English language, to whom Ricoeur refers, has taken the form of a theory of interaction, mutual communication and influencing each other. The meaning of the metaphor in this approach is not literal, but only emerges from the context of a sentence or words, and has its source in the action of the context which leads to the interaction of semantic fields of several words and

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[10] Ibidem, p. 111.
[11] Paul Ricoeur introduces the theory of metaphor in his book *La métaphore vive*, Paris 1975.

in which it is contrasted with words taken literally. Metaphor is, therefore, a multi-word expression constructed in such a way that if each word is assigned its proper, literal meaning in the code of a given language, an inconsistent expression is obtained, but this inconsistency in the metaphor also helps to capture the mechanism underlying such a combination of words (e.g. their similarity). Understanding a metaphor is therefore based on the knowledge of the cultural code, which allows us to grasp the literal meaning, but at the same time it is situated in a divergence, in a distance from that meaning.

Ultimately, the meaning of metaphor is based on the foundation of similarity, on the approximation between different semantic fields. This similarity is only constructed in the process of understanding, since semantic fields are initially distant from each other. A metaphor therefore always contains an inconsistency, deviation, distortion (*déviance*) concerning the predictive structure itself, and is thus based on a distorted or "strange" predicate. How does this inconsistent predicate come to pass? How does a new meaning emerge despite its inappropriateness in normal language use? Inconsistency in metaphorical expressions is the consequence of violation of the semantic code in a given language, which organizes the assignment of predicates in its normal use. But this remoteness of meaning at the word level and this incoherence of a new predicate leads to the emergence of a new appropriateness (convergence) which reduces the inconsistency. From an inconsistent expression emerges a new meaning, a new appropriateness, the expression acquires a sense as a whole. Each new metaphor introduces a semantic innovation, a new meaning, not yet established, hence it is creative[12].

To understand a metaphor is to capture the dynamics which makes a metaphorical statement, i.e. a new semantic relevance, emerge from the ruins of such semantic inappropriateness that one can see when reading a sentence in a non-transferable way. However, this sense can become an ordinary one, and the metaphor itself can be included in the semantic system due to the habit of using it and, in this sense it becomes worn out. Such metaphors occur in the form of permanent idiomatic phrases functioning in the common consciousness and are often referred to as "fossils" or "frozen metaphors". However, as Ricoeur points out,

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[12] "The innovation lies in the producing of a new semantic pertinence by means of an impertinent attribution" (P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, Chicago, London 1990, p. ix).

> The metaphor is alive as long as we can perceive, through the new semantic pertinence – and so to speak in its denseness – the resistance of the words in their ordinary use and therefore their incompatibility at the level of a literal interpretation of the sentence[13].

In Ricoeur's perspective, imagination, which is the basis for understanding a metaphor, has a linguistic semantic character and is not identified with an image. It is an operation of creating meanings, which consists primarily in grasping the similarity of semantic fields, which is a form of response to their initial semantic distance. Imagination is, therefore, an operation of making semantic fields of different notions similar in the process of generating meaning, it is a transition between them, creating a new appropriateness through them.

Imagination in this operation of matching is an approach, perception, intuitive *insight*, which belongs to the discourse itself, and which implements a change in the distance between different semantic fields.

> Imagination is thereby approximation. Aristotle referred to such a logical vision, saying that "creating good metaphors is perceiving (contemplating) of what is similar (*to to homofon theôrein*)" (*Poétique*, 1459 a 3–8)[14].

This vision of what is similar is at the same time, as Ricoeur puts it, seeing and thinking. It is thinking because it is the realization of transforming semantic fields, re-categorizing what has already been categorized. But this thinking is seeing, as long as perception consists in a momentary grasp of the offered, given combination possibilities.

Ricoeur describes this creation of similarity through a logical approximation as an assimilation that consists in making the concepts it connects and places in the metaphorical expression close semantically. In Ricoeur's view, however, it does not mean traditional assimilation by similarity, which was based on mechanical attraction between different mental elements. Ricoeur replaces it by an operation specific to the language and its act of predication. Assimilation is possible when this approximation meets with earlier categorisation, so that it is only the predication that appears to be "strange". The metaphor remains alive as long as we see previous inadequacy through new adequacy. The operation of imagination, therefore, consists precisely in capturing

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[13] Ibidem.
[14] P. Ricoeur, *Imagination et metaphore*, texte d'une communication faite par Paul Ricœur à la Journée de Printemps de la Société Française de Psychopathologie de l'Expression, à Lille les 23–24 mai 1981, "La Revue Psychologie Médicale" 1982, No. 14.

tension, not only between the logical subject and the predicate, but also between literal understanding and metaphorical understanding of the same expression, in perceiving simultaneously what is similar, despite... and through what is different.

> In this sense – Ricoeur says – we can speak together with Gadamer about the fundamental metaphorical nature of thinking, as long as the figure of discourse, which we call a metaphor, allows us to see the overall operation of generating concepts. Because in a metaphorical process the movement towards the general is crossed by the resistance of difference, the metaphor emerges as a figure of rhetoric[15].

The operations of imagination described on the example of metaphor, i.e. the synthesis of imagination based on the difference and similarity between different semantic fields, and the new figurative meanings that emerge from it, form the basis for the interpretation of meanings, including the symbol and image. Not only the meaning of the metaphor, but also of the symbol and image is figurative and constructed by interpretation based on imagination.

