

FROM PERCEPTION TO LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER ADDRESSES CONCEPTS SUCH AS PERCEPTION, LANGUAGE, SYNESTHETIC PERCEPTION FROM THE COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE. IT IS DIVIDED INTO THREE CHAPTERS. IN THE FIRST CHAPTER ATTEMPTS ARE MADE TO CLARIFY THE BASIC CONCEPT OF PERCEPTION FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND COGNITIVE POINT OF VIEW. CHAPTER TWO EXPLORES THE RELATION BETWEEN LANGUAGE/PERCEPTION AND PRESENTS THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PERCEPTUAL FIELD. CHAPTER THREE DEALS WITH THE STUDY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS SYNESTHETIC PERCEPTION SHARES WITH ORDINARY OR VERIDICAL PERCEPTION. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE DOMAIN OF PERCEPTION HAS GIVEN US THE OPPORTUNITY TO HIGHLIGHT ITS CLOSE RELATION TO CONCEPTS SUCH AS LANGUAGE, COGNITION, CONSCIOUSNESS AND SYNESTHESIA.

KEY WORDS: PERCEPTION, LANGUAGE, SYNESTHESIA, COGNITIVE GRAMMAR.

The term *perception* etymologically derives from the Latin ‘*perception-, perceptio*’, which means "receiving, collecting, action of taking possession, apprehension with the mind or senses." [1] Perception is a particular cognitive process through which animated entities, generally human, are affected by external stimuli providing them with information on the exterior world: "... one must mention an initial stimulus coming from the external world and causing some part of the body to send a message to the owner of that body, thereby causing him to have some information about the part of world which acted as the initial stimulus" [2].

1. The concept of perception

Fields such as psychology, philosophy, literature and cognitive linguistics deal with the concept of perception in specific ways. One of the aspects studied is the manner in which the human brain transforms the disordered sensorial images into a conscious perception of the world. When interpreting the stimuli registered by the senses, knowledge and previous experiences intervene. Perception is more rigorously defined as the interaction between the reception of data, innate principles and previous knowledge. This results in that the perception act does not consist of a simple reproduction of the external stimuli, but also in implying an active process of data organization. "The quality of our perceptual experience depends only in part on the stimuli that impinge on our sense organs and the signals directly induced by these stimuli. Equally important is the structure

imposed on these peripheral events at more central levels of processing in accordance with current expectations and the available inventory of perceptive and interpretive routines. Perception is not a passive phenomenon, but an active process that is reasonably regarded as a kind of problem solving activity.”[3]

Perception consists of the multitude of mechanisms allowing humans to become aware of the surrounding world, based on information from the subject. It designates the totality of information-taking operations: the perceptual system transforms stimuli into a specific sensory modality. We need time to process the sensory data especially when someone tells us something we were not really paying attention to. Similarly to sounds we hear, sometimes not significant enough and therefore untreated, these words are only transformed into information the moment we ask somebody to repeat them. The words, we suddenly become interested in, are immediately comprehended so no repetition is required.

Other questions concerning perception, explored from Aristotle to nowadays, refer to the origins of perception (*Where and how do perceptive processes occur?*), the object of our perception (*What do I perceive?*) and the inherent properties of our perception (*Is my perception reliable? To what extent are my perceptions personal? Are the characteristics of my perception universal?*). For instance, Vendler [4] considers perception as belonging to the class of “philosophically notorious specimens” and summarizes the enigma of perception in “*What happens when we perceive, and what is it that makes it happen?* Indeed, the language translation of our perception (*How can we describe our perceptions?*) is at the same time an object of philosophical and linguistic study.

2. The relationship between perception and language

The correlation between perception and language represents the starting point for an important number of linguistic studies. “The impression that perception and language are closely related may stem from a feeling that people use language primarily to talk about the world they perceive” [5] Regarding the same aspect, Franckel and Lebaud [6] wonder if the phenomenology of the perception of a given culture is affected by the way perception verbs function in the corresponding language or if, on the contrary, the linguistic analysis is overdetermined by the philosophical culture of perception.

