

Zuzana Zilova *

THE LANGUAGE GAME AS THE CONSTITUTIVE COMPONENT OF POSTMODERN PLURALITY WITH REGARD TO MORAL AND INTELLECTUAL PREFERENCES OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The contribution deals with the analysis of postmodern plurality by applying the term a "language game" to the postmodern condition. It makes use of the word that originally derives from Wittgenstein's analytic philosophy and was supplemented with Lyotard's conception that sees the society as the multi-central body consisting of many independent areas. It tries to emphasise the advantages of the situation such as freedom of expressions, wide range of options to choose from, creativity, but faces up disorganization. It examines the possibility of development and the role of knowledge in the situation of plurality.

Key words: language game, plurality, autonomy, development, knowledge

1. The origin of the term and its introduction to philosophy

The intellectual activities in the Period of Postmodernism concentrate on two main issues: either they analyze the role of language that became the new tool how to interpret, proceed and form reality; or they notice the idea of plurality as the principal constitutive element expressing not only the new structure of society but also the model of morality and behaviour. Postmodernism is typical of the raising interest in crossing linguistic and ethical issues, it witnesses the expansion of subjects, themes, terms, methods that used to be specific for linguistics into the other areas like ethics, culture, values, knowledge, justice.

Similarly, the term a "language game" first appeared in the field of philosophy concerned with the role of language in epistemology. The subject was brought up by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his work "Philosophical Investigations" and was connected to everyday life and ordinary language. Wittgenstein named "the language game" each single human activity, for example: giving orders, and obeying them; making up a story, and reading it; forming and testing a hypothesis; making a joke, telling it; asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying [1]. As he states, confusion and chaotic structure of ordinary activities is not the fact that should be eliminated, but it is the source of linguistic riches, because it necessarily involves the use of specific forms of language that consist of different rules, signs, patterns. Thus each social group plays its own language game: students, lawyers, scientists, workers, musicians, teenagers and their speaking serves to their needs and interests. Naturally, all members are supposed to be aware of the rules if they want to take part and play the game successfully.

The features of variability, autonomy, multiplicity were made use of by Jean - François Lyotard. He switched over the meaning of "the language game" from linguistic issues to ethical and behavioural matters and applied it to picture the contradiction between the homogenous society that controlled human intellectual activities until Modernism and the postmodern phenomenon of the open society. The language game became a crucial word that expresses its plurality, multiculturalism, globalization, anti-centralism.

Lyotard starts the explanation with the examination of various historical periods. He says that there used to be crucial historical periods that represented, explained and legitimized social, religious or moral understanding of the world. These periods were considered to be the principal explanative ideas of an appropriate era and were typically characterized by some forms of transcendent or universal truth. Lyotard called them "the Grand narratives". They provided "the narrative knowledge", which was the knowledge of story-telling (myths, customs, religion, values) that not only clarified, but also justified everything within the system. The Grand narratives were based on the principle of wholeness, totality, inner coherence and stood for the undoubted concepts [2].

The postmodern society expresses considerable suspicion of such exclusive forms of foundation. The origin of this feeling can be traced in more sources: Western civilization that used to be proud of its Christian and Greek ideals of humanity capitulated from its central role in spreading the truth after it had admitted such events like Holocaust or Hiroshima. The disappointment has hit the Euro-American region encouraged by the expansion of other cultures, religions, values that contradict or subvert its original

* Zuzana Zilova

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Science, University of Zilina, E-mail: zuzana.zilova@fpv.uniza.sk

heritage. The Grand narratives have become bankrupt. This resulted into "...the disintegration of social aggregates into a mass of individual atoms thrown into the absurdity of Brownian motion" [2, §41]. The concept of society based on the plurality of fragmented areas (language games) appeared.

