ABSTRACT:

In this paper I discuss Cassirer’s interpretation of language as symbolic form by looking at it from the perspective of his general functionalist conception. This functionalism was developed by Cassirer in his early work *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* in relation to an analysis of the modern science. Later, the results of this investigation evolved into a new understanding of human cultural activity as an activity of creating meanings.

Key words: synthesis, function, science, symbolic form, language.

A. Ernst Cassirer’s understanding of scientific knowledge

Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) may be considered one of the last great humanists, a true *Uomo Universale*: he masters both Einstein’s physics and Hegel’s philosophy, the Culture of Renaissance and Goethe’s works, the history of religion and the history of science. His method is a synthesis between Kantian and (apparently in a paradoxical manner) Hegelian philosophy, on the one hand, and structural and functional thinking of science, on the other. Educated in the school of the Neo-Kantian H. Cohen and considered his most important student, Cassirer develops Cohen’s ideas, therefore being himself considered a Neo-Kantian, although a special one. This Neo-Kantianism was, in other respects, the reason why, from the beginning of the thirties, in Europe at least, Cassirer’s thought remained, until recently, at the periphery of philosophical interest. Interest in his work awoke when one discovered in it anticipations of structuralism and postmodernism.

Many of his books seem to be only historical works, presentations of writings and ideas belonging to authors of the past. Despite his immense erudition, Cassirer is not only a historian of ideas, but also an original thinker, for whom the appeal to the past is an opportunity to assess and acknowledge the contributions of his precursors in the development of certain ideas or disciplines. For any problem he deals with, Cassirer first presents its history and the different approaches to it in the course of time. In this way he succeeds not only in giving a very accurate presentation of also problem, but also shows the manner in which other conceptions have conditioned it and given it its actual form during its history. We have to emphasize this particularity of his method, a particularity that corresponds to his general philosophical conception, i.e. the philosophy of symbolic forms. Cassirer himself maintains that his method is indebted to Hegelian phenomenology, namely to a “science of the experience of consciousness” (Hegel 1986, 596) (as was the first title of the famous Hegelian work), which means a science that describes the experiences through which consciousness (human spirit, in general) has to go through in order to reach its present stage. Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms necessarily implies this historical dimension, because only through it can one observe the progress, the materialization of a certain symbolic form. Historicity remains therefore also for Cassirer, as for other contemporaneous thinkers of him, Heidegger for instance, a fundamental trait of the human being. But this historicity seems to be paradoxical, knowing that Ernst Cassirer is considered a Neo-Kantian philosopher, because it is not so easy to comprehend how the pre-eminence of science and logic (one of the main features of the Neo-Kantianism) may be placed on the same level and associated with the historicity of man.

When at Davos M. Heidegger criticizes Cassirer for his Neo-Kantianism, he explains that this philosophical stream interprets Im. Kant’s work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as being only an epistemological treatise, only an attempt to found mathematical physics. Neo-Kantianism should also consider, according to Heidegger, that the only domain of
culture which may be seen as being the true object of philosophy remains a specific type of science:

One can understand the common feature of Neo-Kantianism, says Heidegger, only by reflecting on its origin. This origin is the embarrassment of philosophy when faced with the question of what is left to do for it in the total body of knowledge. All that seemed to remain was just this knowledge of science rather than of what there is. This perspective determined the entire ‘Back-to-Kant’ movement. Kant was seen as the theoretician of a mathemo-physical epistemology. (Hamburg 1964, 214)

On account of such an interpretation, all other domains of culture would be depreciated to the level of a gratuitous play of the human spirit. We would find true knowledge only within science, and the model of every truth would remain scientific truth, which is a “universal” and “necessary” truth, as proposed by Kant. Cassirer’s answer is very suggestive of his theoretical approach:

The status of the mathematical sciences of nature is only a paradigm for me and not the philosophical problem in its entirety. There is one point, though, on which both Heidegger and I do agree and that is the central importance of the productive imagination for Kant. I was led to this insight by my work on the symbolic (forms). Imagination is the relation of all thought to intuition (Anschauung), a ‘synthesis speciosa’. Synthesis is the basic power of all pure thought. (Hamburg 1964, 214)