This relationship is particularly exploited by cognitive linguists who undertook a complex reconfiguration of the links between language, perception and action. An essential aspect is to understand how language applies to the perceptual reality by means of categorization and by actively structuring it, and how this structure is essentially coupled to action. The inquiry of the linguistic principles must be envisaged only in relation to the other cognitive faculties but also any reference to the language components (semantics, syntax, phonology) should take into consideration all the three levels concomitantly.

The uses of the verb ‘see’ in the sentences ‘*I see the sky*’ and ‘*I see what you mean*’ express, according to Sweester [7], two domains that seem to be unrelated at first sight: perception and cognition. Cognitive grammar puts forward an explanation for the connection between them “on the basis of our conceptual organisation. We perceive and understand these two processes as related. On the basis of our experience as human beings, we see similarities between vision and knowledge, and it is because of these similarities that we conceptualise them as related concepts. For cognitive linguists, language is not structured arbitrarily. It is motivated and grounded more or less directly in experience, in our bodily, physical, social, and cultural experiences” [8]

It has always been rather difficult to establish the relationship between language and the experience of reality. Linguists such as Sapir [9] and Whorf [10] have illustrated the close connection between the way we communicate and perceive [11]. Language in its most elementary functions categorizes objects of perception, induces semantic constraints and creates a hierarchisation of human beings at the syntactic level. Our interaction with nature takes place according to the patterns of our native language. In other words, the categories or types isolated from the world of phenomena are not immediately offered to the observer's perception as they really are. On the contrary, the world presents itself to us like a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions that our mind must firstly organise mainly through the assimilated linguistic system. We perform a sort of methodical dissection and organise it into concepts whose meanings are established according to a convention determining our worldview – convention recognised by the linguistic community we belong to and codified similarly to the patterns of our language. It is obviously a non-formulated convention, of an implicit character, but it constitutes an absolute obligation.

The depiction of the way the perception verbs function goes beyond the sphere of a simple linguistic inquiry by taking into account the experience parameter as well. The aim is not to inaugurate a discussion on whether words precede things or the other way round. The main objective is to investigate in what way the linguistic analysis can illuminate the multiple facets of the perceptive experience.

The semiotician and structural linguist Benveniste [12] states that human language allows us *to say everything* as the main difference from the form of animal communication. However, this expression opposes the cognitive theories given that the meaning of our expressions is in strong connection with our experiences and extra-linguistic faculties. Any dissociation between perceptive and language acts seems, from a certain point a view, artificial and questionable. Therefore, it is artificial and restrictive to radically dissociate vision and hearing from linguistic forms employed to express what we see and hear.

Merleau-Ponty [13], a French phenomenological philosopher, whose work in the field of phenomenology established some connections with the cognitive science, defines perception as the background of experience which guides every conscious action. The world is a field for perception and human consciousness assigns meaning to the world. We cannot separate ourselves from our perceptions of the world. The essential element in the perception that we have of the other is language. When discussing, a link is created between speakers. Each responding to the intervention of the other, their ideas “fit” together one into another and form a whole, being somehow in harmony. Hence, dialogue is a kind of exchange because each answer leads the other to “riposte”, think and reply. Therefore, we can perceive, know someone by talking to him via language. Merleau-Ponty says that thought precedes speech, in that speech is a way of expressing thought. Thoughts which cannot be expressed are temporarily unconscious while those that can be expressed become conscious.

Speech can express the thoughts of the person who is speaking, and the listener can receive thoughts from the sounds of the spoken words. Thoughts may exist through speech, and speech may be the external existence of thought. But speech is not merely the expression of thought, because speech may have a power of signification of its own.

Language is a system of autonomous signs allowing not only for the communication between humans but also for the conversion of disordered appearances into a coherent and meaningful system.

The meaning is present in our most immediate experience because it is obvious that perceiving means seizing significant units. Merleau-Ponty adds that *meaning is perceived* similarly to the way the eye or ear perceives a form in the space. The parallel is very close between grasping the meaning of a sentence which sums up its elements in a structure and the perception of an object in space, linked to a meaning that establishes an interdependence between the elements of the structure. Before being formalized within the language or translated into statements, perception is structured like a language because it associates to the eye, ear, skin, etc. a set of signs in the signifying unity of a form, as words are associated with an utterance. The same functions are present when hearing a song, an utterance or a noise made by a vehicle. The double meaning of the verb ‘hear’ is articulated with the same type of psychic activity. Recognizing a noise is similar to recognizing the meaning of an utterance. The audition of signifiers is directly and immediately translated into the comprehension of the utterance.