2. Plurality of language games as the model of postmodern condition

The most common concept that is connected to the theory of language games is its application to the situation of postmodern plurality with its main features: fragmentation, multiplicity, independence, autonomy, incommensurability. Using them Lyotard describes the society consisting of abundance of micronarratives (as the opposite to the former period of the Grand narratives) each one with its own criteria, goals, methods, responsibilities, moral values. There is no authority that would approve one game to provide universal truth or ultimate order. This concept is supported by the strong individualism with the indisputable right to choose own concept of life. In the situation of globalization and multiculturalism one game does not seem to be enough to capture the diversity of the world. Similarly, there are to be many ways how to organize one's behaviour and role in society, more concepts to develop personal, intellectual and creative potential. From this point of view, "self" represents the minimal space with its own autonomy. It is the language game itself that proclaims its uniqueness and sovereignty.

There are different attitudes to the postmodern condition. Advocates praise personal freedom, tolerance and respect to various concepts of life; opponents criticize its chaotic structure, vagueness, moral indifference, superficial approach to values and liken the postmodern man to a "sandy being" that can easily adapt personality to any kind of situation taking only benefits into consideration. In fact, there is no problem to move from one language game to another, change an opinion according to particular circumstances. Society lacks, and does not insist on personal attitude. Toughness and persistency are features of obsolete rigidity. The human nature should be flexible, adaptable to changeover. Not surprisingly, this is what postmodern thinkers warn against. Wolfgang Iser reminds us of the important difference in understanding the postmodern plurality. He differentiates [3]:

- a) the genuine plurality typical of accuracy that tries to support dissimilarities, argues for preservation of originality of each language game, refuses mixing criteria and moving rules from one concept to another, does not compromise due to getting benefits. It is the counterpart of anarchy that seems to be the common and popular but completely improper understanding of the idea of plurality.
- b) plurality as the chaotic organization of society without distinct centres and boundaries where rules are mixing up without any critical thinking. It is the vague and superficial blending of ideas in the name of fashion, needs, profit, moral and intellectual indolence. Unfortunately, this view prevails and affects the behaviour of the postmodern man who is neither an autonomous subject nor a decision-maker but more a point of

intersection, where different language games try to use his weak personality to fight for power.

There is also another paradox in the structure of postmodern plurality. Although said to be multicultural and open, it tends to prefer scientific and technological approach to the world and disqualifies the other concepts e.g.: ethics, religion, legends. Although the postmodern period is typical for searching spiritual dimension and witnesses the boom of religious and mythological imagination, everyday practice is determined by utility and pragmatics of language games that provide convenient and comfortable life. In this understanding spirituality stands for luxurious experience reserved for the special occasions like Sunday service or Christmas time and it is far more for amusement than for serious interest. However, the strong evidence that people long for transcendent sphere can be seen in popularity of this genre in literature: *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Twilight Saga*, *Harry Potter*. The supernatural pictured in these books forms the opposition to inhuman scientific explanation of the world.

Obviously, it is natural that each language game tries to protect its integrity from outer intrusion by questioning those ones that could disturb its unity. Nevertheless, the language game of science is really pervasive and suppresses the other concepts. To understand this, we should explain the nature of knowledge in two main historical concepts: the role of knowledge in the periods of the Grand narratives and its modification due to the plurality of language games. We make use of Lyotard's view on knowledge and his division [2]:

- a) narrative knowledge - typical for traditional societies, cultures, religions, based on story-telling, rituals, myths, parables, that provided timeless order and unchallenged support to human behaviour. Its affirmation was included within the system, usually on ontological basis represented by some kind of spiritual dimension like God, essence, Logos or secret law hidden behind the material world as seen in the Grand narratives (Hegelian, Marxist philosophy) as well as in the great religious concepts - Christianity, Islam, Buddhism.
- b) scientific knowledge - the concept of contemporary society based on quantity of language games that lacks metaphysical foundation and asks for affirmation of its statements and achievements in other way. The justifying derives from the set of conditions that are agreed on in advance, and have to be fulfilled in the process of considering their validity or falsehood. This means that language games are separate systems in which meanings are produced and rules for their calculation are created due to mutual agreement.

