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## Towards an Orthodox Philosophy of Language

### Abstract

This essay makes a contribution towards an Orthodox philosophy of language by drawing on the work of Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov. Three dimensions of linguistic meaning are discussed: meaning as *reference*, meaning as *use* (the pragmatic aspect of meaning), and meaning as *sense*. The paper argues that a one-sided emphasis on one of these dimensions of meaning prevents the formation of a theologically convincing theory of language. First, an account is given of Florensky's discussion of 'pure empiricism' that anticipates later criticisms of the logical



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empiricists' theory of meaning as reference and empirical verification (ideal language philosophy). Second, the article argues that Florensky's dialectic seeks to do justice to the pragmatic aspect of meaning, but without succumbing to a radical finitism and epistemic pessimism. Although linguistic meaning is indeed dependent on pragmatic and contextual factors, Florensky believes that language enables us to acquire real knowledge of the world. Thirdly, the paper discusses Bulgakov's semantic realism and his Trinitarian understanding of semiosis. Through our acts of naming and predicating ('A is B') the Kantian abyss between noumenon and phenomenon is overcome. Predication exceeds the dichotomy of freedom and necessity, as every act of interpretation involves at once an experience of the world's resistance and an act of creativity.

#### Keywords

philosophy of language, Russian religious philosophy, linguistic meaning, realism, sophiology

## **1 Introduction**

In this paper, I will make a contribution towards an Orthodox philosophy of language. Language figured prominently in twentieth-century Western philosophy, but only few attempts have been made since the so-called 'linguistic turn' to develop a consistently theological theory of language. Very often philosophy of language is based on presuppositions that (implicitly) contradict basic Christian beliefs. Most importantly, since the late middle ages, nominalism has come to dominate a great deal of philosophical reflection about language. As a result, the epis-

temic reliability of language has been largely undermined.<sup>1</sup> I will give a brief outline of a theological philosophy of language that seeks to avoid these shortcomings by drawing on the work of the two Russian thinkers Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) and Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944). The focus of my paper will be the ‘meaning of meaning’. Three aspects of meaning will be examined: meaning as *reference* (I), meaning as *use* (the pragmatic aspect of meaning) (II), and meaning as *sense* (III).<sup>2</sup> I will show that the neglect of one of these aspects of meaning, as well as a one-sided emphasis on one aspect, prevent the formation of a theologically convincing theory of linguistic meaning and generate forms of reductionism.

## **2    Ideal language philosophy: meaning as reference and empirical verification**

In the 1920s and 30s, the logical positivists (or logical empiricists) pursued the project of an ‘ideal language philosophy’. They reduced the task of philosophy to correcting the ambiguities of natural language that obscure rational thinking and reliable knowledge about the world. The purpose of the so-called ‘principle of verification’ was to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless statements. According to A. J. Ayer, who introduced logical positivism to the English-speaking

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Leiss, *Sprachphilosophie* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 92. A different use of terminology is possible as well as common; see *ibid.*, pp. 92–94.

world, “a sentence had literal meaning if and only if the proposition it expressed was either *analytic* or *empirically verifiable*”.<sup>3</sup> But the concept of verifiability proved rather complex and some subtle qualifications were introduced to render it philosophically more plausible.<sup>4</sup> According to the revised version of the principal, a sentence was meaningful if it could be regarded as a *probable hypothesis*. Full verifiability was no longer considered a *necessary* criterion for meaningfulness. Yet, they argued, metaphysical and theological statements are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable – not even in the weak sense – and therefore literally nonsensical. At best, they express the attitude a person has adopted towards life and can only be of emotive, ethical, or aesthetic significance.<sup>5</sup>

Writing in the second decade of the twentieth century, before logical positivism emerged in the West, Florensky repudiates the attempt to define linguistic meaning in terms of the

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: V. Gollancz, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1946), p. 5. Italics added. A more elaborate version of the principle of verification reads as follows: “We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false. If, on the other hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth or falsehood, is consistent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of his future experience, then, as far as he is concerned, it is, if not a tautology, a mere pseudo-proposition. The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him; but it is not literally significant” (ibid., p. 35).

