

Artefacts and language as institution

The aim of this paper is to compare the ontology of artefacts with the ontology of language. The main issue is whether language can be considered as a social entity. Social entities – or better, institutions – need to cling to physical objects for existing. I will show that language is an institution and there is a relationship between language and artefacts. My proposal can be summarized in five points.

1. The ontology of artefacts. Natural kinds are the classical term of comparison of artefacts. Since the end of the Sixties, Herbert Simon has spoken about “artificial phenomena” like entities that stay within the bound of physical laws. At the end of the Eighties, researchers close to Cognitive Sciences are interested in the relationship between objects manufactured by men and their project dimension. If design is the main topic in discussing about artefacts, we have to take into account two kinds of remarks: first, it is necessary that design is believed a not recent skill; second, we have to explain intrinsic sociality of this particular kind of material objects.

2. The ontology of social entities. Besides natural kinds and artefacts in our world there are also social entities (Searle, 1995; Ferraris, 2008). According to Searle (1995; 2008), social entities are objects like a 20 dollar bill or University of California. These two examples are “institutional facts”, that is to say that are objects that need human institutions based on collective intentionality for their existence. According to Searle, all the institutions need language for rising and existing. In *Language and Social Ontology* (2008), Searle dedicates a short paragraph to language as an institution.

3. Language as an artefact or language as an institution? Searle's position on language as institution clashes a long time tradition that has considered language as an instrument and then language can be assimilated to an artefact (Tomasello, 1999; Rossi-Landi, 1968, 1972). As already Benveniste sustained, it is not possible to think about language as an instrument, as it would mean to attribute to language the ontological status of material objects like a hoe or a wheel. Before Benveniste, already Humboldt struggled contemporary theories that explained language as an instrument. According to Humboldt, language is the formative organ of thought. Instead, an historical language (like English, or Italian, or French) is the place in which a national legacy crystallizes. The essential being of historical language is not to be an accomplished work, namely a material object (*ergon*), but it is *energeia*, that is activity, an everlasting work of spirit.

4. Language as an institution. At this point, I want to consider the ontology of language by two points of view: first, intentionality and second, the relationship between language and human work. By this way, I will consider the researches of Michel Bréal (1897), who has sustained the idea of language as the product of human actions but not like an object. Against organicism in philosophy of language, in his works Bréal compares linguistic changes and law. This comparison is made by the concept of intentionality and considering that all institutions are artificial.

I would return to the conception of language as an institution as Bréal suggested. In my proposal I would take into account notions like “institutional facts” and physical objects (Searle, 1995).

5. Artefacts and language. If language can be considered as an institution that needs human activity and physical objects too, these physical objects – for example linguistic signals – can be considered as artefacts? In this way, I notice an open issue, that is the core of this paper: intentionality. What is the difference between linguistic intentionality and intentionality as a concept that explains relationship between subjects and artefacts?

Bibliography

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