Thus, we see that for Cassirer the problem area of philosophy goes beyond the sphere of the mathematical sciences of nature, even if these sciences represent a paradigm for philosophy. But the sense in which we must understand this paradigm is given by the last sentence, which, in my opinion, expresses exactly the essence of Cassirer’s entire thought. For him, certainly, synthesis is the fundamental power of every thought, the aim of philosophy being in this sense to explore this “basic power” of synthesis which belongs to the human spirit, in all the domains of its materialization. This program also continues the investigations of H. Cohen. Therefore, says Cassirer, „I do not look upon my own development as a defection from Cohen” (Hamburg 1964, 214), who, also for him, is not only an epistemologist.

Cohen has emphasized that understanding the activity of consciousness must not be restricted, as Kant has done, only to the mathematical sciences of nature. The unity of consciousness, understood as a unity of the cultural consciousness, has to become the main research object of philosophy (Görland 1906, 15). Cohen saw the unity of consciousness, in the Kantian sense of it, as a synthetic unity, and the idea of a cultural unity of the consciousness means for him that the entire human culture is the result of the synthetic act of the consciousness and must be investigated as a materialization of it. But what does it mean to speak of this synthetic unity of consciousness, and the concept of “synthesis” that was considered by Cassirer as being the “basic power of all pure thought”, i.e. of the spirit?

This concept comes from Kant’s philosophy, where it may be seen as the true cornerstone of the whole Kantian system. One knows that Kantian philosophy distinguishes between the thing-in-itself and the phenomenon, and that on account of this distinction the concept of knowledge with which Kant operates is one which is valid only for the phenomena: we know the phenomena, says Kant, but not the thing-in-itself. Our knowledge presupposes a matter of knowledge (the sensations) and a form of knowledge (the concepts). In its most general meaning, conceptual activity is seen by Kant as an ordering activity whose object is the “manifold” of intuitions. But this ordering activity presupposes a criterion, an instrument of operating such that the undetermined manifold of intuitions can be arranged in representations, namely, that they can be built into a unity. Certainly, our representations do not appear chaotically in our consciousness. This composing is the result of a double activity of the human soul: a) an activity of the productive imagination, which arranges our intuitions in different concrete relations to one another, the results of which we see in our current experience; and b) an activity of the intellect, which produces the meaning of these representations. The “meaning” of our representations is the concept, and this is actually a function, i.e. the result of the activity of bringing a multitude of representation under one common representation: „All intuitions,” says Kant, „being sensuous, depend on affections, concepts on functions. By this function, I therefore mean the unity of the act of arranging different representations under one common representation. (Kant 2, 1881, 60) We may say that Kant is the philosopher who introduces the term of „function” into the philosophical tradition. But this „function” is only one of the aspects of the activity of the human spirit. The other aspect, the one that is correlated with it, is „synthesis”. As Kant describes this pair of activities:
In its most general sense, I understand by synthesis the act of arranging different representations together, and of comprehending what is manifold in them under one form of knowledge. (....) We shall see hereafter that synthesis in general is the mere result of what I call the faculty of imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but the existence of which we are scarcely conscious. But to reduce this synthesis to concepts is a function that belongs to the understanding, and by which the understanding supplies us for the first time with knowledge properly so called. (Kant 2, 1881, 68–69)

Hence, synthesis, as an activity of the (productive) imagination, combines images, builds from different representations a new one, as, for instance, from a succession of perceptions about a mountain the unique intuitive image of that mountain. The function of the intellect allows for this manifold to be recognized and comprehended as forming a single object: the mountain. Therefore, when Kant considers human knowledge as being a continuous process of bringing a manifold of representations under a common one, i.e. as a functional unity that belongs only to the human consciousness, he believes that he has the right to consider human reason as not only a pupil of nature (as we could think, if we understand knowledge as being related only to what appears to us), but a true judge of it:

Reason, holding in one hand its principles, according to which concordant phenomena alone can be admitted as laws of nature, and in the other hand the experiment, which it has devised according to those principles, must approach nature in order to be taught by it: but not in the character of a pupil, who agrees to everything the master likes, but as an appointed judge, who compels the witnesses to answer the questions which he himself proposes. (Kant 1, 1881, 368)

This concept of knowledge excludes therefore the idea of a simple mirroring of nature. It excludes the understanding of knowledge as an activity of reflecting the outside of human being in his inner consciousness. Human knowledge is not a result of reflecting, but is a construction. However, it is not an arbitrary construction.

