Decoding the sign.
Stages and specificity in primary school

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Resumen: El presente artículo estudia los mecanismos concretos mediante los cuales el alumno de la escuela primaria (6/7-10/11 años) llega a recorrer el camino de la integración no acrítica y espontánea en su sistema extralingüístico y lingüístico al metaconocimiento de este fenómeno que le permite tomar consciencia y analizar críticamente la transformación del material perceptivo e intuitivo en objeto del conocimiento lingüístico. Las relaciones objeto/referente-signo (como unidad relacional de significante y significado) creador de significado son analizadas desde la perspectiva del alumno de la escuela primaria, situado en la doble hipóstasis de locutor y alocutor, fuera de la cual ni el objeto ni el signo se podrían objetivar desde el punto de vista lingüístico y semiótico.

Palabras clave:*: signo, sentido, discurso didáctico, texto, contexto.*

> "There is a truth in words that can move mountains. It is worthwhile to look for it from time to time in our words, especially when we want to maneuver our being towards a new life."
>
> (Constantin Noica, *Cuvânt împreună despre rostirea românească*)

Charles Morris highlighted the relationship between semiotics and the science of education, showing that linguistic signs, as well as those of other semiotic codes, are the support and tool of learning. The semiotics theory of learning, whose promoters were Charles Pierce and Max Bense, thus becomes a solid foundation for the study of cognitive development, in general, and for psycholinguistic development, in particular, both with a particular analyzable path within the generous framework of didactic communication.

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As there is definitely an ontogenetic, spiral and progressive development, there is also a unique pathway for each human being during a first initial contact, usually undifferentiated, somehow amorphous, with a particular *el signo*, followed by the metacognitive awareness of the distinction between the object/reviewer – signifier – signified.

Education, in this context defined by Zellmer, appears as a "semiotics guiding", as "a long initiation adventure in the world of signs, laborious apprenticeship in the reception of meanings" (Dospinescu, 2008: 5), while the didactic discourse is nothing more than "a translation of knowledge items into signs (learning) and signs into knowledge items (discovery), a vast semiotic process of interiorization and exteriorization of significance systems." (*Ibidem*)

Every sign-word has its double meaning: one outside the particular human being, characteristic of human speech in general, but also one directly and closely connected with each person who has their unique way of initiating a first contact with it, appropriating it, and then using it in clearly defined socio-linguistic contexts (which are the subject of this analysis).

As adults with psycholinguistic experience, we are rarely able to resume analytically and progressively the stages that we have gone through in speech and in the particular act of language: we are so proud of our linguistic acquisitions that are defining and intrinsically linked to our being that we can not, most of the time, clearly and surely identify the moment of accession to the ontological experience through the sign-word.

That is why we propose to understand, analyze and exemplify the way in which a randomly chosen word – ***man*** [rom. ***om***] comes to exist in the psycholinguistic system of a child, towards the end of the small schooling, respectively the steps that both the word takes towards the child and the child towards to word, analytically and comprehensively studied.

The postsaussurian acceptance of *the sign* evolved from the understanding of it as only a sound-signifier side, the unity between the signifier and the signified, ultimately reaching the relationship between the two (Louis Hjelmslev) or the sign function, postulated by Umberto Eco. Peirce, in return, considers that the semiosis is a triadic relationship between the sign, the object and the interpreter, so that this relationship cannot be reduced to dyadic relations. Taking on the definition of St. Augustine, according to which the sign is "something that, besides the species contained in the senses, evokes in the plane of thinking, something else", Peirce puts the sign in relation to the object he defines and also to his interpreter, which is due to invest it with meaning. Moreover, the linguistic sign unites not a thing with a name (although this is, ontologically, the first of the stages that will lead to the sign, for before the concept, seen as a mental construction, is most often a concrete object), but a concept with an acoustic image. The latter must not necessarily be understood as physical sound, but as a psychic trace of this sound.

