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# SOME REMARKS ON THE MEDIEVAL SEMANTICS

The term *semantics* is rather associated with the contemporary analytical philosophy, mainly with the ideas developed by Gottlob Frege and Alonzo Church. It is not associated with the Middle Ages, especially that this term comes from XIX-century. However, there is a long and rich tradition of contemporary investigation concerning this aspect of the medieval philosophy, which is accompanied with the problems of the speech, signs, siginification, properties of terms, representation and the role of the symbol in the medieval everyday life[1]. Despite the lack of the definition of the term *semantics* in the secondary literature, we could understand this term as it is to refer the group of the issues mentioned above.

Semantics in the Middle Ages is not precisely defined discipline, but it seems to be rather the complex of the reflections on the concept of the linguistic sign, its functions and classifications. Semantic reflection mainly emerged out from the ancient ideas concerning the problems of language and grammar.

Let us make a suggestion, that the theory of properties of terms was the basis of the medieval semantics. Among the various properties, signification (*significatio*) was the most important property of terms, which were distinguished by the medievals. Thus, in this article, I would like to examine the basic semantic problems considered by the medieval authors, but mainly, I shall focus on the concept of signification. It seems, that

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[1] See bibliography.

solutions of semantic problems, which were offered by scholars, lead to the division of the medieval semantics tradition into the two traditions, namely *via antiqua* and *via moderna* semantics. So, I would like to point out these main directions of the development of the semantic in the Middle Ages.

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We could suppose that semantics has developed in the Middle Ages for the following reasons: firstly, as Stephan Meier-Oeser claims, *scholastic learning is essentially a commentary tradition*[2]. Medievals attached great value to the texts. Therefore, while scholars were discussing and commenting texts, they came across such hermeneutical problems like understanding or interpretation. Also, as Egbert P. Bos claims, commentary tradition might explain medievals's interest in the signification of terms and of propositions constituted by those terms[3]. Secondly, the plain scholastic method could be the reason of the development of the medieval semantics. Medieval thinkers put great effort into the conceptual analysis of the basic terms which appeared in the commented texts. Among these terms there could be found such semantic terms like *signum, significare* and *repraesentatio*. So, whenever scholars encountered these terms, they felt obliged to give an explicit account of these concepts[4].

It seems, that these two reasons resulted in the further development of the semantics in the Middle Ages. In the XIII century, when the first European universities have been set down, semantics took place in the framework of scholastic disciplines. The semantic issues were mainly investigated on the Faculty of Arts (*Artium*), in the realm of the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric and logic). Especially logic seemed to be the area within the semantic questions were widely discussed. If we studied the problems which were discussed within the logic, most of them would seem to be the problems of semantics[5].

J. Pinborg points out that there were many debates among the scholars concerning the difference and similarity of the subject of the *trivium* disciplines[6]. The most important conclusion of these debates was to indicate the sameness of the object of these disciplines. Scholars agreed that the language in the aspect of its semantic properties is the proper object of all disciplines embraced by *trivium* course. This conclusion has given rise to the unification of the *trivium* and it was quite important for the further development of the semantic reflection.

Three sources could be found in order to point out the basis of the development of the semantics in the Middle Ages, i.e., Augustinian theory of signs, grammatical works of Priscianus and Aristotelian semantic ideas presented in *Peri hermeneias*. Let us consider all these sources. Firstly, it seems that Augustinian considerations of the sign became fundemental to the development of the medieval semantics. We could come across two definitions of the concept of the sign in the writings of Augustine: *Signum est*

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[2] Meier-Oeser, 2003.
[3] Bos, 1997, p. 71.
[4] Meier-Oeser, 2003.
[5] Bochenski, 1993, p. 26.
[6] Pinborg, 1962, pp. 23-26.

*quod et se ipsum sensui et praeter se aliquid animo ostendit*[7] and (...) s*ignum est enim res praeter speciem, quam ingerit sensibus, aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire*[8]. The common aspect of these two definitions is that they both indicate mediation of the thought (*anima* or *cogitatio*) between sign and something what is signified by the sign. Oeser-Meier explains, that for Augustine: *a sign is always a sign* of *something* to *some mind*[9]. These two definitions were essential to the later development of the idea of triadic relation between language, thought and reality. Also, this concept of the sign provides the basis of the Augustinian theory of language. As Augustine writes: *Nec nulla causa est nobis significandi id est signi dandi, nisi ad depromendum et traiciendum in alterius animum id, quod animo gerit, qui signum dat*[10]. Augustin claims that there is no other reason for signifiying (that is giving the signs - *signi dandi*), except to express and bring to the other man's mind (*alterius animum*) what the sign-giver has in his own mind. So, we could conclude that the main role of the language (linguistic signs) in the conception of Augustine is the communicative role of the language. In his *De magistro*, Augustine confirms this interpretation. Let us notice, that this work concerns the problem of the teaching, communication and dialogue. The concept of the sign is the crucial concept used by Augustine in the explanation of all these events. Augustine claims that in order to communicate, i.e., in order to express thoughts, we are using the words which function as the signs. What is more, there is *regula loquendi*, which means, that while we are speaking, our attention is focused on the signified things, rather than the signs. Thus, the whole process of teaching and gaining knowledge relies on the signs conveyance.