For Cassirer too, as we have seen, both the idea of Kantian synthesis and the idea of the (intellectual) function remain fundamental terms. Actually, these two notions, due to the fact that they represent different aspects of the same act, are often used, even by Kant, as interchangeable concepts. For Cassirer too, knowledge has a functional character, namely, the act of bringing a manifold of representations under a common one. Unlike for Kant, this activity no longer expresses the unconscious operations of the human spirit, but is rather an activity by which the object itself is created.

In his work Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff, Cassirer introduces a distinction that will become fundamental for the entire XX century. The major theme of this writing is the way of building our concepts, both the building of scientific concepts and our common concepts. Cassirer starts his investigation by describing Aristotle’s manner of explaining this building. For Aristotle our concepts reflect a true resemblance that exists between things. This is why we speak about a correspondence between these concepts and the real things. „For Aristotle, at least,” Cassirer argues, the concept is no mere subjective schema in which we collect the common elements of an arbitrary group of things. The selection of what is common remains an empty play of ideas if it is not assumed that what is thus gained is, at the same time, the real Form which guarantees the causal and teleological connection of particular things. The real and ultimate similarities of things are also the creative forces from which they spring and according to which they are formed. The process of comparing things and of grouping them together according to similar properties, as it is expressed first of all in language, does not lead to what is indefinite, but if rightly conducted, ends in the discovery of the real essences of things. Thought only isolates the specific type; this latter is contained as an active factor in the individual concrete reality and gives the general pattern to the manifold special forms. The biological species signifies both the end toward which the living individual strives and the immanent force by which its evolution is guided. The logical doctrine of the construction of the concept and of definition can only be built up with reference to these fundamental relations of the real. The determination of the concept according to its next higher genus and its specific difference reproduces the process by which the real substance successively unfolds itself in its special forms of being. Thus it is this basic conception of substance to which the purely logical theories of Aristotle constantly have reference. The complete system of scientific definitions would also be a complete expression of the substantial forces which control reality. (Cassirer 1923, 7–8)

Hence, for Aristotle, whose ontological thought dominated Western thought until the end of the Middle Ages, our concepts reflect the real sub-
stanes, those substances which are effectively in re. Between knowledge and reality there is no insurmountable wall as in the case of Kant. This understanding of knowledge determined that ancient and medieval science had mainly a qualitative character, unlike modern science, which had a quantitative character. Ancient and medieval science tends to grasp the inherent substance of the thing, and not the relations between them. Even more, mathematics, for us the science of these relations, was considered by Aristotle an obstacle on the way to this grasping. Nevertheless, states Cassirer, in mathematics and geometry we deal with a different type of concept building. Mathematical concepts do not reflect outer realities, so that numbers and geometric forms cannot be considered to be such reflections. On the contrary, in mathematics we encounter a real Setzung, a creation of concepts. And the same thing happens in the entire modern science of nature. This science which separates itself only with difficulty from a substantialist conception, namely from a self-understanding of knowledge as a knowledge of real substances, founds its theoretical undertaking by certain conceptual constructions, by means of which it can investigate reality afterwards. On account of these fundamental concepts that are elaborated by scientists, one makes a selection in the multitude of the aspects of reality. We find such a selection in every science, says Cassirer. Further, this selection takes place even on the level of our common perception. Hence, we encounter reality only while starting from a previous concept about the thing that we shall encounter. This is the new functional model of understanding knowledge that is supported by Cassirer, a model in which reality is given to us according to the concepts which are already possessed by us:

Without a process of arranging in series, without running through the different instances, the consciousness of their generic connection – and consequently of the abstract object – could never arise. This transition from member to member, however manifestly presupposes a principle according to which it takes place, and by which the form of dependence between each member and the succeeding one, is determined. Thus from this point of view also it appears that all construction of concepts is connected with some definite form of construction of series. (Cassirer 1923, 15)

The connection of the members is in every case produced by some general law of arrangement through which a thoroughgoing rule of succession is established. That which binds the elements of the series a, b, c, . . . ., together is not itself a new element, that was factually blended with them, but it is the rule of progression, which remains the same, no matter in which member it is represented. The function F (a, 6), F(b, c), . . . ., which determines the sort of dependence between the successive members, is obviously not to be pointed out as itself a member of the series, which exists and develops according to it. (Cassirer 1923, 17)

And finally:

Every mathematical function represents a universal law, which, by virtue of the successive values which the variable can assume, contains within itself all the particular cases for which it holds. If, however, this is once recognized, a completely new field of investigation is opened for logic. In opposition to the logic of the generic concept, which, as we saw, represents the point of view and influence of the concept of substance, there now appears logic of the mathematical concept of function. However, the field of application of this form of logic is not confined to mathematics alone. On the contrary, it extends over into the field of the knowledge of nature; for the concept of function constitutes the general schema and model according to which the modern concept of nature has been molded in its progressive historical development. (Cassirer 1923, 21)

The transformation of the concept of function in Cassirer’s thought in comparison with Kant’s concept of function consists in the fact that function means for him no more the conceptual recognition of the “unconscious” activity of the soul, but a process which is treated for itself and not in relation to a background that is external to knowledge.

Cassirer renounces the Kantian assumption concerning the primacy of the unreflected experience, i.e. the premise of the existence of such an experience about objects, which must be given first to us in order that we may reflect on it and that we can build concepts about the objects that belong to it. His argument, as we have seen, is that any science, namely any true knowledge, does not proceed in this way, but, on the contrary, while it posits and builds certain concepts, it opens for itself a certain horizon of objects, a certain plain of objects which have not existed prior to and apart from that concept:

The individual thing is nothing for the physicist, but a system of physical constants; outside of these constants, he possesses no means of possibility of characterizing the particularity of an object. (Cassirer 1923, 148)

Every science, on the ground of its fundamental principles, creates a domain of objects that will be investigated by it in the course of its development.
These principles are no more, as they are for Kant, conditions of a universal experience, but conditions of a special experience, the particular experience (i.e. the relationship with the objects) of the concerned science, an experience that is not reducible to any other kind of experience. Thus, even the term of “phenomenon” changes: the phenomena are no longer the objects which are conceptually determined by the intellect, objects that we find in all of our experiences, but every scientific domain encounters a special kind of phenomena. Using its own principles and concepts, a science creates a network that permits it to create a particular type of phenomena, i.e. the objects which it investigates are thought and described starting from those principles:

It is only owing to the fact that science abandons the attempt to give a direct, sensuous copy of reality, that science is able to represent this reality as a necessary connection of grounds and consequents. It is only through going beyond the circle of the given, that science creates the intellectual means of representing the given according to laws. For the elements, at the basis of the order of perceptions according to law, are never found as constituent parts in the perceptions. If the significance of natural science consisted simply in reproducing the reality that is given in concrete sensations, then it would indeed be a vain and useless work; for what copy, however perfect, could equal the original in exactness and certainty? Knowledge has no need for such a duplication, which would still leave the logical form of the perceptions unchanged. Instead of imagining behind the world of perceptions a new existence built up out of the materials of sensation, it traces the universal intellectual schemata, in which the relations and connections of perceptions can be perfectly represented. Atom and ether, mass and force are nothing but examples of such schemata, and fulfil their purpose so much the better, the less they contain of direct perceptual content. (Cassirer 1923, 164–165)