From an ontogenetic and linguistic point of view, the man, as an external reference subject, first comes in directly immediate contact with the infant, through touch, physical protective contact, maternal or paternal, before the infant has access to ***man*** **[*om*]** as a signifier or as signified. By direct addresses "Come to Mom!" [rom. „Vino la mama!"], "Come to Mom!" [rom. „Hai la mama!"], "Shush with Mom!" [rom. „Taci cu mama!"] addressed in the onset of family coexistence, mom, dad are gender specifics of the object-referent ***man*** **[*om*]**, and as signifiers/ signified being under development, they are a first useful step in the embedded building of the ***man*** **[*om*]** sign, in which the child will naturally include both the mother – hu***man*** **[*om*]** and the father – hu***man*** **[*om*]** and the grandfather – hu***man*** **[*om*]** and the random hu***man*** **[*om*]** in the park.

Getting to the ***man*** **[*om*]** signifier is relatively easily because it does not raise difficulties in reception or pronunciation in Romanian. The pre-school or small child will come to phonetically analyze and synthesize the sound cover – the ***man*** **[*om*]** signifier,

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correctly identifying the phonemes and naming them the consonants *m* and *n* and the vowel *a* [the ***om*** signifier, correctly identifying the phonemes and naming them the vowel ***o*** and the consonant ***m***]. Then they will write the corresponding letters, in caps during pre–school in cursive during first grade, and so they will already have gradually came to the construction of the signified, so that the written sign ***man*** **[*om*]** became the sign of a sign. Obviously, the process by which this phoneme group reaches the particular concept of ***man*** **[*om*]** is, as Saussure remarks, completely arbitrary.

The distinction at the level of the signified ***man*** **[*om*]** is achieved gradually by conceptual differentiation, possibly witnessing the particular object-name association, which favors the dissociation at the level of the different cognitive species: for example, seeing a ***man*** **[*om*]** being attacked by a dog, simultaneously with the linguistic expression of the perceived action: "See, the dog was about to bite the ***man***!". Any signified phrase is stratified into a compulsory lexico-syntactic level through three major verbal operations of object-building (things, beings, events) of discourse: designation or reference (the common name ***man*** **[*om*]**), characterization (sensitive, intelligent, creative being) and predication (speaks, thinks, loves, works). "As an element of the language, the name (linguistic sign) has a virtual signified, while only in speech a name can denote objects." (Coşeriu, 2009: 144) Here is how the signified ***man*** **[*om*]** comes to have "a mental picture, a concept and a psychological reality." (Eco, 1976: 14-15 *apud* Fârte, 2004: 22) The construction of this signified is more laborious and is preceded by the association of the name-label, the object referent – ***man*** **[*om*]**, initially perceived immediate and that is, as signified, constituted by progressive accumulations of indices and distinctive features distinctive from other subordinate or superordinate concepts. Thus when the child is spoken to, they do not just *hear* simple natural sounds, but they *listen* and even *distinguish* meaningful language-specific matter.

In the process of assigning meaning, it is important to identify the signified (the concept) based on the indications given by the signifier (by the sign). Moriarty thinks that in order to create the meaning, it takes more than to define a word or to decipher a code, since the onlooker (the receiver) personalizes the meaning.

Based on the daily observations from the chair and on the basis of the recording of all verbal answers of the students, in a corpus currently in the process of being constituted, it was concluded that, for the elementary school pupil, the signified ***man*** **[*om*]** will come to represent:

human being

that is	**or**		
thinking / meditative sensible / sensitive determined cheerful sad	smiles laughs reasons / judges talks sings	plays is creative is generous is bold is confident	writes reads calculates plans fixes

Jaques Derrida also points out that the plurality of meanings is given by a "chain reaction", because each signifier turns itself into a signifier for another signified, as in the inferential statement. [proverb "The hardworking **man** is like the fertile tree, he doesn't miss laziness"]. Since "the transfer of meaning is the purpose of human communication" (Don Fabun, 1987: 26), it is interesting to analyze how the child reaches the meaning of the sign ***man*** **[*om*]**, initially having to go beyond the state of cognitive dissonance, meeting

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the concept and reaching their own construction of meaning, for it is known that the meaning assigned by the transmitter is never the same as the receiver's. Connection (comprehension) is fastest when the didactic conversation is sustained, based mainly on meanings, on the particular content, on the "contextual understandings", as well as on the ambiguous metaphorical discourse, being in fact a "secondary language".