<sup>4</sup> The problems of the verification principal were discussed in detail by Carl Gustav Hempel, ‘Empiricist Criteria of Cognitive Significance: Problems and Changes’, in *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Carl Gustav Hempel (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 101–19.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Carnap, ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language’, in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1959), pp. 60–81, p. 78.

empirical verifiability of a sentence. At the beginning of the movement, the logical positivists believed in the possibility of drawing an unambiguous distinction between neutral, observational sets of facts that cannot be questioned by any rational observer, and explanatory, scientific theories that need to be verified on the basis of these facts. Florensky questions any simplistic opposition between *describing* (*opisyvat'*) and *explaining* (*ob"iasniat'*) reality.<sup>6</sup> He argues that if by 'explaining something' we mean that something can be explained *exhaustively*, then this kind of explanation can neither be found in the ordinary language of everyday life, nor in the sciences. Rather, an explanation must be viewed as a *specific mode of description*, as a description that is particularly dense, resulting from a particularly penetrating concentration.<sup>7</sup> Every explanation is conditional, i.e. diachronically and synchronically contingent, including scientific theories. Explanations constitute models, symbols and fictive images that shape our perception of the world. The explanation is believed to be apodictic, but in fact only has a hypothetical character.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, Florensky understands the history of science not in terms of a continuous evolution, but as a series of convulsions, destructions, upheavals, explosions and catastrophes. Anticipating insights by Thomas Kuhn, he writes that "the history of science is a permanent revolution (*permanentnaia revoliutsiia*)".<sup>9</sup> Yet despite this intuition, Florensky remarks, the

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<sup>6</sup> Pavel Florenskii, 'Dialektika', in *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. Andronik Trubachev, P.V. Florenskii, and M.S. Trubacheva, vol. 3/1 (Moskva: Mysl', 2000), pp. 118–41, 118.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Pavel Florenskii, 'Nauka kak simvolicheskoe opisanie', in *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. Andronik Trubachev, P.V. Florenskii, and M.S. Trubacheva, vol. 3/1 (Moskva: Mysl', 2000), pp. 104–18, 112.

<sup>9</sup> Pavel Florenskii, 'Dialektika', p. 120.

sciences still pursue the ideal of an unambiguous method and demand permanence and immutability. It is the dynamism and flux of *time* that unmasks this ideal as an illusion and that relativizes the significance of the schematic constructions by means of which we seek to achieve epistemically reliable knowledge about the world. Once the reductive character of science is recognized, it becomes clear that time and life must become a 'method'. For Florensky, this is the task of philosophy and (Platonic) dialectic.<sup>10</sup> The dependence of meaning on time and context is of course an important aspect of the pragmatic dimension of linguistic meaning that I will discuss in the next section.

To sum up: If it is not possible to evaluate rival scientific theories in a fully rational way by checking them against, neutral, uncontested observational facts or sensory data, and if a description and an explanation are not qualitatively different kinds of discourse, verification can no longer serve as a criterion to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless statements. The theory of meaning as reference – as conceived of by the logical positivists – is no longer plausible. This is not to say, of course, that the notion of reference is itself implausible. Rather, it means that reference cannot be isolated from other aspects of meaning.

### 3 The pragmatic dimension of meaning: meaning as use

The transition from ideal language philosophy to ordinary language philosophy was motivated by the discovery of the *prag-*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 121; 'Razum i dialektika', in *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. Andronik Trubachev, P. V. Florenskii, and M. S. Trubacheva, vol. 2 (Moskva: Mysl', 1996), pp. 131–42.

*matic* dimension of meaning. In the wake of the later Wittgenstein's insight that "the meaning of a word is [often] its use in language"<sup>11</sup>, philosophers such as J.L. Austin, J. Searle, H.P. Grice significantly widened the scope of philosophy of language. It became clear that not all sentences describe states of affairs and state facts that are either true or false. The meticulous analysis of the different properties of utterances, of language in use, brought to the fore a wide range of additional linguistic features that had hitherto escaped scrutiny. Whereas semantics deals with stable and conventional rules of meaning, pragmatics seeks to explain how one and the same sentence or word can express different meanings in different contexts, and studies features such as ambiguity, indexicality, and conversational implicature.<sup>12</sup>

While ideal language philosophy had an empiricist, scientific and anti-metaphysical orientation, ordinary language philosophy was anti-scientific and tended to be less hostile to metaphysical questions. Proponents of the latter movement hold that the technical terms of scientific language would be incomprehensible without reference to words with ordinary meanings.<sup>13</sup> Human life and culture, including the sciences, are based on a pre-theoretical understanding of the world. This

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<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Philosophische Untersuchungen', in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Tagebücher 1914–16. Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Werkausgabe Bd. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 225–580, §43.

<sup>12</sup> Kent Bach, 'Pragmatics and the Philosophy of Language', in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. Laurence R. Horn and Gregory L. Ward (Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 463–87.