Because science thinks every object starting from its principles and schemes, induction, which is the fundamental procedure of science, takes place not as a paradoxical and incomprehensible generalization, not as an extending or generalizing of particular data (which can be observed at the beginning of our research) to the entire class of objects. Every induction, says Cassirer, is founded on a certain way of conceiving the individual case. That means that from the beginning induction projects in the particular case a content that transcends it radically, transforming this particular case in the exponent of an ideal rule. The reality is that the process of adding through empirical observation of new cases actually confirms the rule which existed from the beginning in the mind of the researcher and not that these cases are those which direct the researcher to discover the rule:

The logical act of ‘integration’ which enters into every truly inductive judgment, thus contains no paradox and no inner difficulty; the advance from the individual to the whole, involved here, is possible because the reference to the whole is from the first not excluded but retained, and only needs to be brought separately into conceptual prominence. (Cassirer 1923, 248–249)

In this way all the objects that a certain science investigates are not only phenomena – a concept that emphasizes only the difference between the content of knowledge (which only “appears” as the concept expresses it) and reality –, but are also “symbols”, that is entities which exist only because they express an immanent rule:

Each particular member of experience possesses a symbolic character, in so far as the law of the whole, which includes the totality of members, is posited and intended in it. The particular appears as a differential that is not fully determined and intelligible without reference to its integral. (Cassirer 1923, 300)

Thus every science generates its own symbolic field. Moreover, the human being, on account of his entire activity and life, is, as Cassirer later argues, an animal symbolicum (Cassirer 1944/1972, 26). This means that in each domain of his activity the human being encounters objects only because he thinks them by means of a certain formula, of a certain scheme of understanding, of a certain sense, because he thinks them in a certain way. Therefore, the existence of a layer of experience that could precede thinking and its instrument, judgement, is denied by Cassirer:

The fact that there is no content of consciousness, which is not shaped and arranged in some manner according to certain relations, proves that the process of perception is not to be separated from that of judgment. It is by elementary acts of judgment that the particular content is grasped as a member of a certain order and is thereby first fixed in itself. (Cassirer 1923, 341)

Arriving at the conclusion that perception, the elemental act of human consciousness, is pervaded by a symbolizing character, on the one hand, and the conclusion that the different sciences have – each of them – a symbolic approach, irreducible to other
factors (thus asserting that there exists an irreducible plurality of symbolizing acts), Cassirer may now generalize the idea of a symbolic character by conceiving man in general as a symbolic being, a being which, through his entire activity, projects around him an autonomous network of meanings. Cassirer does not develop this idea in his writing Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff, but acknowledges that he discovered it while working on this book (Cassirer 1, 1977, V).

B. The language as symbolic form

We find the development of the previous idea in the writing which represent the systematic work of Cassirer, the expression of his philosophical conception, namely in the volumes of his Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. At the beginning of the first volume, Cassirer maintains that the project he has commenced in his writing about substance and function must be developed by showing not only the way as the symbolic activity of man takes place in the sciences of nature, what he actually realized in that work, but also in other domains of the human existence. In other words, it was necessary to investigate the different modes by means of which man encounters the “world” and their articulation. Also it was necessary to present the specificity of those modes and their irreducibility to other faculties of the human spirit.

In general, writes Cassirer,

under a symbolic form should be understood every energy of mind through which a mental content of meaning is connected to a concrete, sensory sign and made to adhere internally to it. (Cassirer 1956, 175)

The term “symbolic form” has three meanings in Cassirer’s philosophy. First, it signifies the relationship established between the symbols of a certain domain. In this sense Cassirer uses terms such as “symbolic concept”, “symbolic function” or the “symbolic character” (das Symbolische). A second meaning of this term concerns those domains of culture where these symbolic relationships are materialized: myth, art, religion, language, science. Finally, “symbolic form” refers to the fundamental categories of thought (space, time, cause, number, etc.), categories which acquire a specific form in each of the domains mentioned before (Hamburg 1949, 77). We have seen earlier that the term “symbol” is conceived by Cassirer as it is used in the sciences, namely, as a sign which stays in a predefined relationship with a totality of signs. The symbol is not so much a sign that is related to something real which is substituted by it, as it is a sign that receives its meaning only on the ground of its intrinsic relationship with a totality of signs that it is included within. Cassirer would then subscribe to Husserl’s idea, that “to signify is not a way of being a sign in the sense of being an indication” (Husserl 1901, 23).

