

## SIX

# Theory of Language and Semiotics in the Stoic Philosophers

## 6.0 INTRODUCTION

The Stoic school of philosophy was responsible for the most rigorous and profound reflection on semiotics which is to be found in ancient philosophy. However, like Aristotle, the Stoics focused their research on two very distinct areas of thought. First of all we can find elements of semiotic interest in their theory of language, which involved an analysis of the relationship between language, thought and reality (corresponding to the terms "signifier", "signified" and "external object"), and then also in their theory of the propositional "sign", which is related to their theory of inference.

These two aspects of Stoic philosophy come together, as we shall see below, in their common link with the *lektón*, an entity which held special status in Stoic thought. At the basis of the concept of *lektón* lies the particular dialectic between the entities which share the property of being "bodies" (*sómata*) and those which are, in contrast, incorporeal (*asómata*). To be more precise, it can be said that Stoic ontology takes into consideration only those entities which have the characteristic of being three-dimensional objects and of possessing in addition some persistence through time. These alone are bodies, and only these are considered to be existent. However, both in the theory of language and in the theory of the propositional sign, incorporeal entities such as *lektá* are taken into consideration along with corporeal entities.

Before preceding any further, or going into greater depth on Stoic ontology, it is necessary to clear two possible misunderstandings from the floor. The first concerns the fate which awaits incorporeal entities; rather than simply being relegated to the sphere of non-existence, they are accorded instead a "derivative existence" (cf. Long, 1971a, pp. 89-90). The second possible misunderstanding concerns the very notion of body. Contrary to what we might expect because of modern ideas of body, "bodies" for the Stoics could also be qualities, inasmuch as they were considered to be matter in a certain state. The properties of a certain individual consist in

states or modes of the being of such an individual, and their existence depends on the existence of this individual. If the individual exists, that individual's properties are existing dispositions of matter (cf. Rist, 1969, pp. 52-55). What we have at this point is an ontology centered on the idea of "particular", which is seen as a material object with definite shape, defined as the sufficient and necessary condition for its existence. The shape is the characteristic element of an object, what makes it identifiable as such (cf. Long, 1971a, p. 76).

The semiotico-linguistic theory of the Stoics has its roots and develops within the terms of these ontological assumptions. The need for a theory of meaning stems precisely from the problems involved in the identification of "particular" and is connected to a theory of perception. It must be remembered that the Stoics believed that images (*phantasíai*) produced on the mind by external objects gave rise to true perception if they reproduced the exact configurations of those objects.<sup>1</sup> Images play a very important role in the Stoic theory of meaning, as indeed they did in Aristotle's theory of meaning.

Another important element to keep in mind when dealing with this area of Stoic philosophy is that one of the ways of identifying a "particular" is by identifying it linguistically. Thus A's ability to communicate with B that he or she is talking about X, and B's ability to indicate to A that the reference has been understood, become fundamental.

## 6.1 THEORY OF LANGUAGE

### 6.1.1 THE SEMIOTIC TRIANGLE

The passage from Sextus Empiricus which contains the basic outline of the Stoic theory of language appears in the context of a conflict of opinions about truth. It is important to point out here that, for the Stoics, a theory of truth—that is, the search for a basis on which to construct the verification of propositions—cannot be developed independently from a conception of the structure of the world and of what can be said about it.

The passage from Sextus Empiricus is as follows:

True and false have been variously located in what is signified (*tò sēmainónēnon*), in speech (*phōnē*), and in the motion of thought. The Stoics opted for the first of these, claiming that three things are linked together: what is signified, that which signifies (*tò sēmaînon*) and the object of reference (*tò tynchánon*). That which signifies is speech (for example, the word "Dion"), what is signified is the specific state of affairs (*autò tò prágma*) indicated by the spoken word and which we grasp as coexistent with (*paraphistámenon*) our thought but which the barbarians do not understand although they hear the sound; the object of reference is the external existent, that is, Dion himself. Of these, two are bodies, speech and the object of reference. But the state of affairs is not a body but a *lektón*, which is true or false.

(*Adversus Mathematicos*, VIII, 11-12)<sup>2</sup>

Based on what Sextus Empiricus reports, it would seem that also for the Stoics the phenomenon of signification can be schematized in the form of a triangle (Figure 6.1). As the figure shows, the terms "signifier" and "signified" are used here (as they are in Saussure's theory), but not the term "sign".

