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FUNCTIONING OF METASIGNS IN FRENCH TEXTS

The aim of this paper is to examine the functioning in texts[1] of signs used in material supposition. They have some features characteristic for the functioning of certain signs in real supposition, but beside that they also have other features, typical to them only. It seems justified to treat the latter as linguistic units having a specific syntagmatic position in a text — keeping in mind the difference between language levels, which distinguishes them from signs used in real supposition.

Let us begin with a terminological clarification: when writing about signs in material supposition, I will sometimes use the term *metasign*, which is used in literature on logic also for some signs used in real supposition, such as *substantif* or "the first word of *The Tyger* by William Blake", etc. I am doing this in order to avoid the inconvenient, although more precise term "sign used in material supposition", or "quotational name". As regards words like *substantif* (in real supposition!), they will remain beyond our interest: their functioning in texts does not differ from the functioning of such words as *table*, *vertu*, *pitié* (used in real supposition!).

It is universally accepted that the essence of metasign is, generally speaking, that instead of referring to extratextual reality and designating certain items (in this case stemming from nouns), a given linguistic form

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[1] The deliberations of the author, who is a Romance languages specialist, are illustrated by French examples. The text was originally in Polish, but in some cases, Polish examples would not properly reflect the differences between the discussed constructions.

designates itself and items isomorphic with it. These two characteristics, namely isomorphism of a sign and its *designatum* and signifying itself by a sign are unobservable in signs used in real supposition. As the primary semantic function of a noun is to designate items,[2] we can assume that — from the semantic point of view — metasigns are characterised as nouns. On the other hand, they occur in the syntagmatic positions in which nouns often appear — the only position they do not occur in is in a simple predicate.

The metasign phenomenon has some common features with several well-known phenomena, which only seemingly have nothing to do with the use of signs in material supposition. The existence of a metasign in a text can be treated as an indication that the speaker used one of the meanings of the sign. According to this concept, each linguistic element would have to be treated as a polysemic unit. This would cause the need to distinguish between polysemy *sensu stricto* and polysemy *sensu latiore*. In the narrower sense, "polysemy" would mean, in line with the linguistic tradition, "the fact that a word or expression has several meanings" (Gołąb, Heinz and Polański 1968, 432); compare e.g. "crane" and "wood" in English, or "racine" and "navet" in French. Polysemy *sensu latiore*, as opposed to polysemy *sensu stricto* — which is limited to only some elements of language — is a universal phenomenon, as it refers to all language signs without exception. In both cases, we can speak of a coexistence of several meanings related to one sign, of which only one is used in the text. In both cases, it is the context that decides in which meaning the word is used. The context acts as a selector of meanings of a polyseme alternating in texts. As regards metasigns, the following contexts are possible:

— introductory words (abbreviation: 'I'), such as "le mot", "l'expression", "le substantive", "le syntagme", "la phrase", "la forme", "le nom", "le verbe", etc., e.g. "le mot *table*", "la forme *chantent*", "le nom d'*arbre*", "le verbe *finir*", "l'expression *être pris de court*", etc.

— metasigns may be introduced in 'definitional' sentences such as:

"XY *signifie* (*s'écrit, se prononce. . .*). . . ", e.g.

"*Table* est un substantive".

"*Victoire* signifie *avantage remporté sur les ennemis*".

The difference between the construction of the two types consists only in the material existence or non-existence of a term introducing a metasign in a text. However, where this word appears, we can omit it (under the condition that the semantic characteristics which it contains and which

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[2]I use the concepts of semantic and syntactic function in line with their usage by Jerzy Kuryłowicz (Kuryłowicz 1960; Heinz 1957: 8—10).

make us interpret the word following it as a metasign are present in the context which is left, to avoid ambiguity), and where it does not exist, it may be introduced. In this case however, although the metasign occurs in the syntagmatic position typical for nouns, there is also no predeterminant[3] when the metasign is used in the general sense, not relativised by any attribute. However, any attribute of a metasign entails the use of a predeterminant: "Votre *fiche-moi la paix!* me semble tout á fait déplacé". "Le *tous* aristotelicien n'est pas exactement le même que celui de la logique modern".

In a construction with an introductory element (abbreviation: 'I—*M*'), there are certain semantic limitations concerning the right choice of 'I', depending on the grammatical nature of the metasign. It is also worth pointing out that where the metasign is a word which in the real supposition is characterised as a noun, there is a tendency to use it after the 'I' without a predeterminant: "le mot *table*", and not *"le mot *la table*". The contexts in which a metasign (used without an 'I') is preceded by an indefinite article are also relatively rare. As such cases do exist, however (cf. below), it seems relevant to speak of a three-tiered system of predetermination of metasigns:

— metasigns with no predetermination;
— metasigns predetermined by an indefinite article;
— metasigns predetermined by a definite article, indicative pronouns, possessive pronouns, etc.

It seems that the three-tiered system of predetermination of nouns-metasigns is something exceptional compared to the two-tiered system of predetermination of nouns used in the real supposition.