Hence, the sign has no existence through itself, but is produced by a law of generation, by a principle of generation, which produces that totality of signs within which each particular symbol is included. This principle of generation, which is precisely the “symbolic form”, founds the great domains of culture. But each domain has a specific symbolic form, and own law of generation (Cassirer 1, 1977, 12). Only from a formal point of view can we talk about a universality of symbolic form as all domains of culture presuppose the existence of a certain act of relating their contents. But the act of relating that belongs to a domain is completely different from the act of relating that belongs to another domain, such that these domains are all irreducible one to another. Language, as symbolic form, is not reducible to a simple transformation in a linguistic sound of an emotional reaction caused by reality. Even if the linguistic sound is also such a reaction, the fact that the human being, in this primal stage of his development, has different emotional reactions before different aspects of reality proves the existence of a selecting activity regarding the contents of reality, a selection which, for Cassirer, is possible only on the ground of a certain function. In the same way, the contents of myth are not reducible to language (as proposed by a certain direction of myth interpretation), nor to other faculties of the human spirit. The myth is the result of an autonomous symbolic activity. Therefore, says Cassirer, the philosophy of symbolic forms does not search for the categories of the consciousness of objects only in the intellect, but begins from the assumption that such categories must act everywhere, in general, where from a chaos of impressions a cosmos, a characteristic and typical “image of world” shall be built. Each such image of the world is possible only by means of specific acts of objectification, i.e. of transformation of the simple “impressions” in representations which are determined and well articulated in themselves (Cassirer 2, 1977, 39).

The relation of a concrete symbol (of a certain symbolic content) to reality is thus always mediated by the principle of generation specific to the domain
where that symbol belongs, a principle that realizes the synthesis of all of our “impressions”. The “indication” of the real thing is possible only on the ground of that mediation. Therefore the indicated real thing is from the beginning an exponent of the symbolic function and not an autonomous existence.

The symbolic dimension indicates not only the building of a functional unity of meanings, but it is also a process of objectification. The term “objectification” comes from the era of German Idealism. We find it in Goethe and in Fichte, but most of all in Hegel. Here we meet the idea of the objectification of Absolute Spirit. This Spirit has an existence that objectifies itself by means of its creations, that is by means of its activity. In Cassirer’s philosophy, where the assumption of such a universal Spirit does not exist, objectification means only that a certain content of the consciousness becomes an object of it. The fact that an emotion objectifies itself means that it becomes an object of consciousness, this emotion being now given to the consciousness as an object and consciousness being able to apprehend and to know it. But the objectified content is not identical with the supposed content that would exist before the objectification. „The expression of a feeling,” says Cassirer, „is not the feeling itself – it is emotion turned into an image. This very fact implies a radical change. What hitherto was dimly and vaguely felt assumes a definite shape; what was a passive state becomes an active process.” (Cassirer 1974, 43)

Thus, the perception, when it is objectified into language, acquires a different kind of reality, it becomes an object, is given to consciousness as an object. On account of this objectification, perception is no more what it was in a supposed pre-linguistic state. But the objectification, as transformation in an object, materializes itself according to the functional laws of the domain where it takes place. The appearing object builds itself not spontaneously, in the absence of every kind of conditioning, but it builds itself starting from the conditions that make it possible (i.e. intelligible) as an object in the concerned domain.

