

Chapter 5

Soft Languages

In this chapter I shall try to give an idea of two soft languages. One is the language of abstract painting, occupying the extreme position on our semantic scale; the other, close to it, is the language of ancient Indian philosophy.

The reader may ask why in this book I pay such great attention to these abstract sign systems. They interest me first of all as an extreme and degenerate manifestation of the semantic disharmony between the transmitter and the receptor. This manifests itself in our everyday language as well, though in a less prominent form. Abstract symbols have been used by people since antiquity. Historically, archeological excavations have yielded abstract ornamentations as often as objective ones. Moslem culture allows only abstract ornamentations. As for modern architecture and furniture—wall papers, blinds, lighting fixtures, plastic floors—they all are patterned on abstract symbols. Even the ceilings and walls of cinema halls and the new metro stations are now decorated in an abstract style. The ornaments of old Russia—flowers, cockerels, and henries—seem to have dropped out of our everyday life. The semantic degeneracy of abstract symbolism allows one to avoid boring obtrusiveness. This may explain the new style's popularity, but here the following questions may arise: can a semantically degenerate language be the means for the self-expression of an artist? What is the value of abstract paintings as works of art? These questions are beyond my subject and my competence. My task here is the formal study of sign systems in all their manifestations (no matter to what extremes they go), but not their axiological interpretation. That is the task of art critics. Any actual phenomenon can be studied from different angles, and a formal study of

one specific language as a sign system is just the study of a single manifestation of a complex system.

The Language of Abstract Painting

It has often been stated that abstract painting may be regarded as a system of signs representing a specific language (e.g., see Klée, 1964). The paper by Andrukovich et al. (1971) written with my participation was an attempt to subject this statement to a precise logical analysis, using general mathematical methods to study the experts' judgments. The experts were offered several abstract pictures and asked to "read" them according to definite rules.

In Chapter 1 of this book, I have already tried to formulate the structural characteristics and functional properties which permit us to rank a symbolic system with language categories. Now let us try to analyze abstract pictures from this standpoint.

No doubt, abstract painting is a medium of communication, transferring information from the artist to the viewer. In any case, a system consisting of a "transmitter" (an artist), a "receptor" (a viewer), and a means of communication between them is clearly present. The viewers attend exhibitions of abstract painting and discuss them passionately, trying to interpret the things observed in ordinary language.

Now let us see in what way the structure of the language of abstract painting is built. First of all, we must manage to select the primary system of signs, situated on the lowest level of sign hierarchy. In the above-mentioned paper (Andrukovich et al., 1971), we tried to do this by analyzing the reproduction of 19 pictures representing various schools of abstract painting (see Appendix 2). This investigation resulted in a list of primary signs, forming *the alphabet of abstract painting*.

The alphabet of abstract painting may be determined by subjecting any such collection of works to geometrical and topological analysis. When we actually did this in Moscow, we reduced the complexity of the artists' creations to thirty-six elements involving lines, circles, shapes, colors, etc., with their various combinations. These are the signs, and with their rules of combination they represent the alphabet and grammar of the language of abstract painting. To test this procedure, it was necessary to determine whether or not a group of 100 art experts would interpret a group of abstract paintings in a manner which would correspond to the reading of a text. A careful logical-statistical analysis of the responses to the exhibit revealed that this was indeed the case. (For complete details, see Andrukovich et al., 1971.)

The spectators can read pictures and place them in more and more

complicated aggregate-paradigms. The demand for the hierarchical system of language is fulfilled. The paradigms prove to be connected with grammatical attributes; consequently, the pictures are read as grammatically arranged sign systems. People may be divided into groups according to their ability to build paradigms in a similar way, and these groups prove to be connected with socio-demographic characteristics determined by their general mode of thinking. Hence, it follows that the process of reading pictures is indubitably connected with some prior predisposition. The sign system of abstract painting meets all the demands enumerated above as characteristics of those sign systems which we intuitively perceive as languages.

True, the language of abstract painting appears semantically degenerate. The viewer is never sure whether or not he has apprehended just what the artist had meant to say. In principle, in the language of abstract painting a plurality of possible interpretations is built in. There are many works that examine the creative process of and motives for painting abstract pictures. One of the possible explanations is an urge to express the subconscious in a Freudian sense. But all this is no more than conjecture. Strictly speaking, we do not know, as a matter of fact, what an artist wanted to convey in a particular abstract picture. This statement means only that we cannot translate into ordinary language something expressed in an abstract painting. However, can we translate into our ordinary language something expressed in "serious" music, in a theorem of any branch of modern mathematics, or even in the constructions of modern theoretical physics? Nevertheless, I have tried here to say something in ordinary language about the texts written in the language of abstract painting.