The method described above can be used for introducing metasigns which in the real supposition represent all grammatical types of signs, namely both synsemantic and autosemantic words, verbal, nominal, and relational elements, single words and whole constructions composed of several words. Together with the introductory words, metasigns can form one of the following constructions: "le mot *pitié*" (I *M*), "le mot de *pitié*" (I de *M*) and "ce mot, *pitié*" (I, *M*).

The first construction is the closest to the classical appositional constructions with the second element being a noun and a structure "Noun$_1$ — Noun$_2$". However, it should be distinguished from some combinations of two nouns typical for the language of advertising and for colloquial language, formally identical to it (on the surface) but divergent in the deep structure,

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[3]By this term I understand articles and all kinds of pronouns of adjectives (cf. Gougenheim 1963: 63—70).

namely "papier toilette", "bifteck minute", "probléme lodgement", "question vacances". Although their surface structure is typical for direct determination,[4] these expressions in fact represent a relational determination, as proved by the following transformations showing their deep structure: "papier de toilette", "bifteck á la minute", "probléme du lodgement", "question des vacances". What is unacceptable, however, is a transformation typical for constructions containing a direct determination in the deep structure: *"ce papier est toilette", *"ce bifteck est minute", etc.

A transformation of constructions containing a metasign (I *M*) gives the following result: "ce mot est *table*" ("le mot *table*"), "cette forme est *chantent*" ("la forme *chantent*"), "ce verbe est *finir*" ("le verbe *finir*"), just as appositional constructions with both parts in real supposition, e.g. "Paris est une ville de trois millions d'habitants" ("Paris, une ville de trois millions d'habitants").

Among the various types of constructions with direct determination, the closest to constructions with a metasign seem to be "le soldat citoyen", "Monsieur Hérard" and "M. Duroc, le directeur commercial de l'enterprise". A syntagm with a metasign differs from the construction of the first and second type only by a small but distinct pause between 'I' and 'M'. In terms of accent and melody, the construction "le soldat citoyen" is identical with the syntagm composed of a noun and an adjective "noun + adjective", e.g. "la maison blanche". On the other hand, this pause in the construction 'I *M*' is less distinct than in the semi-predicative construction of the latter type ("M. Duroc, le directeur commercial de l'enterprise"). In order to omit the 'I' in a sentence where the context is sufficiently unambiguous, the pause is significantly prolonged after the word directly preceding the metasign.

As regards the external representation of the construction in question, both the introductory term and the metasign can perform this function — this is possible only in appositional constructions where the defining element is preceded by a predeterminant (e.g. "M. Durand, un des plus importants grossistes de la ville"), where there is a proper name in the function of the defined element (e.g. "sa femme Nicole" or "le roi Charles V"), as well as in nominal constructions such as "le parfum *Mirage*", "les tulipes *Rêve*", etc.

It is hard to establish which words used in the said type of construction make us interpret the following word as a metasign, and which do not. It seems that we can order them according to the semantism of the basis, with the extremes being the construction "le mot *mirage*" on the one hand and

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[4]For the definition of direct and relational determination, cf. Heinz 1955: 35—39.

"le parfum *Mirage*" on the other.

In all cases, the relation between the word in the second position, the defining element, and the defined element is the same, which is reflected in identical transformations. The differences between the individual constructions concern only the semantism of the defining basis, therefore it seems that we cannot distinguish several types of metasigns on these grounds, as done by Leon Koj (he calls them 'quotational names', cf. Koj 1964), as the difference does not lie in themselves but beyond them. If it was possible to make a division within the class of metasigns according to differences in the context, nothing would prevent us from distinguishing not three but six types of metasigns:

"le phonéme *p*" "le syntagme *prendre la mouche*"

"le morphéme *bel-*" "la proposition *Pierre travaille*"

"le mot *beau*" "la phrase *moi, je travaille tandis que toi, tu dors*".

It seems possible to make a division of metasigns when examining the relation of signs used to create metasigns in their real supposition to extratextual reality. In this context, we can distinguish two groups of metasigns:

— metasigns stemming from signs, which, when used in real supposition, directly correspond to certain segments of extratextual reality, e.g.: "table", "rouge", etc.

— metasigns stemming from elements of language which, as long as used in real supposition, do not correspond directly to anything in extratextual reality.

This is the case with signs such as "brr!", "psst!", as well as those elements of text which perform a diacritical function (Zawadowski 1959: 18), e.g. individual sounds of which the word "table" is composed. In the case of these signs, substantivization is equivalent to the use in their material supposition, e.g.:

"Ce *psst* n'a été entendu que par moi".

"Son *aïe!* nous a fait sortir du silence".

"Il prononça un *r* caractéristique, propre aux Parisiens".

Apart from the 'I *M*' constructions, *another* frequently used construction is 'I de *M*'. Among the constructions which do not contain metasigns, it corresponds to the group "Noun$_1$ de Noun$_2$", with its primary function being

relational determination. In transformation, it gives us "Noun$_2$ dont Noun$_1$", e.g. "la maison de mes parents" — "mes parents dont la maison". The secondary function is the introduction of elements in direct determination. One of the uses of this type of construction is when it introduces a metasign. While the 'I *M*' construction has not exhibited any restrictions on the part of the metasign and was characterised by a maximum range of use, the 'I de *M*' construction is not usable for some metasigns (e.g. those which stem from the personal form of a verb — *"la forme de *chantent*"), and cannot occur in some contexts, e.g. *"Le mot d'*arbre* est pensé différement par un botaniste et par un bûcheron". Among the expressions built along the 'I de *M*' pattern there are also some ambiguous ones, e.g. "mot de tendresse".