Secondly, reflection of the medieval authors was focused on the grammatical issues. This reflection revolves around the *Institutiones Grammaticae* by Priscianus[11], Latin grammarian and the Latin language teacher. In the early period of the medieval philosophy, scholars considered grammatical problems such as definions of various parts of speech (*partes orationis*), or concepets connected with the syntax, like *subiectum* and *praedicatum*[12]. Commentaries on the *Quaestiones Priscianum* became the introduction to the development of the *grammatica speculativa* in the XIII-century. On the other hand, in this period, scholars got acquainted with the *Analytica Posteriora* by Aristotle. This work has brought about the discussion about the nature and the subject of sciences. Grammarians took part in debates evoked by Aristotle's work. In result, they have worked out the idea, that the grammar can be the science. Moreover, the speech (*sermo*) in general, (that is, the speech abstracted from any particular language), is the object of the grammatical considerations as a science[13].

Thirdly, the main source of medieval theories of signs and language is the Boethius's translation and the commentary of the Aristotle's *Peri hermeneias*[14]. This translation was the only one Aristotle's work concerning the semantics available in the Middle Ages.

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[7] Augustine, 1857.
[8] Augustine, 1989, p. 50.
[9] Meier-Oeser, 2003.
[10] Augustine, 1989, p. 50.
[11] Priscianus, 1855.
[12] Pinborg, 1962, pp. 22-23.
[13] Pinborg, 1962, pp. 27-29.
[14] Boecjusz, 1887.

We could say, that the scholars in the early period of medieval philosophy perceive the Aristotle's semantics through the eyes of Boethius. Moreover, due to his works, Boethius has made some influential decisions concerning terminology.

Aristotelian and Augustinian semantic traditions and the ideas of the grammarians resulted in the establishment of the framework of the semantic questions and problems in the Middle Ages. Scholars emphasized that the linguistic units play the role of the signs. Terms like nouns or verbs are to function like the signs. In other words, terms have got the nature of the sign. Hence, there was deep need in the Middle Ages to examine the terms in the aspect of their semantic properties. The theory of properties of terms (*proprietates terminorum*) came to be the basis of the medievals' semantic theory.

The problem of the properties of terms was usually presented in the medievals's works entitled *De proprietates terminorum*. This type of writings embraces consideration of properties like signification, supposition, restriction, copulation, ampliation and appelation (*significatio, suppositio, copulatio, ampliatio, appelatio*)[15]. The *Introduction to logic*[16] by William Sherwood and the *Summulae Logicales*[17] by Peter of Spain were the most famous and the most often commented works concerning the problem of the properties of terms. However, medievals put the effort to consider two first properties, i.e., the signification and supposition. Read notices: *Signification corresponds most closely – though not exactly – to contemporary ideas of meaning or sense, so supposition corresponds in some ways to modern notions of reference, denotation and extension*[18]. Thus, following Read, we could suppose that the theory of signification was functioning as the theory of the meaning whereas the theory of the supposition seemed to be the theory of the reference.

The central and the most important among various properties of terms was the signification (*significatio*). It was due to the fact that the other properties of terms were dependent on the signification. Despite the great disagreement in the Middle Ages about what it is that terms signify (*significatum*), medieval authors commonly agree on the definition of the signification. One of such a definition is to be found in the works of Buridan: *For "to signify" is described as being "to establish understanding". Hence a word is said to signify that the understanding of which it establishes in us*[19]. The general idea is that when the words signify, they evoke understanding of the signified thing in us. Following Spade, we could say that the relation of signification in the medieval sense is the sort of causal relation, i.e., word signifies what it makes us think of[20]. Establishing understanding (*constituere intellectum*) in Buridan's definition might be interpreted as the inner, non-verbal act of understanding of the signified thing.

Definition of the signification (*constituere intellectum*) in this formulation, is to be found in various semantic works of medieval authors. However, c*onstituere intellectum* is not to be identified with possesing the concept of that what is signified. This definition can be understood as the intellectual grasping the form of the signified object. Buridan writes about the concepts, universals and the mental terms which are established within

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[15] Read, 2006.
[16] Sherwood, 1966.
[17] Peter of Spain, 1969.
[18] Read, 2006.
[19] Spade, 2002, p. 63.
[20] Spade, 2002, p. 63.

the signification. It could be said that all these expressions are concerning the same phenomenon, which is considered from the various points of view.