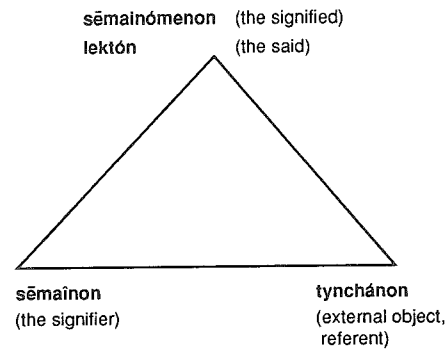


Figure 6.1

As in Aristotle, the idea of *sēmeîon* belongs to a different, not strictly linguistic, sphere of the theory. It is worth noting here too that a very particular example is used, that of a proper noun or name.

However, even though the use of three terms to express signification (one of these terms being the external object, which strictly speaking is outside of language) recalls Aristotle, the correspondence between the two models is only partial. Only the first and the third term, that is, the signifier and the object, can be directly compared in the two triangles.

#### 6.1.2 LEKTÓN AS "STATEMENT"

The term at the apex of the triangle, first called *sēmainómenon* and then *lektón*, represents a unique case. Especially in its second denomination, it represents a term which is peculiar to Stoic philosophy of language and refers to a complex yet extremely interesting concept. A first indication of its special nature can be seen by contrasting it with Aristotle's terminology. At the apex of the triangle of signification, Aristotle had placed psychological entities, which were considered to be identical for everyone. The Stoic *lektón*, as the passage from Sextus Empiricus implies, is completely different: barbarians, even when hearing the sounds and seeing the object, cannot understand it.

As Todorov (1977, pp. 17-18) demonstrates, the basic difference between the concepts lies in the fact that, while the entity taken into consideration by Aristotle is located at the level of the mind of the speakers, that considered by the Stoics is located directly at the level of language. Todorov interprets the *lektón* as the capacity of the first element to designate the third

element. This interpretation depends heavily on the fact that the example used by Sextus Empiricus is a proper noun for which, though it has the same capacity of designation as other nouns, there is some doubt as to whether it actually has meaning; in fact the usual conclusion is that it does not.

Barbarians certainly hear the sound sequence |Dion| and see ||Dion||, but they are not capable of connecting the sound to its object of reference. Understanding, then (as happens for Greeks with respect to this example), consists precisely in the perception of the connection between the spoken word and the object to which it refers. Long (1971a, p.77) also identifies *lektón* with this connection, though in the sense that it operates as the statement which an utterance makes with respect to some object. In this case, the more appropriate translation of *lektón* would be "what is said", as such an expression covers both the notion of "judgement" and that of "the state of affairs signified by a word or set of words".<sup>3</sup>

The idea that *lektá* could operate as "affirmations about objects" may be seen in a passage from Seneca (*Epistulae Morales*, 117, 13), which sets out a triadic scheme of signification analogous to that given by Sextus Empiricus, but using a proposition (|Cato walks|) where he had used only a name (|Dion|). Seneca draws attention to the distinction between the object of reference, which is a material object—in this case, Cato—and the assertion about this object (|Cato walks|), which is an "incorporeal". This assertion is the *lektón*, and Seneca proposes three different Latin translations of the term: *enuntiatum* ("utterance"), *effatum* ("affirmation"), *dictum* ("assertion").

It is easier to see how the predicate "true" or "false" can be applied to Seneca's example, a proposition, than to that used by Sextus Empiricus.<sup>4</sup> Only *lektá* which make up a complete proposition (i.e., a clause) can be true or false.<sup>5</sup>

#### 6.1.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEKTÁ AND THOUGHT

In Aristotle's model of signification, linguistic expressions are symbols of psychological states (*pathēmata en tēi psychēi*) and/or thoughts (*noēmata*). In this way there is no clear distinction between the notion of "meaning" and the notion of "thought". The same conception reappears in Ogden and Richards' well-known theory in the present century (cf. Ogden and Richards, 1936, p.37), which produces a semiotic triangle with the notion of "thought" at the apex.

The conception held by the Stoics is quite different. Passages from both Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes give evidence of the fact that the notion of meaning was quite distinct from the notion of thought, even though there was a certain type of relationship between them. The passage from Sextus Empiricus reads:

The Stoics held as a common view that true and false are in the *lektón* and they

say that *lektón* is that which is (subsists, *hyphistamenon*) correspondent to a rational presentation (*logikē phantasia*), and a rational presentation is one in which what is presented (*phantasthén*) can be shown forth in speech.

(*Adversus Mathematicos*, VIII, 70)<sup>6</sup>

A passage in Diogenes (*Vitae*, VII, 63) expresses precisely the same idea and uses the same terms. From these two passages we can then see that the Stoics operated a clear distinction between *lektá*, which represent the level of "meaning", and "rational presentations" (*logiká phantasíai*), which we could define as forms of intellectual activity, or thoughts. The latter entities are peculiar to the human species<sup>7</sup> and can, if necessary, be expressed in words (this is what the adjective *logiká* refers to).

