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TRENDS IN INTERPRETING REIFICATION

In the foreground of the enterprise of investigating reificatory phenomena is the effort to rationally understand a phenomenon. Once understood, the phenomenon may no longer haunt one's mind. By understanding, humans are on a par with those things they are unable to control.

The Latin word *res* can be translated into English as: object, thing, matter, affair, business, concern, property. Philosophers once conceived of *res extensa* versus *res cogitans*. The former is useful for denoting the physical existence or the physical world; the latter is directed to a thinking and thoughtful being, under which conditions one may develop a self-perception called 'beingness'.

Let us begin with the empty half of the glass, pessimistic or diffident voices about reification. Reification is on trial for a number of things that flow from its occurrence. Nonetheless, some researchers of the phenomenon we are discussing agree that reification cannot encumber the occurrence of new and different ways of understanding the world.

Amardo Rodriguez (2002), in his article entitled "Culture to Culturing" published by *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, claims that there many practices threatening the interplay between reifying ambiguous meanings. "Arguably, one of the most serious and insidious [practices] is that of reification. Reification is the gateway to alienation and deification. It aims to limit human action by limiting ambiguity. It seduces us by limiting the anxiety that comes with ambiguity. In limiting human action, however, reification limits volition and, consequently, responsibility. It thus limits our obligation and commitment to each other and, in so doing, promotes separation and fragmentation." This is, in sum, a multiple charge of (a) harm brought to human relations, (b) blockage of interpretive processes, (c) thwarting of a living, flexible whole that is the world we inhabit.

In our world, much concerned with the opposite actions of separating and unifying, the reification of the situation into painting a wall, going to a wall, bringing down a wall, putting up a wall is very frequent. Symbolically, the wall will undercut diversity and thus damage the evolution of human relations. Let us follow its presence in the recently begun presidential career of Barack Obama. Our first notation: in a Washington Post interview, Obama speaks and warns – the latter verb is the accompanying statement commentary that the newspaper uses – that he will not be capable of vaunting quick results, that public trust will quickly crumble down if the population's optimistic feelings have been overacted. The metaphor of the wall, implicit here, is to be reconsidered by Obama later. The second notation: upon touring Europe, during the political campaign, Obama means to make a speech at the very Berlin spot where Ronald Reagan had uttered, marking the end of the Cold War, the famous words "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Our third notation: because the event just mentioned did not take place as meant, Obama requires that he deliver a speech to the crowd precisely where president Kennedy said in an equally famous piece of rhetoric "Ich bin ein Berliner" – which is the balcony of Berlin's City Hall. The historical moment was John F. Kennedy's speech in the wake of the Berlin Wall construction. One can consider that this reifying process in stages is the initiative of a ritual, in other words Barack Obama trying to give solid foundations to the United States once again. Above

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this and with all this, reification supposedly can be described as a bio-genetically driven feature of the Darwinian survival mechanisms.

Practice supports a neurological link between manual dexterity and speech. Let us pick the case of computerized writing: a hand-shaped letter seems to contain the mark of the writer's personality and human warmth, when contrasted to machine writing. Lucian Mândruță comments on school rules forcing the young one into a physical contact with the letters. "Might we save one year in the life of schoolchildren if we were merely to apply to the digital system? Couldn't by any means their brain connect from the first minute the synapse of the thought to the neuron pressing the keys, instead of compelling them to follow the contortions of the hand-written word?" (passage in our translation from "Lecția de scriere" in *Dilema Veche*, #259, 2009).

Communities and 'imagined communities' is a distinction theorized by Kramsch (1998), who starts her demonstration from the double effect of culture on the individual – liberating and constraining – because there is a real community for him or her, dealing with facts; there can also be a discourse community for him or her, handling artifacts. The individual has to deal with impositions, structures and principles, but (s)he may also choose to deal with common dreams, fulfilled and unfulfilled imaginings. We intend to show here the ways in which reification helps towards a liberation from anonymity, from randomness of nature, by the agency of culture engendering 'imagined communal values'. Kramsch (1998: 8) observes that "imaginings are mediated through language" and language is a metaphor for cultural reality. The examples she gives are ancillary to a demonstration of reification too. We opt for two of her examples: 1. "Thus the city of London is inseparable, in the cultural imagination of its citizens, from Shakespeare and Dickens"; 2. "Rose gardens have been immortalized in the French imagination by Ronsard's poetry".