Aristotle's semantic idea presented in his *Peri hermeneias* was the main source of working the notion of signification out. The relevant passage follows: *Therefore, verbs spoken by themselves are names, and signify something. For the speaker halts his thinking and the listener pauses*[21]. It has to be remembered, that only few medieval philosophers spoke Greek, so most of them were acquainted with this fragment of Aristotle from the Boethius's translation. Boethius translated the greek word σήμάινέιν into *significare*. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Aristotle writes in this passage not only about the nouns, but also about the verbs[22]. It should be noted, that speculative grammarians considered *modi significandi*, i.e., the modes of signification, of the various parts of speech. Except for nouns, they developed the theories of the modes of signification of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and many others.

Many questions and problems have arisen around the problem of the *significatio*. One of these question concerned the problem of the *significans*, i.e., the problem of the language. Medievals have worked out the concept of the threefold division of the language. They distinguished written, spoken and mental language (*lingua mentalis*). Also in this case, Aristotle's below passage from the *Peri hermeneias* was the source of medievals's inspiration. The passage in the translation of Boethius follows: *Primum oportet consituere quid sit nomen et quid verbum (...) Sunt ergo ea quae sunt in voce earum quae sunt in anima passionum notae, et ea quae scribuntur eorum quae sunt in voce. Et quaemadmodum nec litterae omnibus eaedem, sic nec eaedem voces; quorum autem hae primorum notae, eadem omnibus passiones animae sunt, et quorum hae similitudines, res etiam eaedem*[23]. In this passage, Aristotle draws our attention on the two different relations. First of them concerns language and concepts. Aristotle claims that the terms (verbs and nouns) are the signs of the *passiones animae*. So, the terms are the signs of "movements in the soul", they signify concepts. Second relation concerns the written language and the speech. In this case, written terms are the signs of the spoken terms.

Aristotle's semantic ideas presented in the *De interpretatione* are also the source of inspiration for the concept of the *lingua mentalis* (the most elaborate idea of *lingua mentalis* is to be found in Ockham's works). Aristotle claims that despite the fact that all humans speak different languages, we all think in one language – the language of thought[24]. The correspondence between intellect and the reality (i.e., *ordo intelligendi* and *ordo essendi* in the terminology of speculative grammarians) is the guarantation of the homogeneity of *lingua mentalis*. Thus, the resemblance between concept and the reality is not the matter of convention. The statement of the *lingua mentalis* existence could be interpreted as the statement concerning the existence of the deep structure of the language. This structure in the medieval philosophy could be understood as the level of the concepts, *passiones animae*, or *verbum* (in Augustinian tradition)[25]. The logical

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[21] Spade, 2002, p. 65; Aristotle, 2003, p. 71.
[22] Indeed verbs, when uttered by themselves, are names and signify something. For he who says [a verb] establishes understanding, and he who hears it rests; see Spade, 2002, p. 65.
[23] Boethius, 1887.
[24] Arystoteles, 2003, p. 69.
[25] Gadamer, 2004, p. 567.

function of the *lingua mentalis* could be compared with the function of artificial formal languages in the contemporary philosophy. The basis of this comparison would be the deficiency of the resemblance between these languages and the natural languages.

Let us return to the proper theme. So, written word is the conventional sign of the spoken word. On the other hand, the concept is the natural sign of the thing. In Buridan's wirtings we could find the precise explanation concerning the relation between three levels of the language. Written words signify *voces*, which means that written language signifies the spoken language, that is speech. Buridan gives the example, which is supposed to clarify this theory: Someone who is Latin native speaker and illiterate in the same time, would not know, that the written statement *homo currens* means *the man runs*. But whenever he hears that, he would know what this statement means. Buridan concluded that the written language signifies the speech in immediate way. It means that the written language is dependent on the speech[26]. Also, we could assume, that the senses were imposed (*impositio* is the act of establishing the meaning) on the level of the speech. Afer all, the position of the speech was extremely strong in Middle Ages. For example, both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas claimed that the human communication is the proper role of the speech. Moreover, the culture of the Middle Ages was the oral culture. There were only few scholars, who knew how to read, and those scholars, who could read, didn't do it quietly. Let us notice that the discussions (*disputationes*) were the most important forms of medieval teaching. Thus, we could say that the philosophy has arisen from the oral dialogue in the Middle Ages. In this context, Spade draws our attention to the one of the most interesting fragments in Augustine's *Confessions*, which is supposed to illustrate the position of the speech in Middle Ages: *Augustine is talking about St. Ambrose who had the marvelous ability to read without vocalising. Augustine thought this was so odd that he goes on to speculate on why Ambrose would ever want to do such a thing*[27].

