

Words to Life

The semiotic quest of Bogdan Bogdanov (1940-2016)

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Let me start with a clarification: the hero of this text had not only hated being labeled, but used to think that he had been deliberately fighting against labels. For Bogdan Bogdanov, the late founder of New Bulgarian University, the greatest insult was being classified in a definite way. He was an intellectual, a classical philologist, a translator, an ambassador, an university manager, an essayist, a linguistic philosopher... and he had consciously been standing by his plurality. That's why when someone called him "professor Bogdanov" or "the philosopher Bogdan Bogdanov", he usually looked ironically at his company and immediately began to protest that in real life there are many professors who are not professors at all, and that before being an academic discipline, philosophy is a natural condition of human speech. "A clever dilettante": this was the only designation that Bogdanov had given to himself and had never rejected when used by others [1].

Such a person I dare to call in this text a semiotician. For he was, on the first place, the main inspirator behind the annual Early Fall Schools of Semiotics in Sozopol (since 1995) and the Southeast European Center for Semiotic Studies in New Bulgarian University (established in 1998). On the second place, since the end of 90's he had been writing more on more on problems of analytical philosophy and semiotics. And last but not least, in the last decade of his life he had created a genuine linguistic philosophy whose basic notion is that signs, and especially verbal signs, not only reflect reality, but in certain way make it. While in the late 90's and early 2000's his essays on semiotics were a commentary on theories created by others – see his books *Change in Life and Text* (1998), *Europe: Understood and Made* (2001), and *Alone and Together* (2005) [2], – the last two books of essays he wrote, *Text, Speaking and Understanding* (2014) and *Words, Meanings, Concepts and Things* (2016), might be regarded as a pioneering journey back to the origins of semiotics.

Origins of semiotics? They are traced back to the 5th and 4th century BC when the Stoics, exploring questions of logic, elaborated the first theory of sign. What we know about it comes mostly from secondary sources, but it is good enough to conclude that Stoic philosophers regarded the study of signification as a basic part of real philosophical knowledge. According to Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus, Stoics considered the sign a constellation of three elements: the sound aspect of a word, in Greek *tò semaiñon* (lit. "the signifying" or "signifier"); the ostensible or unostensible object we are talking about: *tò tyghánon* (lit. "the thing that happens to be", "the thing as it is in this moment"); and the meaning of the object we are talking about: *tò semainómenon* (lit. "the signified") or more frequently *tò lektón* (lit.

“what is said” or “what might or must be said”) [3]. Obviously, the Stoics identified the sign with the verbal sign and the act of signification with speech.

The basis on which Stoics developed their logic, was the notion of *lektón*, of what might or must be said about the meaning of any object of speech [4]. A rational idea of what is spoken, *lektón* is functioning as a kind of mental link between reality and verbal sounds. But unlike the object and the sound aspect of the word which exist independently of the subject who speaks, what Stoics used to call *lektón* exists only in the heads of those who speak the same language: barbarians, says one of the Stoics, certainly hear our words but don't understand them, because they don't know the *lektón*.

This is the original premise of Stoic logic: in spite of the fact that it doesn't exist objectively and ostensibly, *lektón* is a product of convention (at least for those who speak the same language at certain period) and organized by semantic laws that, in turn, might be studied and formally described. The logic of the Stoics is a highly elaborated scheme of the expressions and basic forms of sentences that one can or cannot say about a thing. This is the first theory of logic that investigates the meaning not in respect of the sound aspect of the words, nor in respect of the nature of things and thoughts, but in respect of speech. Without the Stoic theory of *lektón*, the intellectual space between Plato's *Cratylus* and Aristotle's *Organon* most probably would stay empty.

I recall this theory, because one of the crucial ideas of Bogdan Bogdanov's linguistic philosophy is that meaning must be understood as different from both the object of signification, and the meaning of the words we use to refer to it. Meaning, insisted Bogdanov, is in the objects within certain qualities and opportunities; it is in the words as well, in their etymological structures and in certain associations of sounds and objective qualities; but it is mostly in speech, being a sort of verbal and mental image of the object, actualized and modified during the process of referring and denoting [5]. This image looks so similar to the object, that we are usually unable to make a clear distinction between what the object is in reality (if it really exists), and its actual meaning in speech. Bogdanov has called this duplicate of the object „a verbal correlate“, „a verbal double“ and „a verbal thing“ [6].

The verbal correlate, according to Bogdanov, is a product of the way the speech functions. Whatever we say, we do two things: replace a real or potential object with a word (this is called reference), and clarify this word by identifying it with another word (this is called predication) [7]. As a result, the meaning of any word is always dynamic in speech, and, paradoxically, the more we try to fix it precisely, adding more and more words, the bigger and more complex becomes the verbal image of the object we are talking about. That's why when we talk about unostensible objects like love, happiness or justice, whose meaning cannot be deduced neither from the inner structure of the object, nor from its functions, what we do is constructing verbal correlates of these objects which serve us in speech as real objects that exist ostensibly beyond speech. This is what we call reification: making the sense of an abstract idea so fixed and concrete, that it is no longer regarded as an idea, but as a thing [8].

