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Deconstructing the Meaning

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Abstract

Since the notion of meaning varies, for example linguistic meaning as opposed to the speaker's meaning, the aim of the present article is to point to different ways of meaning fostering and message creation. Taking into account that message is a core element of every text, it is necessary to understand the process of message coding and decoding. For this reason the term "deconstruction" is introduced and explained. Moreover, the article attempts at a brief discussion over the architects of text or message, and points to the abilities and knowledge they should possess to succeed in communication, that is in message coding and decoding. In this respect, stress is put on the danger of misunderstanding in the very process of deconstructing the meaning.

Keywords: *deconstruction, message, meaning, communication, discourse, language, grammar, competence, misunderstanding*

Not always are we aware of the fact that in interpersonal linguistic contacts, meaning, as it appears in communication, is negotiated. The two parties, being responsible for the outcome of the discourse, are actually constructing the very meaning embedded in the created text. Whether the negotiated outcome has exactly the same meaning to each of the two negotiating parties is still a matter of dispute. Essentially, in order to be successful in communication and be able to encode and decode the very meaning and therefore the very message, we have to know the tool – that is language. Only then can we create a comprehensive and meaningful text, which is a result of the language user's linguistic mastery. As Noam Chomsky says

> *...having mastered a language, one is able to understand an indefinite number of expressions that are new to one's experience, that bear no physical resemblance and are in no simple way analogous to the expressions that constitute one's linguistic experience; and one is able, with greater or less facility, to produce such expressions on an appropriate occasion, despite their novelty and independently of detectable stimulus configurations, and*

to be understood by others who share this still mysterious ability.
The normal use of language is, in this sense, a creative activity.
(Chomsky, 2007, p. 88)

Nevertheless, the notion of "creative activity" not only with reference to language but to any other social domain such as, for example, art, architecture or philosophy, requires a deeper consideration of the very product of any creation. Let us take architecture and two examples of its creative work: one – a typical office building composed of four walls and the roof – the building you can easily find in the downtown area of thousands and thousands of cities all over the world, and the other – Barcelona's proud – Sagrada Familia. Both buildings, being creative works of architects, were designed to fulfill the prescribed for them purposes and roles to serve people. As both of them are functional, one may still wonder whether or not the richness of ornamentation and the architect's imagination has any influence on the usefulness of the Barcelona's church; one may not understand the architect's intention and desire. Simplicity, in general, is easy to digest.

The use of language, as it comes out from the above-presented quotation by Chomsky, is creative but at the same time different in the dose and level of its creativity. This is so because language users, the architects of speech and communication, differ in linguistic experience or experience in general, age, education or social and cultural background. They may also differ in the intention of their message which, for one type of receiver is clear, while for the other – undecipherable. Architects of text, either in its spoken or written form, intend to make receivers (listeners or readers) interact with that specific linguistic product. Only then can the interaction be successful that is when the sender of the message and its receiver know and use the same code, enabling the receiver to decipher and uncover a range of meanings and therefore thoughts embedded in the message.

Let us consider "message" as a core element of a text – either written or spoken. As said earlier, simplicity is easy to digest, which does not mean, with reference to text, that every single text has to be easy. Texts differ as they are loaded and even overloaded with meanings. Two readers, interacting with one and the same text, interact differently, which results in two different messages they get after the text reading. This is so because texts differ in the depth of their expressiveness due to the figurative language, especially metaphors used in them. Hence, reading, and especially comprehension, appears to be a complex process of a subjective nature. This subjectivity of text deconstruction is directly related to the judgment based on the reader's individual impressions and feelings as well as opinions rather

than facts implanted in the text. Therefore, two readers, interacting with one and the same text, approach and decompose it differently thus, reaching different levels of comprehension. Moreover, it is quite possible that the difference in text analysis and understanding is so remarkable that it is also possible to say that, in one case, we witness the reader's understanding while in the other – misunderstanding. At this point, a question of reading validity can be raised. Namely, which of the two analyses and text deconstructions by the two readers is valid, important and worth discussing as marked by rightness and appropriateness. The answer is – both, because two different text receptions make possible carrying out a contrastive analysis of the text deconstructions which, in turn, helps to find out the causes of differences in comprehensions. This means that all readings are equally valid, even those which are marked with misunderstandings. Besides, there is no guarantee that every single reading is objective; we can only talk about a degree of objectivity.