In language we objectify our sense perceptions. In the very act of linguistic expression our perceptions assume a new form. They are no longer isolated data; they give up their individual character; they are brought under class-concepts which are designated by general names’. The act of naming does not simply add a mere conventional sign to a readymade thing – to an object known before. It is rather a prerequisite of the very conception of objects; of the idea of an objective empirical reality. (Cassirer 1972, 45)

We may extend this description of linguistic objectification to all sorts of symbolic forms. Each of them, in the very moment in which they take over a certain content and objectify it, subordinate this content to its specific object concept, and thus confer on it a meaning that has not existed before, removing its individual, particular character. By becoming an “object”, that content can now be known better and better, its features can be articulated more and more in the course of the experience with it. Thus, for instance, starting from the investigations of Use- ner, Cassirer affirms that the divinities of the developed pantheons have evolved from original deities that were undetermined and appeared instantly as „momentary deities”. They were, in Cassirer’s opinion, a kind of peculiar emotional state that was later described as a divine presence. The determination and assignation of more and more complex qualities to these primal divinities takes place by means of experience, implying also the historicity of the human being. Actually, „the momentary deities” are grounded in a layer of mythological thought which is earlier as structured religion, i.e. earlier to a personalization of the divinity, being grounded in the representation of mana.

Between the building of a religious pantheon and the constitution of the empirical world of objects there is an incontestable analogy. In both of them, says Cassirer, we can observe the transcending of the stage of isolation of the immediate given thing, and we can observe that man understands all individual existence as being integrated in a network that forms a totality (Cassirer 2, 1977, 100–101). On account of this integration, different perceptions do not remain on the stage of an “aggregate” (of a disorganized mass), but advance gradually to the condition of a „system” (of a multitude, that has an inner organization) (Cassirer 2, 1977, 101). Hence, objectification means for Cassirer also the act of integrating in a determined form (in science, in a “conceptual” form) an undetermined impression. This integration in a form is not accidental, but is realized according to the specific logic of the respective domain. Thus any symbolic form may not be seen either as a true copy of reality, nor as an arbitrary creation of the mind. Such a symbolic form has an internal logic, and it materializes itself according to an “order of foundation” (Fundierungsordnung, as Max Scheler says), namely according to a synchronic but also to a diachronic determination of
meaning. All contents that are once objectified effect all the future experience of the individual human being and of mankind in general (Cassirer 2, 1977, 235).

Cassirer sees in the evolution of language three stages: on the first stage language is only a mimic expression of reality, in the second stage language is an analogical expression, and in the third stage language becomes a symbolic expression of reality. In the first stage, the mimic one, we encounter the belief that language and its components copy reality or are believed to be an immediate expression of reality. The fear that a certain object provokes exteriorizes itself in a certain sound, a sound which is then understood as being the object itself. There exists on this level a complete identification of the word with the thing. The word is not seen as having a separate existence from the thing. In the second level, the linguistic sound, although seen as existing apart from the thing, is considered to have the power and the capacity to replace the thing. Only in the third level does the consciousness that the linguistic sound, the word, is only a sign that we use for the thing appear. We observe that in the course of this evolution the critical consciousness evolves, from the entire identification of the word with the thing to the consciousness of the fact that this word is only a sign for the thing. We encounter the same evolution, says Cassirer, in the domain of myth and mythical thought. If at the beginning every mythical creation was considered as being the reality itself, gradually the mythical consciousness transforms into a religious consciousness, a consciousness in which there exists the understanding that the reality (in this case the divinity) and its representation are absolutely different, the representation being only a symbol of the divinity (Cassirer 2, 1977, 285), a symbol that expresses very vaguely the transcendent reality of the divinity that it signifies. Only by reaching this third stage of evolution of mythical thought is the critical faculty of human thought sufficiently developed for understanding that the mythical images are projections of the human mind, and not expressions of reality itself.

Language, as all symbolic forms, is thus the result of a sui generis way of man’s relating to reality. We may only describe this relating, the way it develops itself in its own horizon, as we cannot discover the “causes” of its apparition. Language is an autonomous world, and as in the case of Kant, every attempt to determine the origin of the world leads us to a dialectics of reason, i.e. to a theoretical impasse, so all attempts to explain language by means of other capacities of the soul annihilate it and make incomprehensible the ubiquitous presence of one of the most important spiritual realities of the human history. Only by recognizing its specific character as symbolic form may language be seen as staying in continuity with the other manifestation of man and may contribute to a better understanding of him.

References