As has been said above, the interpretability of one sign system into the language of another is one of the necessary characteristics of a language system. But our interpretation might be entirely different from what the transmitter actually intended to say. Imagine that an experiment similar to that described above was carried out with a collection of insects. Probably the results would seem rather similar: an alphabet and grammar would be found for the language of insect morphology, and in the reading process the paradigms would be found related to grammatical characteristics. Interpretation of this experiment in our system of ideas would look approximately as follows: a population of insects "converse" with the environment, offering a continuously changing variety of characteristics to the process of evolution. Having managed to rank the collection of insects, people would read this record from quite another standpoint, i.e., proceeding from their *à priori* aesthetic notions. Will a similar situation not arise when it is necessary to read the messages of the inhabitants of other worlds?

Let us consider another mental experiment. Assume that paintings by classical artists would be studied. Arranging them according to their preferability, we would, most likely, again obtain hierarchical structures. But for this system of pictures, we would not manage to build in any representative alphabet or grammar. Classical painting is not a language of signs, but of *images*, which cannot be divided into elementary constituents. However, as I have already stated, the style of the images of the same type, e.g., icons, probably can be represented as a sign system. Now assume that a similar experiment was carried out with color slides of landscapes. Here, preferability ranking will probably give hierarchical structures as well, but again they cannot be connected with an alphabet and grammar. Broadly, we perceive nature as images but not as a grammatical arrangement of elementary signs. (If the reader wishes to regard images as signs, he will have to admit that this is a strangely extreme type of sign system. The notion of a sign system can be broadened so that any substitute for something is considered a sign, and in this sense a portrait is a sign of a human being. However, I would not feel comfortable with this point of view.)

One more mental experiment: Imagine that we want to make a computer reproduce a certain abstract painting in terms of our alphabet and language. Generally speaking, the computer can cope with the task, but the pictures created will have a large number of variations. We do not know why it was this version, but not another, that the artist created. We may complicate the task and introduce a random generator for changing previously set conditions. Perhaps, in this new set of pictures, a work of genius will appear, but how shall we recognize it? Hence, the failures of those who wanted, through mechanical methods (sometimes obviously exaggerated), to create something constituted of seemingly elementary, easily reproducible signs, arranged according to quite simple rules. The same question arises when we try to simulate by a computer the creativity of a composer or to build mechanically a model of creative thinking. It is one and the same question that remains unanswered: What is the algorithm set up for the selection of a really brilliant solution (even if afterwards we manage to formalize this solution)? But let us return once more to classical painting: here we can build a not too clumsy system of alphabet and grammar which would be adequate to find among the versions created by a computer something looking like the original we wish to reproduce. This mental experiment is perhaps the best way to explain the difference between the imaginative and symbolic means of information transmission.

Probably the dream of creating a highly abstract universal language will always remain with people. We yearn for a language similar to that of the game of glass beads in the book by Hesse (1961).

The Language of Ancient Indian Philosophy¹

The polymorphism of language is revealed much more clearly in the ancient Indian texts than in the contemporary languages of European culture. A word in Indian texts is always many sided with respect to the meanings ascribed to it. This fact has been noted by all the scholars of ancient Indian thought, as illustrated by the following examples:

One and the same expression is often used in different meanings, or one and the same idea occurs in different series of concepts. (Oldenberg, 1881)

To attempt translation of such pregnant terms is however always dangerous as the new word—part of a new language which is the outcome of a different tone of thought—while it may denote the same or nearly the same idea usually calls up together with it very different ones. (Rhys-Davids, 1880, p. 112)

In using this language, it is not always necessary that certain words should possess a precise meaning. Vagueness can also be useful. It is like a half-empty mould: each can fill it to his own taste. But the principal content is more or less always there, its “flavour” is reproduced in a flowing context. The flavour of the word *dharma* is a concept of duty imposed by religion or nature, which is the same. The stability of our understanding this concept does not depend on anything—it is created by the human being. Outside this general meaning, other more or less special meanings are ascribed to the word *dharma* when needed. Context governs the use of the word which sometimes narrows and sometimes widens its content; the term is flexible, and due to its combinative power it obeys two opposite elements: concrete and abstract. The article specifying to which one of these meanings it corresponds, i.e., what the term is, occupies six pages in the Petersburg Dictionary and shows how this term has acquired religious, moral and political meanings; this is to say, that the whole juridical, social, political and didactical literature had the general name *dharmas’astra*. The word *dharma* embraced the traditions of India, illuminating its ideals of the future and explaining the present of Indian society. Sometimes only a narrow partition separates *dharma* and *karman*. The latter is the symbol of causality; the former is the causality in its final manifestation, in the totality of its results, something like our “destiny.” (Willman-Grabovska, 1934, p. 45)