The present discussion finds a strong support in Barbara Johnson's point of view presented in her writings where it is evidently shown that she follows that kind of philosophy of reading which aims to undermine the logic of opposition within the text. With reference to text analysis and criticism, she recommends to undertake an appropriate course of action based on the four logical formulas:

– *If all readings are misreadings, then all readings are equally valid;*
– *If there is no such thing as an objective reading, then all readings are based on subjective preferences;*
– *If there is no absolute truth, then everything is relative;*
– *To criticize is to be skeptical; to put in question is to dismiss.*
 (Johnson, 1980, p. 9)

Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned principles, if applied in discourse analysis, point to a new track to be taken in the process of message decomposition and text deconstruction finding out what is camouflaged in the analyzed text. Following the above principles may greatly facilitate finding and determining the core meaning of the text, regardless of the objectivity of judgment. Undoubtedly, this approach remains in concord with the theory of reading and analysis known as deconstruction. The very term of deconstruction often evokes emotions among linguists and their reactions against the introduction to the sphere of linguistic analysis yet another theory which to some extent parallels Chomsky's distinction of surface structure and deep structure and in consequence – surface meaning and deep meaning – the distinction already presented and accepted in the 1960's (cf. Chomsky, 1972;

2007). But before we start deconstructing a message and therefore its very meaning, we have to be aware of the fact that, for example, the now deconstructed message must have been constructed in accordance with the commonly accepted rules. Moreover, the architect of any message, its "constructor" must have also used the required tools to make the message meaningful and thus – logical and comprehensive. Hence, molding a message in the form of a text marked by an orderly, logical and aesthetically consistent relation of its parts, testifies to the constructor's creativity. In such a case, the very act of creativity cannot be questioned but what we can question is the meaning of the creator's outcome. Despite the use of commonly accepted and unified rules and tools, the constructed meaning can be the product of a subjective mind, viewing the objective world in his or her specific way.

Objectivity of one individual becomes or at least may become subjective when judged by another individual due to the differences between the two, such as the mentioned earlier: age, education, experience, and many other features. The logical value of an utterance or sentence is stable and therefore – objective. This means that the logical value is not dependent on the point of view or knowledge of any individual regardless of his or her social status, position, emotion or personal prejudice. The logical value of a sentence cannot be changed by the fact that someone considers the sentence as true or false because the logical value depends on whether the sentence describes the world objectively – in accordance with the reality or in the way that violates and distorts objectivity. In conversation, we can often hear *"This sentence is true to John but it's false to Peter"*. Now, we know that no matter what someone thinks about the contents of a sentence, its logical value cannot be changed. In this case this is not the logical value of sentences that matters but this is someone's point of view on the logical value that should be examined. Therefore, the above quoted example should be understood in the following way:

> *John is of the opinion that a given sentence contains a true description of a selected part of the world, while Peter – that the description given in this sentence does not correspond with the reality.* (Ziembiński, 1992, p. 55, trans. T.Z.)