"The language as such has (=is) a signified, but not «meaning»: it only offers the possibility of the appearance of meanings of any kind, which, however, appear only in the texts." (Coşeriu, 2009: 137) If the signified and the designated are transmitted (more precisely, they are owned by the speaker and the interlocutor in the beginning, the first by knowing the language, the others by being in the same object world), meaning can not be transmitted, instead it is said that it is interpretable. (*Ibidem*, p. 115) At the same time, as Gagne writes, we learn «thanks to/ because of» [rom. «datorită»], «starting from» [rom. «plecând de la»] (Ausubel), «with» [rom. «cu»] (Piaget), but also «against» [rom. «împotriva»] (Bachelard) functional knowledge we have in our «head».

The 3rd and 4th grader, based on previous accumulations, will be able to undertake a metacognitive approach by which they can appreciate what they know and do not know about the subject under discussion – the concept of ***man* [*om*]**, clearly indicating:

1. what can be *said about* it (phonetic structure, morphological value) – **o** as a vowel and **m** as a consonant; ***man* [*om*]** – noun or auxiliary morph in formation of the folk future: **'*om*** merge (rom. = vom merge), as well as the syntactic function: subject, predicative, attribute, complement;
2. what can be *done with* it:
   a) they can analyze it phonetically – **man – *om*** (in grade zero they will emit the signifier and will "translate" it through a graph, using as symbols the empty circle – **o** for the vowel, the full circle ● – for the consonant);
   b) they can analyze it morpho-syntactically, as shown above;
   c) they can form the lexical family:

manikin [**om**uleţ]	hu**man** **[om**enesc**]**	**man**kind [**om**enire]	[**om**enit]
[**om**uşor]	inhu**man** **[**ne**om**enesc**]**	**man**slaughter [**om**ucidere]	[ne**om**enit]
hu**man**ly [**om**eneşte]	[a **om**eni]	hu**man**e [**om**enos]	super**man** **[**supra**om]**
inhu**man**ly [ne**om**eneşte]	hu**man**ity[**om**enie]	inhu**man**e[ne**om**enos]	superhu**man** **[**supra**om**enesc**]**

   d) they can find words that rhyme with it: tree [p***om***], rum [r***om***], atom [at***om***], tome [t***om***], agronomist [agron***om***];
   e) they can observe the effects of its integration into comparative structures:
      - some compare themselves with him: "welcoming house like an welcoming **man**" **[**„casă primitoare ca un **om** bun"];
      - or he compares himself with others: "a **man** that's bold like a lion or gentle like a lamb" [„**om** îndrăzneţ ca leul sau blând ca mielul"], "a **man** that's towering like a tree" [„**om** falnic ca bradul"], "a **man** that's tough like a stone" [„**om** dur ca o piatră de cremene"], "a **man** that's good like hot bread" [„**om** bun ca pâinea caldă"];

Since "a theory of the text must also be a theory of the context", the meanings, in a connotative sense, of the structures suggested to the primary school pupil can not be

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accessed by them, unless they reference the contextual indexes that were identified and integrated into the discursive structure.