But let's go back to the Stoics and ask what is the difference between their *lektón* and Bogdanov's verbal correlate? A scholar of Hellenistic literature and devoted translator of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, Bogdan Bogdanov has been familiar with the Stoic idea of the sign and most probably influenced by it: if we read carefully his writings on semiotics, we will find that they are in almost perfect consent with the logic of the Stoics. But while the

Stoic philosophers were interested mainly in the semantic aspects of meaning, that is how we talk properly about any given object of signification, Bogdan Bogdanov has been more interested in the effect of the approach and mismatch between the real object and its verbal image. When we talk about something, he insists, we are always referring to it as both what it is in reality, and what it might or must be in an ideal situation [9].

However, according to Bogdanov, the discrepancy between the verbal image of the object and the object itself should not be regarded as weakness or defect of speech, but as one of its basic characteristics. Owing to our sensibility of the fact that what we say is never exactly the same as what the object of speech is in reality, we are able to experience verbally the need and opportunity to change life. This is what Bogdan Bogdanov has called “work” or “praxis” of speech: when we realize that the word or phrase we have used to replace an object are not enough to express it, the speech immediately takes us to another word and eventually to another object, then to another one, and then to another one, and so on, until we either stop our talking in what we assume to be true for the object, that is a matching between its meaning and its real qualities, or “intervene” in reality and change the object after the verbal image we have created. Although not every speech act results in real act of change, every speech act participates in our understanding of the world as open to change.

This is an old idea: the idea that words can lead to a change of reality. It is underlined for the first time in Plato’s *Gorgias* when Socrates challenges the sophistic definition of rhetoric as *peithous demiorgós*, that is “master of conviction”. In 1955, a university cycle of lectures, published few years later in the book *How to Do Things with Words*, made British philosopher of language John Austin world famous with his theory of performatives: a certain type of utterances that cause a real change in life (e.g. “I name this ship *Queen Elisabeth*”). What Bogdan Bogdanov has added, on one hand, to Platonic tradition which assumes that speech cannot change truth but only human attitudes to it, and, on the other hand, to analytical tradition influenced by Austin, which narrows the speech-acts to certain situations, is that when we talk about something, whatever the situation, we always change the meaning of what we talk about, and, doing that, trace our way to change in life. The truth, says Bogdanov, is not only a correspondance of what is said to what a thing of reality is, but a process of change of both meaning and thing.

But the discrepancy between meaning and real qualities of an object serves yet another universal need of human existence. Owing to verbal images created in speech, we always have at hand something like a small model of the world as if a place ideally made for us. And here is the third function of speech, as Bogdanov has formulated it: along with referring to the world and predicating certain qualities upon its elements, the speech makes the world seem like a wholeness organized by certain principles. These principles – good and evil, right and wrong, true and false, etc. – are the reason why we basically see the world not as something alien to us, something that we cannot understand and live in, but as something that is our home. In linguistic philosophy they are usually called universals or paradigms [10].

Every time we speak, we are mixing the real thing with its verbal duplicate, the world with our internal model for it, and finally, the real qualities of the object we are talking about, with the cognitive paradigms that make us capable to know anything. “Then, what is the actual subject of our talk: the real things or the paradigms that we believe in?”, Bogdan Bogdanov used to ask. Real science, he reminded, following an idea of Aristotle, is not only knowing the

general and specific characteristic of things, but questioning both the existence of the thing and the existence of the principles that make you think about it. If you don't ask constantly about the existence of the cognitive paradigms, you are not making science, but spreading ideology.

That's why Bogdan Bogdanov usually began his texts and seminars with the question "How does exist the topic we are going to talk about?". Ostensibly like chair, or unostensibly like justice? And where are the principles that make us believe that chair is a piece of furniture, and justice is a basic human virtue? Where are they? Somehow in the chair and in the virtue themselves, or somehow in the definitions of chair and virtue? Are principles only in words, as some medieval nominalists thought, or somewhere in reality, as their opponents, the realists, thought? Tuned to compromise in everything, Bogdan Bogdanov used to answer that he is a nominalist who respects realism. The principles, he says, are both in things, as their own particular qualities that are independent from speech, and in talking about these things, as a tendency to integrate particular qualities in universal classes [11].

Compromise is a frequent word in Bogdan Bogdanov's philosophy. He believed that it is not only personal quality, but a general quality of our world in which everything is always accomplished according to a combination of principles. And if the world is a result of compromising and combining principles, our attitude to it, he insisted, should be also a compromise. Hence, his idea that the separation of scientific logic from common language – that is a separation of one of the forms of speech at the cost of others – is not an advantage, but a loss for knowledge. According to Bogdanov, even the most complicated logic, if used alone, is not capable of understanding this basic feature of world and man: the power of compromise [12]. As far as he believed that man can know his world, Bogdanov believed that real knowledge is not knowledge of pure forms, but fusion.