From the above presented discussion, it can be deduced that in a sentence analysis we should carefully analyze the meaning of every single word used in the sentence as the logical value of that sentence depends on the sense of all lexical elements used in it. Besides, we have to take into account the way in which all these lexical elements are ordered as well as grammar and regi-

ster used. It has to be underscored that especially the style of a language used in a particular context is of paramount importance. Undoubtedly, this is lexis and register which decide upon the text clarity, expressiveness and the recipient's understanding of the message. Moreover, all the discussed here essentials of successful communication are embedded in the message creator's culture. This is just the language user's culture which is a supplier of names and notions, producing a lexicon. All these names and notions are the product of thought and all of them are neatly ordered in accordance with the rules responsible for logical expressiveness in the language, being an instrument used within a given community for the purposes of communication. Nevertheless, even between members of one cultural community we find individual differences which may be responsible for constructing and deconstructing the meaning of a created message. Language users' expressiveness is directly related to the richness of their lexicon and the level of their creativity. Since the lexicon of one language mirrors objects and ideas created by the minds of users of a given language who differ in customs, behavior and tradition from other language users, text analysis and deconstructing the meaning of one and the same text by two culturally different users may often result in discrepancies. Misunderstanding and thus misapprehension is the consequence of rule-breaking and inadequateness at the level of lexis, grammar and culture. Thus the expressiveness of one party may be strongly blurred during the process of text deconstruction undertaken by the other party, while analyzing the same message. Formal linguistic differences as well as cultural differences between two language users who seek to expose deep-seated contradictions in a given text by delving below its surface meaning may result in totally different outcomes. Thus, this can be one more evidence that socio-linguistic compatibility between two language users marked at the level of lexis, grammar and culture is responsible for a successful discourse (Zygmunt, 2008).

All the same, not only the working knowledge of lexis, grammar and culture is a prerequisite for constructing and deconstructing a text and functioning freely within the area of expressiveness. Yet, *conditio sine qua non* of free functioning in a discourse is the user's ability to distinguish and trace social aspects of language and all its aspects of production covering both the sphere of spoken and written discourse. Undoubtedly, these two spheres of discourse differ substantially, especially that the spoken discourse in comparison to the written one is transient.

> *When a word is spoken this event happens within the 'co-ordinates' of a particular place and moment and these can never be reduplicated, … A second, related, factor underpinning the na-*

ture of speech, and affecting the type of language choices which can be made, is the delivery via the oral/aural channel. (Hughes, 2002: 12)

Writing, in this respect, is entirely different as, first of all, writing is not transient and thus ephemeral. Writing can be digested as long as the reader needs doing so to penetrate both surface meaning and deep meaning. A text gives its reader a chance to deliberate the lexical items of the analyzed message, concentrating on the very information embedded, and discussing the pros and cons of issues and arguments found in the message. Hence, writing offers the time for a thorough analysis of a text and its deconstruction. On the contrary, a spoken discourse participant has to react abruptly, using his or her socio-linguistic and cultural competence at the very moment of thoughts exchanged, which might be risky as an instant reaction to the information and the way of expressing it by the interlocutor can be fatal in consequences. In such a case, a great risk is, therefore, misunderstanding.

In order to understand better what the aspects of production and social aspects of discourse cover, let us consider the model presented by Rebecca Hughes (2002). The analysis of the model shows that the two types of discourse, that is spoken and written, differ in a variety of features prescribed to the aspects of production and social aspects, as well. It appears that the spoken discourse viewed through the prism of the aspects of production is characteristic of the following features:

ASPECTS OF PRODUCTION: SPOKEN DISCOURSE
– context dependent
– unplanned
– transient
– oral/aural
– dynamic.

On the other hand, the written discourse is marked by the features as follows:

ASPECTS OF PRODUCTION: WRITTEN DISCOURSE
– static
– visual/motoric
– non-transient
– planned
– decontextualized.

It also appears that only a marginal area of the two types of discourse can share the same features. For example, occasionally, both written and spoken discourses can be either planned or unplanned.

With reference to social aspects, the discrepancy between the two types of discourse are also numerous as marked by the below presented features.

SOCIAL ASPECTS: SPOKEN DISCOURSE
– locus of change
– inter-personal
– informal
– stigmatized
– rhetorical
– primary.