- in metaphorical structures: **man** – **om –** wandering shadow on Earth, **om – man** – thinking reed [rom. trestie gânditoare];

In the situation of explaining what the Blaisian structure means "Man is a thinking reed", the fourth grade student responded: "It means that the man thinks [...] he's a reed that thinks, meaning, he is like a plant that thinks, although plants can not think. A! Even if he is delicate like a plant, he is also powerful because he thinks." We observe the outsourcing of the rationing processes, step by step, leading to finding the explanatory solution, which is of heuristic nature. The previous example comes to demonstrate Eugen Coşeriu's statement, who considers that the receiver-reader "binds facts that are not explicitly connected, makes assumptions, reads between the lines, constructs points of view ..." (Carpov, 1999: 35) in known and stated proverbs: "**Man** sanctifies the place. The hardworking **man** is like the fruitful tree. Every **man** is the emperor in/ of his house". [rom. **Om**ul sfinţeşte locul. **Om**ul muncitor e ca pomul roditor. Tot **om**ul e împărat în casa lui].

Any phrasal act, like all the above, assumes, as the first subact, the enunciation, subsumed by the action labeled by John Austin as a phonetic act, respectively a fatical act, which comes from the articulated character of the sounds emitted and from the grammatical precision of the combinations. The next act of speech will be fully perceived by the phrasal dimension if and only if it is accomplished as ternary action – at the same time phonetic, fatical and retical (in John Austin's view). Structures built from the last proverb above („Tot **om**ul e împărat în casa lui!"[All **man** is the emperor in his house!]), as „*Casa e tot omul lui în împărat!"* [The house is every man in the emperor!], though grammatically correct, fail to decode an intelligible meaning, precisely because, as Benveniste asserts, "the meaning of a phrase is other than the meaning of the words that make it up." [„sensul unei fraze este altceva decât sensul cuvintelor care o compun"].

- in different kinds of structures or phrases: friendly, from **man** to **man** [rom. ca de la **om** la **om** = prieteneşte], God's **man**, good, honest [rom. **om**ul lui Dumnezeu = bun, cinstit], to educate, to enrich [rom. a face pe cineva **om** = a educa, a înstări], rich **man** [rom. **om** cu dare de mână = bogat], trustworthy **man** [rom. **om** de cuvânt = de încredere], married **man**, having a family [rom. **om** la casa lui = căsătorit, cu familie], mean, selfish **man** [rom. **om** al dracului = rău, afurisit], unreliable **man** [rom. un **om** de nimic = pe care nu te poţi baza], nice **man** [rom. **om** de treabă = bun].

f) they can observe the role of the topic – it's not the same if this word is the first in a sentence, as in: My grandfather was such a good **man**! [rom. **Om** bun mai era bunicul meu!] or the last one: Act like a real **man**! [rom. Comportă-te ca un adevărat **om**!] or if it is seated before the adjective: tall **man** [rom. **om** înalt], smart **man** [rom. **om** deştept], troubled **man** [rom. **om** necăjit] or after it: the well-knowed **man** [rom. cunoscutul **om**], the good **man** [rom. bunul **om**], the amazing **man** [minunatul **om**];

Moreover, the primary school pupil perceives relatively easily the distinction between the denotative content and the connotative extensions (approached by Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall) in the case of the word ***om* [*man*]** from the wording: For me, he is not a man, but a MAN! [Pentru mine, el nu este **om**, ci **OM**!]. This demonstrates once again that any discourse acts on audience through *what* it says (dictum), but also *how* it says it (modus). Denotation, as a direct and specific meaning that we can get from a sign, describes and

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represents the signified, while the connotation shows what the object represents at a individual level (in this case, the higher moral and attitude standard).