As we have stated, Postmodernism refuses the exclusivity of the narrative knowledge as obsolete, not meeting targets of the pluralistic society. Unfortunately, this openness is only the illusion. The postmodern society tends to privilege the language game of science and its criteria stand nearly for absolute obligations. To analyze this paradox it is useful to examine the role of development and knowledge in Christian and Greek roots that provided the basis for Western civilization for centuries and their interaction with the postmodern tendency for deconstruction of all traditions.

3. Two interpretation of the development of knowledge

Although the development of human knowledge was primarily understood as the spiritual movement governed by a search for happiness and a desire for eternal life, since the 16th century the scientific sphere has been trying to absolutize its criteria: experimentation; observable, empirical evidence; accuracy, objectivity, utility, repeatability. It has been trying to eliminate other concepts. There are more observations about this predominance:

The first one is anti-essentialism that claims that there is no ontological basis for universal validity of the truth, the good or values. They are not ready-made or existing in a form of eternal ideas while people are to discover them. To put it into practice – all scientific theories and definitions are temporary achievements and as such subject to modification. They acquire the role of mere social conceptions that depend on interests, needs, expectations, outcomes of a particular period [4]. If a scientific concept stops giving satisfaction it will be replaced. It is a constant competition for power similar to the idea of Darwin’s natural selection.

The other reason can be seen in the way how the term “development” is understood. The technical progress with its criteria of acceleration and utility is considered the most important category by which the quality of society is measured. There are two theories about this issue: either the development and knowledge are accumulated as regular, continuous and unanimous or they can be seen as periodic, discontinuous, conflictual [2]. Although Western civilization abandoned the ideal of Christianity, its interpretation of time is still alive. It presumes that time flows continually starting from the creation of the world described in the book of Genesis to its doom seen in Revelation. This obsession with continuity is present in thinking of postmodern man. However, the thinkers like Lyotard, Foucault or Derrida prefer the second theory and try to shatter any kind of conventional order the Western civilization was used to. In his famous work “The order of things” Michael Foucault states that any culture builds the set of controlling mechanism represented by habits, customs, values, particular scientific and technological approach. It forms a kind of language (or grid) imposed on reality, affirming or excluding all statements entering the system. He calls this organizing idea episteme (or dominant discourse). It is “the fundamental code of a culture governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home” [5, p. xxii]. In Foucault’s opinion, it is illusive to think that human knowledge moves forward continually without any kind of interruptions, obstacles, digressions. Stating three important periods in human history – the Renaissance, the Classical age, the Modern period he reveals that there were at least two discontinuities in the development of Western culture. Foucault’s and Lyotard’s ideas presume that the reality is fragmented in both directions: horizontally – there is no possibility for human development to move forward in linear series, as well as vertically in a form of numerous language games with many centres existing in parallel. This statement can be supported by another postmodern thinker Paul K. Fayerabend who objects

any single prescriptive scientific method and advocates the idea of anarchism in development: “Knowledge is not a series of self consistent theories that converges towards an ideal view; it is not a gradual approach to the truth. It is rather an ever increasing ocean of mutually incompatible alternatives...” [6, p. 21]. He finds methodology, criteria, rules that Western civilization considers indisputable the violation of knowledge. He declares that the reduction of reality to the only conceptual model, that is restricted, isolated from others, destroys traditions and constitutes chimeras [7].

The consequences of this fact could be disturbing for the contemporary man. Postmodernism is said to be pretty proud of its plurality of language games and tolerance to various opinions, practices, life–styles. Nevertheless, it seems to be unacceptable to admit that progress cannot be understood as linear process for more language games provide more and often contradictory concepts. Naturally, plurality implicates the diffusion of power. Thus, the struggle of two strong desires worries the postmodern man: the first one is the request for tolerance and refusal of any absolute or limited concept of the world; the second derives from inevitable urge for stability that could guarantee the integrated system of knowledge. This need is so strong that it preserves the idea of linear development in the form of scientific knowledge and causes its supremacy over other language games. It creates the illusion of continual progress.