The symbolic nature of words was well grasped in India, where it was understood that formally one and the same word has tremendous potential, and may denote utterly different concepts; it was known that

¹ This section is based on Nalimov and Barinova (1974).

a word's meaning is to a great extent determined by the whole system which the word enters. (Toporov, 1960)

Polymorphism found its manifestation in all sign systems of ancient India including Buddhist fine arts and Buddhist iconography. This is what was said on this point by Toporov (1965):

Semiotic analysis of Buddhist works of art becomes especially expedient due to a tendency for ancient Indian culture to display a high degree of symbolic character in all its manifestations. Sometimes this is so great that visual or some other immediate likeness easily gives place to mediated (in particular, to symbolic) associations accompanied by the tendency characteristic for the culture to link one and the same mode of expression with several different sets of meanings.

In contrast to the language of European culture, in Indian texts the impossibility of unambiguous and consistent definition of a concept is openly recognized and, moreover, *emphasized*. Several examples showing the open introduction of inconsistency in defining word meanings follow. *The fact that the cited example relates to the absolute does not distort my thesis: all statements, no matter what they concern, are given by the system of thinking which finds its expression in the language.*

He is more subtle than what is subtle, greater than what is great, . . . [S'vetas'vatara Upanishad, III, 20 (The Upanishads, 1965)]

It moves, it is motionless. It is distant, it is near. It is within all, it is beyond all this [Isavasyopanishad, V (The Upanishads, 1965)]

This is my Self within the heart, smaller than a corn, than barley, than mustard, than the kernel of the mustard seed. He is my Self within the heart, greater than the Earth, greater than the sky, greater than heaven, greater than all these worlds [Chha'ndogja Upanishad, III, 14.3 (The Upanishads, 1965)]

It is often recognized that we have to speak of something which is beyond cognition:

The eye does not go there, no speech, nor mind. We do not know that. We do not know how to instruct one about It [Kenopanishad, I, 3 (The Upanishads, 1965)]

How should one know the knower? [Brhadaranyaka-Upanishad, IV, 5.15 (The Upanishads, 1965)]

Where one sees nothing else, hears nothing else, understands nothing else, — that is the Infinite. Where, however, one sees something else, hears something else, understands something else, — that is the Finite. That which is Infinite, is immortal, that which is Finite is mortal [Chha'ndogja Upanishad, VII, 24.1 (The Upanishads, 1965)]

The task set is immense: if not to describe then at least to give some idea of the incognizable. The *insufficiency of the word symbol system* is acknowledged, and as in abstract painting, empty or almost empty signs are introduced, i.e., signs which have no clearly defined meaning ascribed to them. According to Willman-Grabovska, they are half-empty molds. Following the requirements of clearness and precision – traditions of Indian didactics – it is merely indicated that a word used in a text does not have either this or that meaning.

The soul which, is not this, not that, nor aught else, is intangible, for it cannot be laid hold of, it is not to be dissipated, for it cannot be dissipated; it is without contact, for it does not come into contact; it is not limited, it is not subject to pain nor to destruction.
[Bṛhadāranyaka-Upanishad, IV, 4 (The Upanishads, 1965)]

Such an unusual attitude toward words led to a situation in which, from the viewpoint of a European reader, ancient Indian philosophy in this style resembles art, sometimes even abstract art, constructed so that “the receptor” can perceive something quite different from what has been put there by “the transmitter.”

In any case, the cogency of the statements is given not by the force of their logical structure but by their originality and, sometimes, by the paradoxical character of the judgments, or by unusual comparisons, by inner beauty of word constructions, and their measured rhythm. Sometimes these have an inner refrain. It is not logic that convinces, but rather the magic of words. Here is an example of Indian style from *Dhammapada* (1952), a famous collection of dicta entering the Buddhist Canon as an independent element:

33. The flickering, fickle mind, difficult to guard, difficult to control, – the wise man straightens as a bowman, an arrow.

Ponderous European philosophical thought, expressed, for example, in the language of Kant or Hegel, could hardly be described by such words. But the language of existentialism – a trend in European thought which was born outside traditional European philosophy – can be compared with the language of the ancient Indian texts. In many of its manifestations, existentialism resorts to the language of art and sometimes even to magical, vague expressions, giving up complete logical constructions, proclaiming the possibility of thinking without concepts or introducing clear ideas with great reluctance. This brings existential language closer to the language of ancient Indian philosophy. Existentialism has emerged as a kind of protest against European culture, and in order to express this protest, it was necessary to build another language; other-

wise, this protest would have been only a part of the outlook protested against.

To speak about the difference in the languages of different cultures is much more to the point than to pontificate about the difference in national languages.