g) they will eventually create, with only these two letters, structures with stylistic valence or do literal combinatorial exercises, finding names like OMO (character or name of detergent) or MOMO (the name of the eponymous character in Michael Ende's book);
h) they will be able to perceive them correctly as a character in a literary work or even create such a character: fighting with dragons, giving them the freedom to be a young man, recently born or old with a white beard, a driver, teacher or actor, alone or with a large family, courageous or sometimes fearful, ill or healthy, rich or poor, ugly or beautiful;
i) Finally, an amazing fourth grade student proposed to their classmates as a wordplay, logical paradox – the following riddle: **Man** created himself! [rom. **Om**ul s-a creat pe el însuşi!]. This statement contradicted the belief of all their other classmates, according to whom God created man. To their question, "What do you mean? Did not you say before that man is the creation of God?!" [rom. „Cum adică? Nu spuneai mai înainte că omul e creaţia lui Dumnezeu?!"], the student replied, "Well, it's easy to answer this question – the **man**, as a human being, has created... the **word man**, as he created so many other words..." [rom. „Păi, e simplu de răspuns la această întrebare: **om**ul, ca fiinţă**,** a creat… **cuvântul om**, aşa cum a creat atâtea alte cuvinte…"] and went on to say: "For him, the human being, the word **man** is the dearest, for it resembles himself... perfectly!" [rom. „Pentru el, **om**ul care e fiinţă, cuvântul **om** e cel mai drag, căci seamănă cu el însuşi… perfect!"].

Here is how a 11-year-old student, based on linguistic, notional, structural and relational accumulations, has come to what Alfred Monson called the interpretation, seen in double sense, at the level of both enunciators, as a fundamental feature of the didactic discourse, and defined as follows: "To amplify, saying the same thing but using other words". The previous example is a living proof that the student, to understand, so as to "translate", did what the author said was interpretation: "to reduce fractures of meaning to fill gaps, to mitigate the noise and to give words transparency." (Dospinescu, 2008: 8) And that's because Benveniste (1974: 64) warned that "The message is not reduced to a succession of identifiable units separately: it is not the adhesion of signs that produces its meaning, on the contrary, the meaning (l'intenté), conceived globally, is what is divided intoparticular signs, that is, in words." (Vlad, 1994: 9)

It is necessary to go through all three levels of interpretation: signification, meaning and understanding. The "aha!" moment of thinking (Evrika!; for the student in question – "A!"), N. Mărgineanu states, coincides with the grasp of meaning, along with its evolutionary direction. The meaning preserves and solves the logical substance of signification and the meaning impregnates itself with a contextually subjective, emotional, affective context.

If, initially, the analysis "destroyed" the textual object, breaking it down into the smallest elements of its verbal matter (sounds), the role of the interpretation was to recompose the destroyed object, causing the restoration of unity and the universality of the text. Paraphrasing U. Eco, this is how interpreting it equates making out what is not said (le non-dit) or, in other words, what the speech does not say, but the transmitter could have made it or would like it to say.

The faculty of language is inherited, but the language (the so-called native language) is taught to the child by the people around him (family, school, society in

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general). And every language of the world, as Dorel Fînaru pointed out, is important in itself: "The emergence and evolution of language marks a decisive stage in the spiritual evolution of man. Each of the over 6,000 languages spoken today on Earth is a linguistic image of the world. In fact, language is a form of culture that (re)creates the world, the ontological reality for the beings who use it. Moreover, language is the supreme form of culture, for all other forms - art, science, myth, religion, philosophy use language as well."

Observing the entire evolution of a primary school pupil, from object to sign, both denotative and conotative, starting from the nominal definition, then reaching the sematic and lexical one, beginning with the main meaning and approaching the secondary, figurative one of the word **man [om]**, in this assimilation and recreation of meanings, Mariana Tuţescu (1980: 413-415) considers that the semiotic triad semantics – syntax – pragmatics corresponds to the sentence/phrase/text trichotomy, as seen in the whole discourse.

The examples of discourse in question confirm that cognitive logic determines the laws of correct thinking that lead to truth, affective logic specifies the laws of emotion that concern the subjective world of feelings, but that it is first and foremost a comprehensive logic, as the end product resulting from the capture of meaning, and signification in an explanatory whole. If the text is a fabric, then it must be approached not as a finished product, but rather as a veil subjected to tearing and remaking, maybe with a new significance other than that of the original weaver and one about to enter into a new, everlasting weaving, to which undoubtedly contributes the receiver, which opens the signs to themselves through a semantic deconstruction, but through which they will also enrich them with another meaning, perhaps with other significations.

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