It is also possible to see from these two passages that the two terms, *lektón* and thought, are put in relationship one to the other. Long (1971a, p.82) makes the following comment on the passage from Sextus Empiricus: "I take this difficult passage to mean that *lektón* is defined as the objective content of acts of thinking (*noēsis*), or, what comes to the same thing in Stoicism, the sense of significant discourse." Before looking more closely at this latter assertion, let us examine for a moment the former comment.

It would seem that the relationship established between *lektón* and the activity of thought is such that it functions as the content or result of such activity. However, this new relationship—indicated in these passages from Diogenes and Sextus Empiricus—introduces an extra element with respect to what Sextus Empiricus says elsewhere (*Adversus Mathematicos*, VIII, 11-12), when he relates *lektón* with the signifier expression (that is, with the *sēmaínon*). In fact, if *lektón* is now defined as something which exists in conformity with a rational presentation, it is clear that the accent has been shifted from the previous relationship with the activity of thought.

This shift of accent, apart from demonstrating an apparent contradiction or a false dilemma, has resulted in the difference of opinion and interpretation of ancient commentators and modern scholars of Stoicism alike. Mignucci (1965, pp.92-93) shows how *lektá*, because these are incorporeals, "cannot be split from something corporeal which in some way provides a support for them and allows them to have their expressibility". The problem remains of establishing whether what provides support for *lektá* are (i) sounds of the voice; or (ii) the activity of the mind which thinks them. The first of Sextus Empiricus' two definitions<sup>8</sup> would suggest solution (i), whereas the second,<sup>9</sup> and also the definition given by Diogenes,<sup>10</sup> would suggest solution (ii). In the same way, some modern scholars, such as Mates,<sup>11</sup> declare that it is words which provide support for *lektá*, while Zeller<sup>12</sup> and Bréhier<sup>13</sup> take the other point of view.

As indicated above, however, this is in fact a false dilemma and certainly cannot be resolved by means of philology, for the texts contain an

equal quantity of "proofs" for each point of view. What we have to do here is to consider a double underlying assumption which seems to be at work in the Stoic theory.

On the one hand, the presence of significant discourse implies intellectual activity, in the absence of which it would not be possible to have meaning; on the other hand, any result of intellectual activity needs the significant sounds of the voice for objective expression. It is therefore possible to draw these consequences from the fact that *lektá* are defined both as the content of rational presentations and as meanings of words. This indicates the need to postulate a strict connection between the content of the representative activity of the mind and its having meaning by means of words. The two terms cannot, therefore, be considered separately from one another.<sup>14</sup> At this point, the full meaning of Long's second comment becomes clear, for we have in fact reached it here: the meaning of significant discourse and the objective content of acts of thinking must be considered to be the same thing.

Long supports this conclusion by reference to another passage from Diogenes Laertius (*Vitae*, VIII, 49-50) which states that the criterion for truth<sup>15</sup> is given by the "presentation" (*phantasia*). Diogenes explains that *phantasia* has a primary role in that it is not possible, without it, to apprehend some of the fundamental processes of knowledge, such as assent (*synkatáthesis*), apprehension (*katálēpsis*) and the act of thinking (*noēsis*): "For presentation comes first, then thought (*diánoia*), which is able to speak (*eklalētikē*), expresses in speech (*lógōi*) what it experiences as a result of the presentation" (translated by Long, 1971a, p.83).

This passage from Diogenes is important because it revives the Platonic notion<sup>16</sup> of thought as "internal speech".<sup>17</sup> This serves to demonstrate that there exists for the Stoics a basic identity between the processes of thought and the processes of linguistic communication. The fact that the cognitive processes are based on *phantasia* highlights the role that mental images play in the linguistic theory of meaning.

## 6.2 THE THEORY OF THE SIGN

### 6.2.1 LEKTÓN AND THE THEORY OF THE SIGN

The *lektón* not only has a central importance in the Stoic theory of language but is equally fundamental to the Stoic theory of the sign and in a certain way serves as a mediating factor between the two theories. For the Stoics, signs (*sēmeía*) are above all *lektá* in that they are made up of propositions.

This means that there is a "rightful" fusing of the doctrine of language and the doctrine of signs in Stoic semiotics, as Umberto Eco has pointed out (1984a, pp.31-32). As Eco says, "In order to have signs, propositions must be formulated, and the propositions must be organized according to a logical syntax which is reflected and made possible by the linguistic syn-