From reification, it is easy to approach the opposing tendency towards humanization. In this case, it pleases us to circulate a synonym for our basic concept, which is 'thingification'. An informative (often single-word) variable of thingification of states of affairs allows the speedy dissemination of information. Let us illustrate with the stylistic choices of an item of news dated May last year and issued by the Associated Press: "SANTA BARBARA, Calif. – Firefighters rushed to ***wipe out*** the last remnants of a wildfire that ***destroyed*** dozens of homes in the hills above this scenic coastal city, ***racing*** against winds that might ***whip*** the blaze ***back*** to life." There is dynamic contamination going from humans to the elements and back, and we have consequently emphasized their alternating moves as dictated by the nature of the grammatical subject: *wipe out* [+ANIMATE], *destroy* [-ANIM], *race* [+ANIM], *whip back* [-ANIM]. If we have encounters that unnerve us, we can exclaim, *I was* ***petrified***. Human hypostasis placed in a different context shifts off a human attribute (possibly a 'reification fallacy' for logic) and installs the treatment due to a concrete 'thing' – which is a distortion of normalcy. To thingification, epistemologists may dispose of the alternative 'hypostatization', explained by Wikipedia as "an effect of reification which results from supposing that whatever can be named or conceived abstractly must actually exist".

One modality of causing reification to exist is to slip into the world of abstractions through lexicalization, for instance to use *I think* frequently in discourse, as if feeling the need to be backed up by Descartes' recognition of human-ness. We believe that this cliché, or pragmatic hedge, or point-of-view distancing device can also be looked upon as a sample of reificatory language that addresses an abstract level of communication while making the activity less communicatively efficient. *I think* can be the signal that discourse will switch

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from slow, even though more accurate, periphrastic wording, to a more generalized inexactitude. Strategically, it functions like an initiative meant to prevent some face threat.

Jud Evans (University of Central Lancashire, England) authoring the internet material "Philosophy and the Reification of the Unreal", May 2007, has the following comment to make: "Whenever the personal pronouns *I* or *me* or *mine* are conversationally generated and introduced, the memorizing brain makes available a huge empiric digest, including a complete (if somewhat fractured and abbreviated) personal autobiography and a constantly updating compendium of one's current moods, actions, interests and anxieties with particular reference to one's current preoccupations and concerns."

Keeping the discussion in the field of grammar, the verb 'be' is controversially claimed by trends in linguistics to be denotative of the *existential modality* of the subject – therefore, no verb at all (cf. Evans 2007). 'Be' confirms by agreement tense and numeral nature, while deictically pointing to the present moment. Nunberg in "Transfers of Meaning" (1995) explains in a famous example – "The ham sandwich is getting impatient" – the transfer upon an argument of a property-bearing *entity*. Hence, a new synonym can lengthen the list we already initiated in support of reification: *entification*. Three components will guide the entifying process. First, the decoder stops upon the nominal expression in this deictic or indexical context: 'the ham sandwich', denoting a thing and sending the interpreter to the index, i.e. the element or entity that is either the person willing to eat a ham sandwich (and is remarked by his neighbor in the restaurant) or the person who has ordered that sandwich (and is remarked by the waiter of the restaurant). Next, the decoding interpreter will get control over features of animacy in the subject-entity, going against the previously notified lifeless material. Then, a relational-component will help him make the index and the referent correspond. From a basic property to a derived property, the move is a predicate transfer going not only one-way but also two-ways, like in Nunberg's further examples, "This is parked out back" vs. "I am parked out back", spoken by a customer while handing a valet attendant the key to his car. The paraphrase of the second utterance is "I am the owner of a car parked out back", an interpretation licensed by the relevant conceptual correspondence between the animate entity "owner" and the inanimate entity "car".

