

Linguistics, Semiotics, and Cognition

Some notes on the book “Signifier. Essai sur la mise en signification”

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1. General Structure of the Work

What is particularly striking about Robert Nicolai's new book is the extraordinary richness of its theoretical background. For, the analysis of the Author covers several research fields belonging both to "human" and "cognitive" sciences: from linguistics to ethnomethodology, from semiotics to sociology until experimental psychology and theoretical biology. In order to have some idea of such a disciplinary variety, it is sufficient to describe the general structure of the essay. It is divided into ten chapters, each of which is devoted to a particular subject. More precisely, chapter 1 (27-33) concerns processes of knowledge construction and its articulations in the theoretical framework of linguistic analysis. chapter 2 (35-53) deepens and extends the previous subject by discussing three different, but related, approaches to the description of the evolution of the languages. Chapters 3 and 4 (55-84) examine the epistemological role played by metaphors in the formal modelization of phenomena. Chapters Five and Six (89-116) focus on the relationship between *objects* and *points of view* in the process of scientific modelization with particular reference to the analysis of *interlinguistic contacts*. Chapters 7 and 8 (117-42) discuss respectively the form of some constraints on the process of knowledge construction and the modalities of perception of phenomena. Finally, chapters Nine and Ten (145-91) thematize the process of how meaning is produced (that is to say, *la mise en signification*) under several and distinct aspects. Furthermore, we remember an introductory chapter (9-22) and a conclusory one (193-209) which give a comprehensive account of the genealogy and the aims of the book.

2. Epistemology of natural languages: some issues

One of the pivotal topics of *Signifier* is the process of knowledge construction. As a linguist, the Author seeks to describe this process

by finding some significative examples within the framework of the evolution and the development of natural languages. From this point of view, the analysis devoted to the researches of outstanding scholars like William Croft (1956-), Salilokoko Mufwene (1947-) and Roger Lass (1937-) offers a stimulating repertoire of case studies. As we all know, each of these linguists, in their own way, examined the related issues of the *linguistic change* and the *dynamics of languages*. In particular, they analysed such theoretical matters by referring to biological models derived from the Darwinian theory of evolution. Therefore, they constitute a good empirical example by means of which to investigate some local (or *domain-specific*) aspects of the process of knowledge construction. As Nicolai observes:

Au cours de deux dernières décennies, plusieurs linguistes, tels, Roger Lass (1997) William Croft (2000) and Saliloko S. Mufwene (2001) se sont référés à ces modèles néo-darwiniens pour tenter de comprendre la dynamique des langues et du changement linguistique; c'est pourquoi la question de l'intérêt de leur généralisation, de leur transposition dans les domaines des langues et l'évaluation de la nature [...] de cette transposition s'est posée et continue à se poser.¹

As can be seen from this citation, the Author aims to discuss the epistemological value of these models with respect to its metaphorical import and its degree of adherence to the domain of linguistic knowledge. In this perspective, a more detailed assessment of these approaches could be useful to obtain further informations about the Author's theoretical biases. For this purpose, we will consider some theoretical concepts developed by the American linguist William Croft.

1 Cfr. NICOLAÏ 2017, 36-7.

3. Populations of utterances

As it is known, Croft is famous for having introduced a biology-inspired definition of natural language. According to it, every natural language can be viewed as a *multiform population* of utterances and, in turn, every utterance can be considered as the *trace* of verbal interactions between speakers and listeners: «a *Language is the population of utterances in a speech community*».² Basing on these minimal assumptions, Nicolai gives us an exemplary demonstration of how to evaluate the epistemological content of the Croftian point of view. More specifically, he provides a simple and elegant analytical strategy as a means to describe this point of view as a particular case of a process of knowledge construction. Moreover, he highlights the theoretical novelties that such a process presents and the theoretical limits that bound it.