Let us now compare constructions with a metasign with other appositional constructions, with both elements in real supposition. Namely, the elements of the latter constructions can be transposed in most cases:

"Monsieur Durand, président de la Société des Charbons" — "Président de la Société des Charbons, Monsieur Durand. . . "

In constructions containing a metasign, the order of elements is fixed: the metasign is always in the second place.

An appositional combination of two nouns in real supposition constitutes a relation of determination, the elements of which, when examined in isolation from the construction in question, can be either in the relation of inclusion ("M. Durand, homme de confiance du patron") or exclusion ("le roi soleil"), or overlapping (when there are two synonyms "Varsovie, capitale de la Pologne"). This leads to a distinction of two types of determinations, from the point of view of the determined element: narrowing and non-narrowing determination. From the semantic perspective, in this semantism the narrowing determiner has some characteristics which the determined element does not have, while the non-narrowing determiner only accentuates some selected characteristics contained in the *determinatum*. In constructions containing a metasign, the determination is always the narrowing one.

If we accept that a metasign is a specific kind of noun, we should say that it has a secondary syntactic function in appositional constructions. Does it not make its semantic function secondary as well? If we adopt this premise, we should state that it equals an adjective in the function of an attribute, both syntactically (secondary syntactic function of the appositive noun equals primary syntactic function of the attribute adjective) and semantically (secondary semantic function of the appositive noun equals

primary semantic function of the adjective). The problem is related to the function of the appositive noun.

In Polish linguistics, and in relation to the Polish language, there are two approaches to appositions. When examined beyond the system of case forms and under the assumption that the semantic function of a noun used as an apposition is the same as of an attribute adjective, they are considered formations of secondary semantic nominal function. As in addition there is the secondary syntactic nominal function, equalling the primary syntactic adjective function, there is a basis for equal treatment of an attribute adjective and of an appositive noun. However, when a noun apposition is treated as part of the case system, we cannot speak of a secondary semantic nominal function (= primary adjective function). Apposition is thus placed among the other grammatical cases, which, although syntactically being determiners, have not lost their semantic primary nominal function.

It seems that the problem of the function of semantic apposition should be treated differently in relation to the French language. In this case, we can speak of a primary semantic function of a noun when it is preceded by a predeterminer; it becomes secondary when the predeterminer is omitted. The same is reflected in the syntactic dimension. Nominal elements with a predeterminer (as well as proper names) can externally represent a whole appositional construction, while nominal elements without a predeterminer, used as apposition, cannot externally represent the whole and become more similar to adjectives. Constructions with a metasign belong to the first type, so it seems reasonable to treat metasigns as forms with primary semantic nominal function and secondary syntactic function.

Metasigns are close to proper names, although they are not identical. Firstly, there is no context into which we could not introduce 'I' before 'M'. Therefore, the fragment of a text in which the metasign is present can be interpreted as an elliptical construction. Proper names, on the other hand, are always a closed whole, without any element being omitted. Besides, they are not related to any kind of context, as it is the case with metasigns. Secondly, metasigns are relatively rarely used in constructions with relational determination, while proper names are not subject to any such restrictions.

There are two characteristics of metasigns particularly worth pointing out, related to forming the plural form and to the grammatical gender. On the one hand, the form corresponding to plural form in real supposition can correspond to singular in material supposition, e.g. "les travaux" — plural in real supposition, "le mot *travaux*" — singular in material supposition. On the other hand, only the metasigns without an explicitly expressed introductory

element can freely take the plural form. It is impossible to express the plural form morphologically in the following construction: *"deux mots *table*" — instead, we use "le mot *table* (répété deux fois)".

The metasign keeps the masculine form regardless of the grammatical gender of the initial form:

"Ce *table* que vous avez dans votre texte..."

What is interesting, when there is a feminine 'I' for a metasign which in real supposition is a part of speech which is in accord in gender with the determined basis, the metasign may keep the masculine form, etc. "la forme *haut*".

Metasigns are a typical phenomenon for the *discours* and do not exist on the *langue* level. Therefore, they cannot be compared with lexemes existing in *langue*. While the former have fixed relations to extratextual reality, namely they denote things, lexemes do not have a specified relation to reality, and they become specified on the *langue* level by grammatical morphemes characterising a lexeme as a part of speech. Every lexeme can be the basis for initiating a derivational process, which is excluded in the case of metasigns. As opposed to the class of nouns used in real supposition, metasigns constitute a set of signs which are hardly varied semantically. This set lacks units which could be the counterparts of *nomen collectivum*, *nomen actionis* or *nomen agentis*.

All in all, metasigns function similarly as proper names but constitute a very special language unit with distinctive characteristics.

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