<sup>13</sup> A. P. Martinich, 'Ordinary Language Philosophy', in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Taylor and Francis, 1998). Retrieved 14 Mar. 2019, from <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/ordinary-language-philosophy/v-1>. doi:10.4324/9780415249126-U026-1.

view brings ordinary language philosophy into proximity to certain strands of Continental philosophy.<sup>14</sup> In Phenomenology, for instance, key ideas such as *lifeworld* (*Lebenswelt*) and *Dasein* are used to articulate our primordial, non-cognitive and non-epistemic engagement with the world that precedes any reflection on the correspondence, or non-correspondence, of propositions with determinate states of affairs.

Florensky's and Bulgakov's philosophies of language are (in some respects) close to the tradition of ordinary language philosophy and its Continental equivalents. As already mentioned, on Florensky's view, scientific discourse and its rigid methods tend to disregard temporality and the inexhaustible semantic depth of reality. Through everyday thinking (*zhiteiskaia mysl'*), as he points out, everything is always already explained. But the explanations are generated on an *ad hoc* basis; they occur in an unsystematic an unordered way, and are characterized by ceaseless, arbitrary shifts from object to object, and from one perspective to the next.<sup>15</sup>

According to Florensky, this lack of method is no problem for philosophy, which strives to achieve an all-connected and comprehensive view of reality. Although philosophy is more abstract than everyday thinking, it springs from the folk soul and not from school philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Dialogue and (Platonic) dialectic are the linguistic manifestations of a dynamical, apophatic, Christian philosophy that seeks to penetrate deeper and deeper into the layers of reality, without ever equating any of

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Lee Braver, *Groundless Grounds. A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Pavel Florenskii, 'Dialektika', p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> Pavel Florenskii, 'Obshchechelovecheskie korni idealizma (filosofia narodov)', in *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. Andronik Trubachev, P. V. Florenskii, and M. S. Trubacheva, vol. 3/2 (Moskva: Mysl', 2000), pp. 145–68.



its symbolizations with reality itself.<sup>17</sup> The dialectic method embraces the pragmatic dimension of meaning. In order to understand the meaning of an utterance, we must pay attention to the *addressee*, to the location *where* the utterance occurs, to the time *when* it occurs, as well as to the *purpose* of the utterance.<sup>18</sup>

Florensky and Bulgakov are both *metaxological* thinkers, who philosophize about the boundary between immanence and transcendence. The transcendent is grasped in and through the contingencies of the immanent sphere, which means that the flux of time, movement and development, as well as synchronic difference are not opposed to the transcendent, but positively mediate it. Finitude is viewed as the “vehicle of transcendence”.<sup>19</sup> The multiplicity of co-existence in the sense of alterity, and the multiplicity of succession in the sense of temporal change and development are *loci* of divine presence and truth.<sup>20</sup> Yet, in twentieth-century philosophy of language, the (re)-discovery of pragmatics as a central aspect of meaning often turned out to be a continuation, or even radicalisation, of a restrictive, *post-metaphysical finitism* that is opposed to Florensky’s and Bulgakov’s thought. For pragmatics investigates the relationship between the sign and the (finite) sign users as well as the spatio-temporal conditions under which the act of interpretation is carried out. And if this aspect of meaning is overemphasized, pragmatics becomes a tool to justify and

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<sup>17</sup> Pavel Florenskii, ‘Dialektika’, pp. 123–24; *ibid.*, ‘Razum i dialektika’, pp. 138–42.

<sup>18</sup> Pavel Florenskii, ‘Dialektika’, p. 141.

<sup>19</sup> See Caitlin Smith Gilson, *The Metaphysical Presuppositions of Being-in-the-World. A Confrontation between St. Thomas Aquinas and Martin Heidegger* (New York; London: Continuum, 2010), p. 107.

<sup>20</sup> Pavel A. Florenskii, *Stolp i utverzhenie istiny. Opyt pravoslavnoi teoditsei v dvenadtsati pis’mach* (Moskva: Pravda, 1990), p. 46.

reinforce the post-Kantian opacity of the thing-in-itself. There is, in many cases, a close connection between pragmatics and post-metaphysical philosophy. Florensky's and Bulgakov's semantic realisms are attempts to avoid this danger.

#### 4 Meaning as sense: semantic realism

According to Bulgakov, genuine cognition is possible in the sense that the abyss between noumenon and phenomenon that dominates a great deal of post-Kantian philosophy can be bridged. In fact, he argues, the abyss is always already bridged by everyday language through our acts of *predicating* and *naming* (*imenovanie*).<sup>21</sup> In the act of naming, the copula connects the transcendent *hypokeimenon* or *ousia*, the thing-in-itself, with an immanent predicate, with a word-idea expressing a cosmic mode of being. The transcendent-actual (first hypostasis) contemplates itself in immanent being, in the realm of language and ideas (second hypostasis). The first hypostasis manifests itself energetically, by affirming itself through the act of naming, and it is the copula 'is' that brings about the unity between the transcendent and the immanent (third hypostasis). It is the noun (*imia sushchestvitel'noe*) that establishes the primordial realism of human language and thinking that is at the same time also an idealism. For the noun and the copula achieve an ontological agglutination of a *res* with an *idea*.<sup>22</sup>