Let us turn the discussion to romantic fantasizing trends. Petru Iamandi, writing about robotics laws in *Anale* (2006), makes arresting reference to humanization. Basically, when machines take over dehumanizing activities, humans are being allowed to become more human, according to Iamandi. There is fear of mechanical intelligence. The computer nowadays may stultify and degrade through dull repetitive tasks prescribed to the human brain. This is a possible outcome signaled by Isaac Asimov and called the Frankenstein Complex (P. S. Warrick 2002, apud Iamandi, p. 42). In this case, the protection of humans is required and can be obtained if the basic law of robotics is, in Asimov's wording, as follows: "a robot may not injure a human being nor, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm" (ibidem). Iamandi comments that Asimov's laws (issued in 1983) – laws in robotics – resemble moral laws that *can* be broken. Yet, robots invariably *submit* to rules whereas humans tend to break them. In his robot stories, Asimov deliberately creates confusion between robots and people. Humanization is shown possible: robots get features which humanize them. The robot-human relationship can be maternal, romantic, loving and kind. Asimov's robots are male. He says, "no woman wants to feel replaceable by something with none of her faults" (1983, apud Iamandi, p. 44). In general lines, one notices a movement of mechanical intelligence towards *human intelligence and death*, and man's development of technology and movement towards *artificial intelligence and immortality*. Iamandi (p. 45)

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concludes: "If the essential elements of the universe are matter, energy, and intelligence, then man is not unique, on the contrary he exists on a continuum with all intelligence, and ethical behavior extends to all systems because any organizational pattern – human or nonhuman, organic or inorganic – represents intelligence."

Andrei Pleşu, resuming his 1977 Bonn notes (in *Dilema Veche*, #269/ 09 aprilie 2009, seems to us to perform a demonstration of how violations of moral law come to a tangency with the treatment of individuals as means and not as ends in themselves. It is the story of an American neurosurgeon, Robert White by name, who had been training himself for a long number of years to succeed in transplanting a man's head onto a different body. His aim was to lengthen individual lifetime in case a body is degraded whereas the head is still functional. One lays hands on a good head and screws it on a healthy trunk. The 'philosophy' of this undertaking grows out of two typical side-slips in contemporary ideology. One is that life itself is sheer value and an artificial prolongation of its span is a moral thing to happen. The second refers to the brain, rather than the head, as a person's essence, while the rest of the body merely exists as a support, the device meant to maintain life in the cerebral suprastructure. The experiment as such is subjected to failure from the start: although the transplant may be a success, the body stays disgracefully paralyzed because the spine cannot respond to the nervous centres in the new head.

Towards the end of this memento article, Pleşu cites from a letter written by Culianu on some Western issues, *Confesiuni despre experiența erudiției aici, în Vest*: „Am descoperit că, de la o vreme, plăcerea de a medita asupra unei teme e înlocuită de plăcerea de a «aduna material», iar efortul de a formula expresiv – de acela de a cita exact. Amâni opinia personală din scrupulul de a inventaria, doct, opiniile altora. Am cunoscut acea juvenilă **dilatatio animi**, stârnită de sentimentul cunoaşterii de cărți, al posesiunii suverane de detalii." [in our translation, Confessions about the experience of scholarship, over here, in the West: "I have found out that, for some time now, the delights of thinking a theme over are replaced by the satisfaction of gathering materials, and the efforts towards graphical expression – by the accurate quotation. You put off a personal opinion out of the scruples of seeming learned while producing the inventory of other people's opinions. I have come to know this juvenile **dilatatio animi**, woken up by a feeling that books are well known and details are supremely owned"]. What has been achieved above is, to our mind, ontologizing lexical semantic resources for the life of man's intellect.