Talking is the first act of individuals in the sense that they attempt, via signs, to change the world they find themselves to belong to. But this world is not a quiet environment. It is itself already established, that is to say full of words, already said, similarly to an expressive landscape in which one must find his place. Therefore, words are always already there even before people learn how to talk, meaning that their consciousness emerges in a world where meaning is firstly represented by the others’ speech. Their word is never the first word, and, therefore, when they learn how to talk, in reality they learn how to insinuate themselves in the word of another. Every word is an answer, just as a gesture is, in fact, always directed toward the other as the objective aimed by his intention. Meaning brings life to the word as the world animates the body through a muted presence that awakens its intentions.

The eye sees a structure right away and immediately and unconsciously, the world takes shape, it moves at the same time as the body, it does not cease to enrich itself as the eyes oscillate. The perceiver is compared at any point to the speaker. It is a being who seizes the organized structures having a role in the appearance of the signification units. Just as speaking consists of entering in this speech-organizing function which dynamically associates signs, perceiving consists of entering in this speech-organizing function which synergizes the elements in a structure. This definition shows that perception ceases being a simple mental reproduction of the surrounding environment and introduces us on the basis of our conscious body in the thickness of the world, similarly to the way language introduces us from our speaking body to the meaning operations.

Despite its global character, perception involves different levels of integration. In order to refer to the complexity of what it seems to be a simple and indecomposable act, all interactive stratifications of this simplicity must be described.

Perception in its most ordinary form is implicitly the product of a sensorial synthesis. Nevertheless, this synergy hidden in the simplicity of the result is even the basis of the perceptive act. This sensorial synergy is the foundation of the unity of what we perceive but it is doubled by another synthesis, the interaction of the aims or functions of consciousness.

The most ordinary act of perception leads to a node of relationships that presupposes the action of memory, imagination, desire and sometimes that of reasoning as well. Perception combines both a recall of memories and an imaginative projection. Just as the sensorial activities and intentionality of consciousness unify within perception, the time dimensions apparently separated and contradictory from an abstract point of view interact

within the perceptive act. The present cannot be constructed without relying on a past and future that emerge within it and allow the object to reveal itself in its hidden faces.

3. Synesthetic perception

It frequently happens that people receive signals and information from more than one sense and they have to combine them in order to comprehend objects and various other aspects of their lives.

This situation is known under the name of synesthesia - the perceptive experience related to a specific sense may be determined by stimuli and information characteristic of another sensory modality [14] [15]. For instance, we can speak of synaesthesia in some learning activities: children acquire the fundamental colours based on a series of sounds and smells or letters and numbers by means of association with a certain colour.

We are not interested in the analysis of the phenomenon of synesthesia in relation to hallucinations or as an abnormality as most linguists have been, but as a combination of signals from different sensory modalities and the characteristics it shares with ordinary or veridical perception.

Sagiv, Ilbeigi and Ben-Tal [16] have highlighted the close connection between sensory modalities such as vision and touch. This visuo-tactile interaction is obvious when we feel, to some extent, at the sight of somebody's facial expression, that person's pain or happiness. When a person close to us is in pain, certain visual signals (facial expression) and auditory signals (sounds) coming from that person may also reach the field of tactile sensations. This is a case of multisensory integration denoting visual, auditory and tactile interaction with a more significant role in the comprehension of objects and events from the surrounding world than information extracted from one sensory modality only.

Even though the above remarks clearly suggest that the relationship of synesthesia and ordinary perception is a very interesting one to observe as well as beneficial for the comprehension of perception in general, space limitations prevent us from going more in-depth.

The phenomenological and linguistic analysis of the domain of perception especially in relation to concepts such as language, cognition, consciousness and synesthesia seems still open to investigation due to the multitude of aspects to explore, continuing to attract various scholars.

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