This belief led him to outline in his last book the need for another logic. He called it "modular" after the Latin word *modus*, meaning "way," "measure," "compromise," "adjustment", and "combining" [13]. He didn't have time to develop this logic into a formal method, but he has pointed out its basic parts: understanding the relationship between reference and predication in the act of speaking; analyzing the cognitive paradigms in respect of the existence of the analyzed object; studying the meanings of the concepts used in speaking; understanding the context in which one says something; monitoring the subjective perspective of the analysis and how it changes during its course; monitoring the external change in relation to the dynamics of perspective, etc.

I said that this logic remained undeveloped as a scientific method, but I'm sure that it was developed by Bogdanov as a practice. If one wants to see what it meant for him the word "modular", one can see the form of his texts and the other works of his life. For Bogdan Bogdanov was a tireless master of combination. He was combining theories – in his semiotic philosophy one can find anything from the logic of the Stoics to the pragmatism of Charles S. Pierce; he was combining literary genres – the home of his philosophy is neither the classical monograph, nor the scientific paper, but a living hybrid he has created from elements of Aristotelian tractate, French post-structuralist essay and Stoic diatribe; he was combining professions – being a classical philologist specialized in the field of ancient Greek literature, and at the same time a university manager who takes care of almost everything in his university; and, last but not least, he was combining people – in teams, in workshops and

seminars, in companies of friends. The strange wisdom of this short and modest man was the wisdom to combine.

But besides that, Bogdanov was constantly arguing with named and unnamed authorities, with popular attitudes, with clichés, and most often, with concepts. He believed that concepts are the biggest enemy of freedom and life, because once turned into a concept, the life of meaning stops and as a result the possibility for change of life also stops. We need concepts for our practical living, but we don't need them for life: this credo summarizes Bogdanov's idea about concepts. His most inspired essays of recent years, dedicated on difference between human and animal, on common features of spiritual and biological explanations, on basis of government, etc., were above all an attempt at bringing back to life certain concepts whose meaning we have ceased to question. Even during his last illness, he was joking that his final book will be given the title *Against Concepts*.

Why was he so vehement about concepts? I suggest, because at some point of his life he had embraced the idea that what we do in speaking, resembles the most what we do in life. The way speech stops in a phrase, combines it with other and continues in third, was for Bogdanov a great image of the course that happens in the universe: the way life goes in one existence, combines with other and continues in third. For him the speech and life share the same reality: a reality of endless combination and change. So if you want to understand what is done in speech, he says, you should see how functions change in life, and vice versa – if you want to study life, you should study change in words. Bogdan Bogdanov has considered semiotics not an academic discipline, but an existential journey.

On his unwritten book has remained another title... *The Course*.

Notes:

[1] See the conclusion of his book from 1992 *Ancient Greek Literature*.

[2] They are published in Bulgarian. One can find some of his essays translated in English in: Bogdan Bogdanov, *Reading and its Functioning. From Ancient Greek Literature to Any One World*, tr. by D. Yankova, E. Rafi, Berlin: OEZ Verlag, 2010; in Spanish: Bogdan Bogdanov, *Modelos de Realidad. Desde la lectura de los clásicos*, trad. de V. Sirákova, S. Míchev, Lugo: Axac, 2010; in French: Bogdan Bogdanov, *Penser et construire l'Europe*, trad. par T. Krasteva, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015.

[3] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, VII.62 et sqq.; Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, VIII.11 et sqq. *Institutio logica* of Galen is also influenced by the Stoic idea of signs.

[4] In the preface to his translation of Epictetus' *Discourses*, Bogdanov says about *lektón*: "this is what you can say. It makes possible human thought and speech" (Epictetus, *Discourses* [in Bulgarian], Plovdiv: Janet 45, 2016, 14); see also in his last book *Words, Meanings, Concepts and Things* [in Bulgarian], Sofia: NBU, 2016, 11-12.

[5] *Words, Meanings ...*, op. cit., 13 et sqq.

[6] Bogdan Bogdanov, *Text, Speaking and Understanding* [in Bulgarian], Plovdiv: Janet 45, 2014, 70 et sqq.; 135 et sqq.

[7] *Text, Speaking ...*, op. cit., 67 et sqq.; *Words, Meanings ...*, op. cit., 24 et sqq.

[8] *Words, Meanings ...*, op. cit., 50 et sqq.; 112 et sqq.

[9] *Ibid.*, 27 et sqq.

[10] *Ibid.*, 72 et sqq.

[11] *Ibid.*, 114 et sqq.

[12] For what he considered “better discourse” see *Text, Speaking...*, op. cit., 65 et sqq.

[13] *Words, Meanings ...*, op. cit., 90 et sqq.