4. Supremacy of science and the status of knowledge within this concept

Besides the misleading desire for the model of continual growth there are, according to Lyotard, three other factors that determine science to be the dominant language game [2] [8]:

1. Criterion of performativity
2. Computerization of society
3. Merchantilization of knowledge

In his opinion, the postmodern society is controlled by four fields, each one of its own criterion that determines its activities, responsibilities, methods, goals [8]:

FIELD	CRITERION
Science	Best knowledge
Technology	Best efficiency (performativity)
Economy	Best wealth
State (body politic)	Best “living together”

These areas cooperate to boost the progress. However, the field of science and its criterion of efficiency (performativity) prevail and force other areas to adopt the same pattern. The reason for this is the strong connection between knowledge, power and needs of society: if the development is controlled by the ideas of materialism and consumerism, it is possible to approve the scientific

knowledge the only valid language game. In this situation, performativity became the dominant model for all human activities and prevents other language games (as non-productive) from being taken as serious partners.

The second factor we should take into account if talking about the dominant role of science, is the way of data-recording. Research, learning, gaining knowledge have something to do with communication, informatics, problems of encoding and decoding information, its storage and access to it. Computers are considerably changing the nature of understanding reality. It seems to be incredible that this development was predicted by Lyotard in 1987, when he anticipated that: "...anything in the constituted body of language that is not translatable in this way will be abandoned and that the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language" [2, § 4]. Besides the other criteria (performativity, utility, observation), the necessity to acquire the status of computer data also works as the tool of power that excludes some information from being a part of knowledge stating them as non-scientific.

Another influential factor is the phenomenon of the affluent society with its main goal of fulfilling all needs by never-ending progress that enables to provide latest and more sophisticated stimulations. This understanding has changed the opinion of knowledge and caused, as Lyotard states, merchandization of knowledge. Instead of its original function – to serve the truth to get revealed, or (at least) to recognize the truth, it became the consumer goods: "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production" [2, § 5]. What is out of the category "demand and supply" cannot be the serious part of knowledge e.g. religious and mythical theories. Unless they become commodities in the form of best sellers or blockbusters, they represent only marginal alternatives to scientific concepts. Thus we can consider the triangle: knowledge, science and technology to be the impetus of postmodern civilization. They control all its areas from tiny problems of everyday life till sophisticated political decisions [10] and, despite the number of language games, create a potential for the new form of totality.

References

- [1] WITTGENSTEIN, L.: *Philosophical Investigations*, <<http://users.rcn.com/~rathbone/~lwtooc.htm>>
- [2] LYOTARD, J. F.: *The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge*, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/lyotard.htm>>, 1979
- [3] WELSH, W.: *Our Postmodern Modernity (in Czech)*, Praha, Zvon, ISBN 80-7113-104-0, 1994
- [4] RORTY, R.: *The Philosophical Orchids (in Slovak)*, Bratislava, Kalligram, ISBN 80-7149-830-0, 2006
- [5] FOUCAULT, M.: *The Order of Things*, New York, Roulledge Classics, ISBN 0- 415-26736-4, 2002
- [6] FAYERABEND, P. K.: *Against Method*, NewYork, Verso, ISBN 0-86091-646-4, 2002
- [7] FEYERABEND, P. K.: *Realism and the Historicism of Knowledge (in Slovak)*, FOUCAULT, M. a kol: Behind Mirror of Modern Style (in Slovak), Bratislava, Archa, 1991, ISBN 80-7115-025-8, pp.171-188, 1991
- [8] LYOTARD, J. F.: *The grave of an intellectual and other papers (in Slovak)*, Bratislava, Archa, ISBN 80-7115-141-6, 1997
- [9] FOUCAULT, M.: *Discourse, author, genealogy (in Czech)*, Praha, Nakladatelstvi Svoboda, ISBN 80-205-0406-0, 1994.
- [10] HAMPL, M.: American Doctrinal thought Against the Background of the Cold War Period. In: *Journal of Interdisciplinary Philology*, Vol. 1, Faculty of Science , University of Zilina, 2010.