Medieval paradigm of the language presupposes that there is the immedietad relation between the thing and its name, i.e., between the level of reality and the level of thought. The thing refers to the concept immedietedly, and the concept refers immedietedly to the spoken language. The main function of the language was to express the thoughts. Language units signifies the *passiones animae* immedietedly, and the *passiones animae* signify the things in the reality. There is mediated relation between language and the reality. Signification is the relation between language and the thoughts, and between thoughts and the reality. It means that concepts played the significative role. They have the property of signification, so they are able to establish understanding. The relation between concept and reality is the same for people speaking different languages and living in various cultures. This relation is natural and objective, not merely conventional. Nevertheless, there is mediated relation between the things and their names, and this relation is the matter of convention.

Except for the question of *significans*, there was the question concerning the *significatum* – the object of signification. What is that thing, which is signified by the term? Ockham was this author, who initiated the discussion on this problem in the late period of medieval philosophy. Scholars disagreed about the answer for this question.

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[26] Spade, 2002, p. 61.
[27] Spade, 2002, p. 83.

The problem of *significatum* became the object of disagreement between nominalists and realists. Hence, the answer for this question was the main criterion for the divisions of the scholars into the nominalists and realists. In this context, we could say about the opposition *via antiqua* and *via moderna* semantics.

We can distinguish two main opinions concerning the problem of *significatum*. First of them is inspired by the authority od Aristotle. According to this opinion, the reality is the proper *significatum*. According to the second opinion, which refers to Augustine, the forms and concepts are the proper *significata*.

In Duns Scotus' commentary to *De interpretatione*, the author poses the question whether the language, except for the concepts, signifies the common nature in the things (*res*) as well. Scotus' answer is afirmative, and he argues that the relation of signification is transitive. The word signifies the concept, but the concept signifies the thing. This opinion came from the metaphysical ideas of Boethius and Porphyry. For these two philosophers, words sygnify forms or common natures, which are individuated in the substances. Aquinas seems to belong to this tradition. In this tradition, universal words signify common natures, but they supposit for the individuals[28].

On the other hand, Ockham and *nominales* claimed that the word signifies the individual directely. In this tradition, namely in the *via moderna* semantics tradition, universal words signify the individuals and they supposit for the individuals.

These two above mentioned conceptions were the principles of the ontological solutions which were accepted in nominalism and realism. Moreover, these two points of view were associated in the explanations of the theory of universals. In the medieval debates, one of the representive of the realists was Walter Burleigh, who argued against Ockham's theory. He claimed that terms of the accidents - predicates, like *white* or *black* cannot signify the substance, which is the subject for the accidents. Burleigh noticed, that in Ockham's conception, when the substance changes, signification changes as well[29]. Thus, according to Burleigh, predicates signify not the substance, but rather they signify the forms which are inhered in the substance.

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The theory of signification has initiated many semantic, linguistic and ontological problems in the medieval philosophy. This theory can lead us to the posing the questions about *lingua mentalis* nature, the grammar of this language and its relationship with the truth conditions. Also, it gives rise to the questions concerning the intensional and modal contexts in the mental language. Definition of the notion of signification (*constituere intellectum*) evokes the problem of the nature of this constitution. We could ask about the conditions of establishing the understanding, relationship between meaning and signification. These issues finally lead us to the reconsideration of the correlation between the theory of the signification and the medieval epistemology, especially intensionality theory in the nominalist tradition.

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[28] Klima, 1993, p. 25.
[29] Spade, 2002, pp. 140-144.

Relation between the levels of the reality and language encourages to the deliberation of the isomorphism between, as we would say in the XII-century speculative grammar terminology, *ordo essendi* and *ordo significandi*. The opinion of the speculative grammarians concerning this isomorphism has been turned down by William Ockham and other nominalists. They argued that the language is the source of the ontological mistakes and illusions.

In addition, there is the problem of the correlation of the semantics and ontological solution. Let us make a suggestion, that we could perceive the nominalistic turning point in XIV century as the subtle change of the semantic principles of the ontological statements.

Medieval semantics seems to be the wide area of the investigation on the nature of signs and of the language, process of the communications and the role of the speech. Semantic questions used to appear not only in the realm of *trivium*, but also in philosophical and theological consideration. Furthermore, the whole reality provided the medievals with the material for semantic consideration. It was so, because medievals seemed to perceive the world as the collection of the signs and symbols. Their symbolic vision of the world has been formulated in the famous words of Alan of Lille: *Omni mundi creatura, quasi liber et scriptura, nobis est in speculum...*[30]

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