3.1 Analogies

With regard to the first point, the French linguist observes that the Croftian definition relies on a network of concepts which present strong analogies with the theoretical apparatus underlying the biology of DNA. In this respect, he stresses three fundamental aspects of such analogies. The first one concerns the concept of «population». It is a biological concept that allows to define natural languages in an anti-essentialist way. In other words, thinking natural languages in terms of populations of utterances implies a *sexual* vision of linguistic organisms:

Développant sa *Theory of Utterance Selection* [...] Croft se démarque d'une définition essentialiste qui se fonderait sur la notion traditionnelle de phrase. *L'interaction communicative* entre locuteurs et auditeurs entre la communauté de discours est 'sexuelle': les langues et leur locuteurs forment des

2 Cfr. CROFT 2000, 26, in NICOLAÏ 2017, 38.

populations au sens biologique.³

The second aspect concerns the possibility to see every utterance as a kind of biological molecule: «Les énoncés auxquels Croft fait appel [...] sont les équivalents des molécules ADN en biologie».⁴ The heuristic value of this analogy consists in a specific empirical intuition: utterances are equivalent to DNA molecules in the sense that they are concrete entities “anchored” in the dialogical behaviour of speakers and listeners:

Un énoncé est ainsi défini comme 'une occurrence actuelle particulière produite par un comportement humain dans l'interaction communicationnelle (c'est donc une chaîne phonique) telle qu'elle est prononcée [...] et pragmatiquement interprétée dans son contexte'.⁵

Finally, the third aspect regards the elementary unities of which utterances and DNA molecules are respectively composed. If the DNA molecules are made of sequences of genes, every utterance will be made of sequences of *linguems*. Furthermore, the analogy between genes and *linguems* will rely on three complementary facts: (1) *linguems* and genes play the role of “building-blocks” in the respective domains of human language and DNA biology; (2) they are respectively potential sources of utterances and of DNA molecules; (3) they are respectively the replicable material of utterances and of DNA molecules:

Ceci étant, on sait que la molécule ADN est composée par une séquence de gènes. L'énoncé, lui, sera donc composé d'une séquence de *linguèmes*. Ainsi un linguème est une unité de la structure linguistique incluse dans un énoncé particulier. Comme un gène, il peut être hérité à travers une réplication: le

3 Cfr. NICOLAI 2017, 38.

4 Cfr. NICOLAI 2017, 38.

5 Cfr. NICOLAI 2017, 38-9.

linguème est alors l'unité qui se réplique.⁶

Although the Nicolai's analysis covers a more extended range of theoretical data, the ones which are here discussed are sufficiently rich to allow for the second step of the analytical strategy of the Author.

3.2 *Metaphorical Modelization*

This step permits to appreciate the epistemological significance of the Croftian point of view, and consequently the theoretical deepness of the Nicolai's perspective. In this regard, it's important to notice that the Author divides his survey into two conceptual parts. The first one is devoted to the elaboration of a critical account of of the Croftian background. The second one seeks to justify the theoretical framework within which Croft elaborates his approach to the human language activity. What one obtains from this combination of critical and justificatory "moves" is a vivid picture of a process of knowledge construction in linguistics. Put in more concrete terms, this double theoretical move allows to get at least two results. On the one hand, it reveals a possible limit of the Croftian approach, and more generally of all neo-darwinian linguistics. That is to say, the fact that they aren't a real theoretical novelty in the study of the so-called *linguistic change*. On the other hand, it shows how it is possible to find in these programs several theoretical paths toward an innovative understanding of some aspects of human language activity. The interplay between social choices of locutors and linguistic usages, the phenomena of interlinguistic hybridization or the metaphorical role played by some biological models in the context of linguistic analysis are just some of such aspects. In conclusion, by means of a detailed analysis of research program like the Croftian linguistics, Nicolai provides a useful and original account of a study case of knowledge construction.

6 Cfr. NICOLAI 2017, 39.

4. Conclusions

Naturally, the linguistic issues represent just a portion of the topics treated by the Author in his comprehensive and original survey. Through a more detailed analysis of the theoretical architecture of the book, we could provide a wide-ranging description of many other subjects. From this point of view, we wish to say that the reader of *Signifier* will find a variety of references to relevant topics of the semiotic analysis and of the cognitive one. Of course, processes of knowledge construction remain the thematic center of the book, but it is necessary to remember how this topic is investigated under different aspects. Notions like “border” (*frontière*), “point of view”, “formal model” or “semiotic dynamics” offer several theoretical accesses to such processes. As the reader will notice, the book allows to connect these notions in order to deepen the logic underlying the genesis of these processes. And this is a good reason to read it.

References

- CROFT, W. 2000. *Explaining Language Change. An evolutionary Approach*. London: Longman Linguistic Library.
- NICOLAI, R. 2017. *Signifier. Essai sur la mise en signification*. Paris: ENS éditions.