



Myth in Russian linguophilosophy: from symbolist theorists to contemporary symbolist studies

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Abstract

This article explores one of the myth conceptualization traditions in the Russian humanities, focusing on the framework of Vyacheslav Ivanov's symbolism, Alexei Losev's dialectical philosophy, which builds upon Ivanov's ideas, and the modern reception of Ivanov's and Losev's approaches in the linguophilosophy of Lyudmila Gogotishvili. It is shown that the linguistic dimension of myth, according to Ivanov, implies an *a posteriori* character of its own formation — that is, as a product of mystical experience rather than its foundation. The linguistic dimension of myth, according to Losev, implies its *a priori* givenness, which is epistemologically limited for a particular consciousness. This is because of detachment from consciousness by the meaning of the myth. It is shown that the *a posteriori* givenness of myth, according to Ivanov, and the detachment of myth, according to Losev ensure the “indirectness” of the expression of meaning (or mystical reality) in language. This “indirectness,” however, can be overcome by an intentional understanding of the meaning implied by language, i.e., by personal action. It is revealed that Gogotishvili, in her philosophical work, relied on both Losev's and Ivanov's approaches, believing the concept of myth as one of the basic categories of all Russian symbolism. From the standpoint of her research, we consider the distinction between mythological and ordinary judgments, the relationship between myth and linguistic reference in poetic and logical perspectives, as well as the nature of the application of the myth concept in the phenomenology of language.

Keywords Primordial myth · Absolute mythology · Dialectics of myth · Mythological detachment · Russian symbolism · Russian religious philosophy · Linguophilosophy

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Introduction

In the twentieth century, the theoretical understanding and conceptualization of myth became a significant focus in the humanities. Anthropologists, literary scholars, sociologists, and phenomenologists ensured that the interest in this issue contributed to the actualization of this concept: myth ceased to be a fable and became one of the most important concepts of modern analytics. Wundt (1909) identified several theoretical approaches to myth, including constructive, symbolic, and rational perspectives. These approaches attempted to integrate researching myth into the existing areas of the humanities (ethnography, anthropology). However, it was the ontological objectification of myth that ultimately enabled its independent theoretical exploration, allowing for its broader application in humanities research.

The effort to develop a systematic ontology of myth first emerged in the works of early classical philosophers, most notably Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, researching myth moved from metaphysics to the sphere of cultural, social, psychological, and aesthetic phenomena. At the same time, there were tendencies towards demythologization when myth appears as an object of overcoming (for example, Roland Barthes, Rudolf Bultmann, etc.) and remythologization, which positioned myth as an essential ontological and/or epistemological category (Mircea Eliade, Kurt Hübner, Ernst Cassirer, etc.) (Romanenko 2017, p. 20).

In a sense, structuralist approaches to myth dominated the humanitarian research of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, other methods have turned out to be important as well, in particular those based on the ideas of the Russian religious and philosophical tradition.

In Russian pre-revolutionary intellectual culture, some directions in the philosophical conceptualization of myth might be identified in the light of the remythologization of reality mentioned above. This interest in the study and ontologization of myth and religious phenomena is found in the works of Russian symbolists (Vyacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Bely, Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky, etc.). A comprehensive overview of religious and philosophical approaches to myth is given by Viktor Tsylev (Tsylev 2004) and Andrei Chaginsky (Chaginsky 2015). Chaginsky notes the interest in myth as an ontological category¹ in the pre-revolutionary Moscow intellectual environment, which, in turn, gave rise to several original approaches to the understanding of the concept of myth.

This research focuses on one of the traditions of understanding myth and refer to the “mythological” studies of Vyacheslav Ivanov, Alexei Losev, as well as to our contemporary Lyudmila Gogotishvili, who is the intellectual inheritor of their legacy.

The Symbolist Conceptualization of Myth

Vyacheslav Ivanov does not have any research devoted exclusively to the theory of myth, but his research related to dionysianism and symbolism directly appeals to the

¹ Thus, he notes the ontological absoluteness of myth according to Frank, superhistoricity of myth according to Vysheslavtsev, etc. (Chaginsky 2015, pp. 40–41).

concept of myth. Ivanov explored this theme for many years, culminating in his most important *Path by the Stars* (1909).² Given this, an attempt to generalize the meanings that Ivanov put into this concept seems promising both for the study of his work as a whole and for examining its specific aspects.