Turning our attention critically and uncompromisingly to the realities of our day and its possibilities of reification, we note the following. We approve of the message and quote the philosopher: "The censoriousness of an age is not an illusion, but a grim reality" (Cronin 2003: 93). Even though censoriousness in its aggravating nuances uncovers political repression, we mean to apply it here with milder connotations of reduced freedom. These critical days troubled by top-level political decisions have shown that the aim of analysis is not to provide a concrete solution; that is, the goal is to engender an understanding of the dynamic nature of relationships, rather than to objectify or reify an "answer." Unfortunately, the discourse on economic affairs today does reify positions. To some, the answer rests on technical manipulation of information as thing or commodity. To professionals, the answer rests on technical application of a few rules of organization or mediation. Of course these are not the only positions, but they do represent the heart of the contradiction. One common trait the two positions share is an embeddedness in the immanent to the point of ignorance of the transcendent (among other things). That is, the focus of attention is on the concrete actions that typify practice (especially those that begin and end with the human

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agent), while ignoring the reasons for the actions and their desired pragmatic outcomes. As a result, "fierbem în etuvă" (we've reached the boiling point in the drying closet) which is a nicely metaphor-generating, while reifying, picture of social reality. The Romanian description "nu e uşă de biserică", renderable into English as "not quite the clean potato", is equally truthful in pointing to reification, objectification, hypostatization, entification, thingification and possibly other future barbarian –ation terminological proliferation meant to theoretically cover frequent findings about fellows in a less than satisfactory milieu.

Striving to find out what is already reified or perhaps non-reified in us Romanians, facing Europe and the world in various forms of communication, it is pehaps suggestive enough to exemplify with and comment upon a three-stanza poem picked on the internet: „prin noi trec anotimpuri cenuşii / animale bolnave / lăsând urme gălbui, argiloase // ne-au mai rămas cuvinte doar pentru / un joc de scrabble într-o limbă apusă // doar ascultarea ne poate apropia cumva / la marginea unei gări prin care trenurile încing / şinele ca un şir de nostalgii plicticoase / depuse pe bătrâneţile noastre de tinichea" [we are crossed by grey seasons / sick animals / leaving behind some clay-yellowish traces // we still dispose of words just for / a game of scrabble in a faded language // by listening only can we be somehow guided / to the edge of a station where the trains / heat the rails like a string of dull yearnings / deposited on our seniority of tin-plate] (our translation of the poem entitled „Reification" by Florin Hulubei, dated 2006-06-14, published at http://www.poezie.ro/index.php/personals/188216/Reificare). This poem suggests how the world can receive threats about remaining mired in reifications. In a strange way perhaps, one can see in this poem a combination of *reaching understanding* as a diagnosis of reification in the Habermas style and *hybridization* as a diagnosis of reification in the Bakhtin style. Since there are no purposeful insertions of punctuation marks, we consider that the whole poem constitutes one utterance. This single utterance entifies existential sickness and, through inference, entifies a colour-sound-matter picture of degradation. Because the primary goal of the poet-reader dialogue involves sharing the experience of evil, the most prominent relation conveyed by the text is between an animal and its trace, in the first place, and between the train and its rail, in the second place. In mid-position, man and his train of words, will immitatively degrade their relation as well. Final emphasis is on properties of inanimacy. The poem entifies multiple bearers of property, properties which are mostly inferred, and relations that are metaphorically textualized. The reified entities are given equivalent degrees of emphasis.

By way of concluding, we reassert the point of our research: we have meant to dedicate the article to an interpretation of how life answers can be reified in our society. Existentializing elements are, in the illustrations commented upon, removed or unplugged from life itself for the sake of the logical demonstration.

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RÉSUMÉ

TENDANCES DANS L' INTERPRETATION DE LA REIFICATION

Ce qu'on recherche par le langage est la confirmation de l'essence humaine en aspirant vers l'investigation de certains niveaux plus profonds que les options lexicales conscientisées. Pour que le rapport d'existence devienne un rapport d'essence la réification linguistique est acceptée comme ayant: (1) utilité dans la matérialisation des abstractions ; (2) utilité dans l'intrumentalisation des conceptes ; (3) utilité dans la réalisation des intentions métaphoriques ; (4) des risques pour la schématisation des perspectives ; (5) des risques d'ossification de la dinamique naturelle de la communication ; (6) des risques dans l'apparition de l'équivoque; (7) équilibre entre aliénation (robotisation) et antropomorphisation de l'univers. Cet article s'occupe aussi des éléments de traduction et de politique linguistique dans l'espace européen.

Mots-clé : *réification linguistique, robotisation) et antropomorphisation de l'univers, politique linguistique.*

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