SOCIAL ASPECTS: WRITTEN DISCOURSE
– secondary
– logical
– prestigious
– formal
– contractual
– conservative (after Hughes, 2002, pp. 10-11).

Also in the sphere of social aspects the two types of discourse, that is spoken and written may rarely share the same features as, for example, both types can be formal or informal.

The juxtaposition of the above presented characteristic features of the two types of discourse make us understand the nature of discourse and realize how complex discourse is. Primarily, we have to be sensitive to the fundamental differences between spoken and written discourse regardless of the aspect. As discussed earlier, finding and determining the core meaning of the message transmitted by discourse is greatly facilitated when we analyze a written text. But even in a written text a true information may be camouflaged due to the use of metaphors and figurative language, in general. Hence, what is clear to one reader may not be clearly understood by another reader. In many cases the difference between two readers is measured by their ability or the lack of ability to read between the lines and the amount of information which is missing from their reading. As it has been stressed earlier, while viewing language as the language of concrete users, it is necessary to take into account individual differences between the users with regard to their cultural-linguistic competence and experience. The knowledge accumulated in their minds makes it possible for them to develop "mental modules" (cf. Pinker, 1995). "Mental module" is here perceived

as a combined unit of both perceptual and cognitive powers of the mind, and, therefore, a mental component that is used in com-

> *bination with other components. It is strongly believed that among some other components the mental module corresponds with, there must be present the emotional module which is responsible for the power of expressiveness and the mood of interaction and interpersonal communication. So basically, communication requires the involvement of at least two modules: mental and emotional. The two modules are responsible for the clarity, precision, and expressiveness of communication as they mark their presence in the channel of information.* (Zygmunt, 2012, p. 712).

As a matter of fact discourse is that kind of communication which fills in the channel of information with both mental and emotional ingredients. So now, it becomes quite evident that for complete clarity of the message it is essential to enter the emotional sphere of a speaker, especially in the case of spoken discourse. Therefore, since the mental sphere pertaining to the language user's socio-linguistic and cultural knowledge is decisive in a written text analysis, this is the emotional sphere combined with the mental one which are responsible for legibility of oral communication. If the mental and emotional modules are balanced in the case of the two communication participants, that is sender and receiver, without regard to the type of discourse they participate in, there is a very high probability that information cannot be missing.

To some extent, the developed here discussion finds resemblance in John Paul II's poem, which may also serve as an illustration of the raised points of view.

Thought's Resistance to Words

Sometimes it happens in conversation: we stand
facing truth and lack the words,
have no gesture, no sign;
and yet – we feel – no word, no gesture
that we must enter alone and face, like Jacob.

This isn't mere wrestling with images
carried in our thoughts;
we fight with the likeness of all things
that inwardly constitute man.
But when we act, can our deeds surrender
the ultimate truths we presume to ponder
(Wojtyła, 1995: 78, trans. Jerzy Peterkiewicz)

The very title of the poem is highly significant as it signals the necessity of interpretation of meaning in relation to expressiveness of thought and thoughts expressiveness. Going through the messages of the poem makes us realize that *"no word, no gesture or sign would convey the whole image"* unless we are equipped with adequate socio-linguistic and cultural knowledge, especially religious, in the case of full comprehension of this poem. Moreover, we also realize that the very act of expressiveness, the way in which we put our thoughts into words is a constant fight for adequacy and precision without any guarantee that the thought reception is correct and thus satisfactory, especially that thoughts are resistant to words. This is an inner fight of the message creator to convey truth and authenticity via his expressed thoughts. This is also the receiver's fight aimed at understanding of the images carried in the sender's thoughts. Hence constructing and deconstructing a message contribute to the manifold development of both the sender and the receiver. Their active involvement in the message creation and reception is a constant *"fight with the likeness of all things that inwardly constitute man"*. That is why the example of Jacob is given. Here, the name of Jacob becomes a password to thorough understanding of the message embedded in the poem. The lack of knowledge pertaining to the Biblical story of Jacob prevents the receiver from getting into the heart of the message.