Every being can receive different namings (A, B, C, D...), all of which are mediated by the copula 'is', and all of which are manifestations of an object's energy. The predicative use of the noun, Bulgakov argues, mediates between the general idea, or the

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<sup>21</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *Filosofia imeni* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1952), p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

pure, noetic idea-sense (understood in the Platonic or sophiological sense), and the instantiation or objectification of this idea in a particular, concrete being.

The potentially infinite possibilities of predicating and naming have an ontological foundation and are not conceived of as merely culturally conditioned. The human being's creative work (*tvorchestvo*) is *anthroposophic* (*antroposofiino*): the human being is actively and freely involved in the process of naming, but human creativity is at the same time constrained by the regularity (*zakonomernost'*) of the world's sophianicity.<sup>23</sup>

Bulgakov's philosophy of language is firmly embedded in his sophiological world view that distinguishes between the Divine and creaturely Sophia.<sup>24</sup> The divine Sophia is the Wisdom of the world, the world soul, the intelligible, ideal foundation of the world; the cosmos, the plenitude of being. The creaturely Sophia is present in our spatio-temporal world, which is the same cosmos, but in a state of becoming (*stanovlenie*) and dissolution in non-being (*nebytie*).<sup>25</sup> As predicates, words are rays of the intelligible world that become manifest in the epistemic foggy of our empirical world. It is the predicative energy, the copula that serves as the connecting ladder between the two worlds. We name things according to their intelligible image.

Bulgakov's and Florensky's semantic realism flies in face of the dominant trends in twentieth-century philosophy of language, whose roots can be traced back to the rise of nominalism in the late middle ages. Yet they by no means stand alone in their quest for a realist philosophy of language. In the twentieth

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Sergii Bulgakov, *Nevesta agntsa. O bogochelovechestve*, vol. III (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1945), pp. 7–88; *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI; Edinburgh: W.B. Eerdmans; T&T Clark, 2002), pp. 3–123.

<sup>25</sup> S. Bulgakov, *Filosofia imeni*, pp. 74–75.

century, it was primarily linguists and semioticians influenced by Charles Sanders Peirce who came to question the all-pervasive influence of nominalism in modern Western philosophy. Peirce's pragmatism radically questions the nominalist *Weltanschauung*, which denies the reality of relations, laws and universals outside the sphere of thought, in the realm of mind-independent being.<sup>26</sup>

## 5 Conclusions

The two Russian thinkers pay attention to all three dimensions of linguistic meaning discussed in this paper: meaning as reference, meaning as use, and meaning as sense. First, language has the capacity to refer to an extra-linguistic reality. Second, linguistic meaning is to a large extent dependent on temporal and spatio-contextual factors and involves the sign-user or interlocutors. Yet the finite communicative conditions are viewed as the vehicle of transcendence and are not intrinsically tied to a radical metaphysical finitism. Third, naming and predicating are creative human activities and the interaction between the object and the interpreter allows for an infinite number of acts of predication. Yet predicating and naming cannot be reduced to a perspectival and merely culturally conditioned way of talking about the world, but have an ontological foundation in the world. Semiotically speaking, Florensky and Bulgakov embrace a *triadic* understanding of semiosis. The linguistic sign stands for an object (reference), and represents this object to somebody, to the sign-user (pragmatics).

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Forster, *Peirce and the Threat of Nominalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Furthermore, the sign represents the object in some respect, i.e. the object, say A, is interpreted as either B, or C, D... etc. (sense). As shown above, in Bulgakov, this triadic semiosis has an explicitly Trinitarian character.<sup>27</sup>

Florensky's and Bulgakov's approaches transcend the traditional division between realism and idealism. Perception and understanding of the world are always already mediated by signs and language. We can know the world as it is in itself, but due to the apophatic nature of reality, knowledge ensues only in the course of an infinite semiotic process. Predication exceeds the dichotomy between freedom and necessity, as every act of interpretation involves at once the experience of the world's resistance *and* an act of creativity. In other words, "the sign stands neither in the world of nature nor in the world of culture exclusively, but in the interweaving and the intersection of these together in the world of human experience".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sergii Bulgakov, *Filosofia imeni*, p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> John N. Deely, *Purely Objective Reality* (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), p. 172. Yet it is possible to distinguish between different kinds of discourses: some are (almost) purely natural, others (almost) purely cultural.