

1.3 (Re)Constructing (Non)Dualism

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The 'binary theory of the sign' and beyond

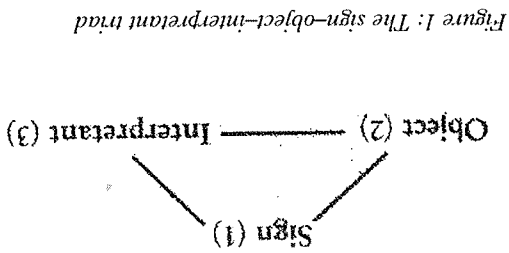
Presuming a subject, a sign and an object that is signified using signs, we are moving on the rather beaten track of 'classical semiotics' (see fig. 1). Couldn't it be possible, however, that we only perceive 'static objects' we finally believe to 'signify' because we have constructed them as such 'static objects' in the first place?

One could call the idea of 'labelling' an object using language 'iconic-theoretical thinking' or a 'dualistic way of thinking' or a 'naive realistic way of thinking'. Realism means here that the world is presumed to be meaningfully 'formed' independently from the act of cognising it as such a meaningfully 'formed' world. Let's consider, for example, a diagrammatic cross-section of the vertebrate eye (see e.g. Pessoa et al. 1998, p. 724). Pessoa et al. presume the existence of an 'eye'. They have already perceived/cognised an 'eye' as 'eye', they have already separated the 'eye' from the body, have pictured it on a piece of paper and have finally signified it as 'eye'. Just as the precondition for perceiving a blind spot is – again – a drawing or photo that pictures a blind spot. The knowledge of possessing a blind spot seems to be inseparably united with somebody else, who has already distinguished the 'blind spot' as 'blind spot' from the 'rest'. Considering these interactive games, the so-called 'triad' between a 'blind spot' (an object) and my (the interpretant's) sign 'blind spot' (see fig. 1) begs a great number of questions. Among them:

1) If we are putting name tags on pictures, who put the name tag 'blind spot/nervous system etc.' on a 'blind spot/nervous system' at the beginning of this game?

2) How do we know that these ships of paper are correctly attached to the 'forms'?

3) Why, if literally rooted in a universal experience of nature, would not all languages be the same?



Picturing our own 'blind spot', we are obviously in the domain of literacy, for the letters forming the words 'blind' and 'spot' are without doubt written down and the picture of a retina is drawn on a piece of paper. And once we have pictured these structures/words, we draw a link between 'sign' and 'picture'. Our 'eye' is,

however, still embedded in a body and only under this precondition does the notion 'eye' or 'blind spot' make sense. It seems, therefore, as if we fill in the 'body' in order to talk meaningfully about a 'blind spot', as it is pictured on a piece of paper. But if we do require a body in order to possess a 'blind spot' and if we require somebody else, who points towards our blind spot, and if, finally, the 'blind spot' didn't introduce itself as such, we can conclude: The knowledge of possessing a 'blind spot' requires intersubjective pointing as well as the utterance (or written down words) 'blind spot'. The 'blind spot' as we finally perceive it on a piece of paper goes hand in hand with somebody who has separated this 'spot' from the rest of the 'eye'. And this concept ('blind spot') seems to require at least a second person, already able to utter 'blind spot', pointing towards a specific structure –forming it as a meaningful 'spot'. The realistic idea that there are 'blind spots' out there that we merely 'label' using 'names' seems to go hand in hand with learning reading and writing, which is the precondition for taking 'eyes' out of their context, putting them on a piece of paper, the precondition for perceiving a 'blind spot' as a 'word', as well as the precondition for drawing lines between a 'word' and a 'blind spot'.

These linguistic domains, the domain of orality, meaning that we utter a sequence (without writing it down) and point at an object or touch it simultaneously and the domain of literacy, meaning that we write down 'words', like the words 'blind spot' (on a piece of paper, sand, engraved in stones, on the skin, etc.) and link it to a picture, tend to be intermingled. Reading through recent literature on language acquisition, we will constantly find the notion that children are 'labelling' their environment, labelling 'given forms' out there, as if they learn to attach 'name tags' to given objects/forms (e.g. Bloom 2000 p. 89ff).

This 'labelling idea' evokes, as already stated, numerous questions and carries a fundamental logical error. If a structure like a 'blind spot' does not introduce itself as such, stating, 'Hi, I am your blind spot', the knowledge of perceiving a blind spot as 'blind spot' must necessarily come from a different source than the so-called 'blind spot' out there. And the only possible source is we humans, who point towards aspects and state 'blind spot' –inventing the concept as well as forming the 'object', drawing differences between 'blind spot' and 'no blind spot'. As soon as this game has started, we perceive blind spots as 'blind spots' but if we forget our own game we might separate –later in development –the picture from the name. Or we might become linguists, raising the question of how 'names' and 'objects' are related, overlooking that we have formed any 'object' as 'object' as soon as we state 'object', overlooking that perceiving 'names' as separated from 'objects' is already a human construction –and so is the so-called 'relation' between 'sign' and 'object', as pictured in figure 1.

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Psychological sidestep

Piaget (1997) describes children as 'nominal realists', meaning that they do not separate between a 'name' and the 'object being named' until a certain age. The age of 'separation' between 'names' and 'objects' is, however, a matter of discussion (Bloom 2000 p. 178f). It would not be surprising if literacy played a critical role here. Literacy makes a 'word' appear as 'word', whereas on the level of spoken language a word is still 'invisible' and can therefore not be 'attached' to an object (how do you attach something that is not palpable?).

Deepthi Kamawar and Bruce D. Homer (1998) elaborate children's metalinguistic understanding of words and names as follows: 'The traditional view on this issue [the understanding of the concepts of 'word' and 'name', emphasizes Gaugusch] is that children begin as 'nominal realists'; that is, they believe that the name for an object is a part of the object being named. According to this view, it is only through general cognitive development that children become nominalists; that is, they come to see that the name is not part of the object, but a particular symbolic or semiotic entity. Recent research suggests that this is far from a linear or monodirectional process The results from this study (Homer et al. 1998) supported the view that there is not a direct and linear progression from infantile realism to nominalist thinking, and that literacy is an important factor in this process' (Jean Piaget Society 1998).

In other words, the idea (of most grown-ups, as well as Piaget) that 'names' do not 'form' benamed objects but are mere signifiers signifying 'given forms' seems to go hand in hand with perceiving 'names' as separated things. The precondition for perceiving 'names' out there is the possibility to 'place them' out there—using 'written language'.

The dualistic worldview separating a priori between 'names' and 'world' dates back to Plato. In the dialogue *Cratylus* he addresses the question of whether things have a proper name 'by nature' (Cratylus) or whether the proper names are a result of conventions (Hermogenes). It is, however, without question that there is a relation between 'objects' and 'names' and therefore the question of how they are connected is emerging. We are, on the contrary, concerned about why/how we separate between 'something' and the linguistic game/name 'something' at all.

We are not, therefore, producing a footnote to Plato here but are trying to show that there is a dualistic precondition in his writings. We are, at least in western philosophy, caught in our dualistic way of thinking, separating a priori between 'objects' and their 'names'—drawing/constructing 'links' and 'lines' between them.

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