Symbol, due to its structure of meaning, is close to metaphor in the fact that its meaning is also not literal, but figurative. The meaning of a symbol is not produced by the context of various notions, because a symbol is not an expression, but a sign. Also a symbol, as a sign, has a double or even multiple meaning. Specifically, a symbol is a linguistic expression with a double meaning, one of which is explicit whilst the other is implicit. As defined by Ricoeur in his work *Existence and Hermeneutics*: "I define »symbol« as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first"[16]. The understanding of a symbol comes from the secondary, direct, imaginary sense, which refers to the original sense. This understanding is a transition from the secondary sense to the primordial sense, but it is an interpretation, since these two levels of meaning exist only at the level of interpretation. Interpretation of meaning is led by the riddle underlying symbols, so it is both socially or culturally conditioned, because it is based on the knowledge of cultural codes, as well as creative, because it co-creates meaning through the autonomy of thinking. The operation

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[15] Ibidem.
[16] P. Ricoeur, *Existence and Hermeneutics*, [in:] P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations. Essay in Hermeneutics*, Evanston 1974, p. 12-13.

of imagination in this transition from one meaning to another consists, as with the metaphor, in capturing two meanings - literal and figurative - in their mutual tension and dependence, as well as similarity.

The image is of a linguistic and semantic character, because its meaning has a symbolic structure. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger writes in his book entitled *Philosophie des images (The Philosophy of Images)*: "An image, better than a concept, appears as a symbolic configuration that retains a certain reserve of meaning, hidden in signs or figures, which can be reactivated by the interpreting subject"[17]. Like a symbol, an image is a carrier of certain knowledge, information and content on a direct and indirect level. Because, as Wunenburger writes, "sets of images are a tangle of latent mental meanings and their decryption, they do not boil down to some kind of unreasonable revelation but call upon a thought to decipher and translate them into another language"[18]. Understanding the meaning of an image, as in the case of a symbol, must therefore be related to the meanings of the symbolic space, to an understandable code, but it is also subjective. In the case of an image, like a symbol, "interpretation appears to be a subjectivisation of what is given to the intuition, the hidden content of the images"[19]. The transition from the explicit content of the image and its explicit meaning to the implicit content is based, as in the case of the symbol, on the operation of imagination, the synthesis of which, while capturing various semantic fields, creates the meaning of the image by making them similar.

A metaphor, a symbol, or an image are forms of the symbolic space language, which has a rhetorical or, more broadly, a figurative character. The figurative nature of language expands the ambiguity of meanings and the possibilities of its subjective, creative interpretation, which also takes into account the operations of imagination which, following Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, is the art of producing syntheses that constitute the basis of figurative meanings, the art deeply hidden in human souls. Understanding the meaning of each of these three language forms requires reference to cultural codes fixed in symbolic space, which indicates its passivity and receptiveness. The meaning of metaphor, symbol and image as indirect, non--verbal, however, requires linking these cultural codes with subjective

[17] J.J. Wunenburger, *Philosophie des images*, Paris 1997, p. 85.
[18] Ibidem, p. 84.
[19] Ibidem, p. 86.

interpretation and reliance on the operations of imagination. Passivity and receptivity of understanding, its subordination to cultural codes, rules and fixed meanings existing in symbolic space, is connected with creative interpretation and creative imagination, which indicates its activity and subjectivity. Understanding meaning in figurative language is not just a passive reflection of the existing codes; it requires the recipient to be equally active. The processes of imagination connected with semantics and imagery that participate in the interpretation require creativity and have unpredictable dynamics.

The concept of creative imagination understood in this way, presented on the example of the analysis of the meaning of metaphor and symbol in Ricoeur's approach and the image in Wunenburger's approach, referring to Kant's pre-conceptual syntheses and adopting a semantic dimension, places it, as Patrick L. Bourgeois stresses in *Imagination and Postmodernity*, in the central space of "philosophy today" and particularly in "postmodernism"[20]. Figurative language, whose meanings are based on both interpretation and operations of the creative imagination, increases the postmodern ambiguity of language and its openness, at the same time introducing subjectivity and thus it "*reestablishes* the position of the humanities as central against the anti-humanism of deconstruction", "re-establishes the humanities in a central position, which deconstruction attempts subvert"[21]. This central place of man means at the same time subjectivity, freedom, creativity in the process of interpreting meanings. The figurative language, shaping the symbolic space and determining the way of understanding meanings in the processes of communication, is no longer merely a manipulation of metaphors, symbols, images, but leaves room for free, subjective interpretation. Metaphors, symbols and images, effective in bringing about social change, should therefore no longer only refer to cultural codes, but also influence these subjective processes of interpretation and the rules of synthesis of creative imagination.

[20] See P. L. Bourgeois, *Imagination and Postmodernity*, Lanham 2013.
[21] Ibidem, p. xiii.

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Abstract:

The paper examines the philosophical account of language arising from the so-called rhetorical turn that occurred in the seventies of the twentieth century and was authored mainly by Paul de Man. Paul de Man emphasises rhetorical mechanisms at work in language, which means that the process of understanding is essentially tropological in nature and interpretation captures and pays close attention to the conventions of rhetoric. How do meanings operate in a language which is rhetorical? Metaphor as a basic rhetorical trope, together with symbol and image, have been chosen to illustrate how meanings are constructed and understood in a language thought of as being rhetorical. An analysis of metaphor, symbol and image shows a fundamental role interpretation and imagination play in understanding meanings. The understanding of meanings requires reference to the linguistic code operating in the symbolic space, but also allows for subjective and creative interpretation.

Keywords:

image, imagination, interpretation, metaphor, Paul de Man, rhetoric, rhetorical turn, symbol

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