As it comes out from a brief discussion on the poem, paradoxically enough, only one linguistic unit – one single word can be a serious obstacle to full comprehension and therefore, deprives the reader of finding out the very information. Then, the reader may only rely on his guesses, which, in turn, may be misleading. In such a case, information is missing and then misunderstanding which appears is more dangerous than not understanding the message at all.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it is indispensable to approach discourse, regardless of its type, in a twofold manner: linguistically and culturally. Not always is the result satisfactory, especially in the case of spoken discourse, because of the reasons mentioned earlier. But definitely, such a twofold approach is a must in the case of written discourse. What, then, do we have to consider? First of all, we have to realize that information cannot be missing if some requirements are fulfilled. The fundamental requirement is to concentrate on the analyzed text, and the text only. To deconstruct the meaning planted in the analyzed text it is necessary to exclude anything outside the text. The only sphere outside the text which might be helpful in deconstructive reading is the reader's knowledge concerning the writer's social and cultural milieu. Only then can we analyze the specificity

of the text. Nevertheless, the only object of interest is the word on paper and its genuine meaning. In deconstructive reading the focus is on metaphors, figurative language in general, and the writer's register used to create a message. Then, knowing the environmental conditions in which the text was created, encoding the message, we can analyze the text's authenticity, its purpose or artistic value as well as find controversies in the message or even contradictions. For example, knowing the social, political and cultural milieu of Jonathan Swift and the message send by him in *Gulliver's Travels*, we understand the purpose of the message and what the text actually means. Besides, what counts here is the text's expressiveness and appeal to the reader's imagination.

Due to the interaction with text, readers develop inwardly and deepen their knowledge and experience. The interaction with any text, both at the stage of its construction and deconstruction enriches the involved individual intellectually because

> *writing of any kind demands some thoughts; it is impossible to write the simplest sentence for ourselves without some thought. But the thought which matters beyond utilitarian and social considerations (such as that which occurs in most of the letters we write, the newspapers we read), is that which comes home to us with a certain force, which has its own profundity or subtlety; this kind of thought has qualities that make it more than an exposition of subject matter. [...] An author can fill his pages with the most abstruse thoughts and yet not be impressive as an individual writer; he may be even naïve as a thinker. Argumentation is not necessarily individual thinking. Thoughts and ideas, often culled from other writers and thinkers – religious, political, philosophical, economic, sociological, psychological and so on – abound in the pages of many modern novelists; such thoughts can valuably stimulate of course, and increase our knowledge.* (Coombes, 1968, p. 64)

Undoubtedly, profound knowledge, not only in the sphere of linguistics but culture as well, is a great asset of a text researcher since, as we have already learnt, not only words but also thoughts and ideas can be borrowed. Thus again, the knowledge of the milieu of the analyzed text creation might be definitely a workable instrument in deconstructive reading.

As a matter of fact deconstructive reading is a process, we might even say – a never ending process because when we have read a text for the first

time and later, we resume the reading of the same text, it appears that we are reading a different text as we approach it differently because of our experience gained during the first reading. Such a break between two or more readings gives a chance and time to think about the way in which the text was constructed. Therefore, a second, third or subsequent reading can be viewed as deconstructive reading, which does not mean, as some may say, that we destroy a text through deconstruction. Hence, it has to be underscored that deconstruction is not destruction but a mere penetration of meaning encoded in the analyzed text. Fundamentally, deconstructive reading focuses on the metaphors used by the writer and, the camouflaged purpose of writing as always there must be a point to create a message. Moreover, the purpose of deconstructive reading is to uncover a range of meanings emerging from each sentence, phrase or even a single word. Then, deconstructive reading turns into the digging into the analyzed text meaning through penetration of both its surface and deeper layers. At first glance, any text, written or spoken, is constructed of words which can be treated as symbols or a code. Used in a text words may have a different meaning to the writer using them in a specific way from the meaning decoded by the reader or listener. This is so because the words we use are not ours – they are universal properties, having an unlimited scope of creative applicability. So, not the words but the way we use them is ours; someone else may use the same words in his or her specific way, entirely different from ours. And, this is an indicator of register, creativity and competence.

In the case of discourse analysis aimed at the deconstruction of meaning, it is inevitable to consider aspects of production and social aspects as they supply the reader with a variety of information on the text's specificity, especially its type, purpose, logic, and addressee. Identifying only these four features makes the reader determine the text center and its peripheries, as every message is purposeful and addressed to the receiver in a logical way, stressing the point which automatically becomes the center of information. That is the main information which is usually hemmed in by some additional and of minor rank messages, coloring the point. Thus, those additions constitute text peripheries where the two kinds of meaning, that is essential and additional, are bordering. Having determined the center of the analyzed text and it peripheries, it is absolutely essential to check and define all the links between the center and a periphery to see how and to what extent peripheral messages are related to the key issue and help in understanding the point. In this way we deconstruct to create, thus constructing the essence of the text. Therefore, the deconstructive approach ought to be applied

in discourse analysis to diagnose certain structural, logical, and lexical problems within a text, searching for the true meaning of the message. Hence, it has to be stressed again that such an approach does not destroy the text's structure as the reader's intention is to fix conclusively and describe dilemmas within the message. This procedure, which aims to look for dilemmas, is quite natural because human nature is designed to explore the unknown and search for truth.

Commonly encountered absence of clarity in texts or the double meanings they express as well as the specificity of communication, on the one hand, and differences between the sender and the receiver encountered in their competency and message treatment, on the other, become a prerequisite for the analysis of what has been sent and what has been received. The difference between message construction and deconstruction points to the difference between the two minds: this of the sender's, and that of the receiver's. Actually, in deconstructive reading, we analyze human minds – the ability of creation and thus coding, on the one hand, and the ability of decoding, on the other. Since the human mind possesses the ability of creating fiction, the depth of expressiveness is not always easy to measure. Hence, not always does the intellectual ability of a reader permit for deep penetration into ideas present in a studied text. So, what, in fact, is needed to carry out successful penetration of ideas embedded in a given text? To answer the question and sum-up the discussion we have to consider the following factors with reference to the aspects of production and social aspects of discourse:

   (i) the milieu of text creation;
  (ii) text specificity, genre, and purpose;
 (iii) register and addressee;
 (iv) socio-linguistic sphere of the language in question;
  (v) socio-cultural sphere of the language in question;
 (vi) language organization and expressiveness (metaphors, symbols, etc.);
 (vii) mental and emotional ingredients present in a text (especially, spoken);
(viii) the relationship between the product of a subjective mind and the objective world;
 (ix) central and peripheral information, and the relationship between the two;
  (x) the logical value of the analyzed text.

Therefore, understanding the need for application of the above principles in discourse analysis, we can start exploring a text, focusing on units of the language in use, especially metaphors, symbols or other constructive elements. Equipped with the knowledge possessed, we can start decoding or

deconstructing them by turning up surface meaning and discovering deep meaning. In this way, the reader becomes not only a discoverer but a creator of his or her subjective reception. Apart from text analysis, following the above presented "decalogue" enables the reader to see the difference between him and the message sender, that is the author of the text. Hardly ever do we realize that deconstructive reading applied to discourse analysis actually makes possible to characterize the two parties, and thus the two minds involved in the text interaction: the sender and the receiver of the message. This is a chance for the reader or receiver to compare his mental module with that of the sender. Moreover, this is a chance for assumptions and deepening the reader's universal knowledge, but especially his or her competence in the areas indicated by the above listed principles. Involving both the linguistic and cultural spheres into a comparative approach, we can depict a variety of similarities and differences between the sender and the receiver, and this is essentially what employing deconstructive reading in discourse analysis brings.

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