This problem is in the focus of contemporary Ivanov studies and is still far from its solution. Thus, Svetlana Titarenko in (Titarenko 2012) identifies three aspects of Ivanov's understanding of myth (Titarenko 2012, p. 120): ritual, symbolic (interpretive), theurgic.

In our opinion, these three aspects align with the cult-aesthetic, linguistic, and mystical dimensions of Ivanov's symbolism, and each can be analyzed independently. Titarenko also offers the following definition of Ivanov's myth: "myth, according to Ivanov, is an interpretation of an archetype that is adequate to its cult meaning" (Titarenko 2012, p. 119). In turn, she connects mythology with the artist's constructing of a mythopoetic universe (Titarenko 2012, p. 120). Based on this, we can distinguish the archetypal-ontological, epistemological, and onto-epistemological spheres in myth. At the same time, from the epistemological point of view, the emphasis is on the linguistic dimension of myth ("interpretation").

Here is Ivanov's "linguistic" definition of myth: "synthetic judgment, where with a concept-symbol as its subject, and a verb for predicate" (Ivanov 2003b, p. 41). A characteristic feature of this formula is the use of the Kantian terminology of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. A synthetic judgment (in the Kantian sense) implies an expansion of knowledge about the object and thereby the "revelation" of the meaning implicit in the object.

In another work there is the following definition, which expands the previous one in a mystical and ontological perspective: "myth [...] [is] a synthetic judgment in which a verb for predicate is attached to the concept-symbol as its subject. The subject denotes the supra-sensory essence, while the predicate manifests that essence in its dynamic aspect as active or passive" (Ivanov 1987, pp. 485–486). The relationship between the suprasensory essence (the "denoting" subject) and the myth that expresses it (the "manifesting" predicate) is a complex issue that warrants a deeper exploration of Ivanov's theoretical framework. However, as a working hypothesis, one might assume that similarity is possible to be here only to some extent. For example, through the semantics of the predicate, which represents a separate aspect of the expressed entity.

In Ivanov's view the manifestation of myth implies the possibility (but not the necessity) of its artistic fixation in language "indirectly" through denotation and interpretation, i.e., *a posteriori*. Thus, myth can be expressed in the form of an image, i.e., a synthetic judgment (with a verbal predicate-verb): "The primordial myth exhausts and expresses the most ancient insight in the form of a synthetic judgment, where the subject is the name of the deity or the animistically animated concreteness of the sensory world, perceived as daimôn, and the predicate is a verb depicting the action or state attributed to this demonic being" (Ivanov 1994, p. 269) (quote from the book *Dionysus and Pradionysianism*).

²Among Ivanov's later works, notable contributions include *The Hellenic Religion of the Suffering God* (1917) and *Dionysus and Pradionysianism* (1923).

Ivanov's reflections on myth and its conceptual meaning were resonated in the works of a number of philosophers and scholars, including Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov, etc. This raises the question of how deeply Ivanov's ideas influenced Alexei Losev's thought in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in works such as *Dialectics of Myth* and *Addition to the "Dialectics of Myth"*. The continuity in Ivanov's and Losev's researching myth is also emphasized by modern researchers (Titarenko 2012, p. 376) (Kayanidi 2021, p. 177).

Nevertheless, it would be premature to speak of a direct lineage or complete alignment between Ivanov's and Losev's approaches. Their definitions of myth differ not only in style but also in the emphasis they place on key semantic elements, even at the level of formulation. These differences seem to stem more from fundamental epistemological divergences than from variations in method. A full exposition of Losev's theory of myth would require as much analysis as reconstructing Ivanov's theoretical framework. Therefore, for further comparison, we consider the definitions from the works *Dialectics of Myth* (1930), *Addition to the Dialectics of Myth* (1930), and the small text *On Mythology in Literature* (1983). These texts provide a foundation for more in-depth research on the subject.

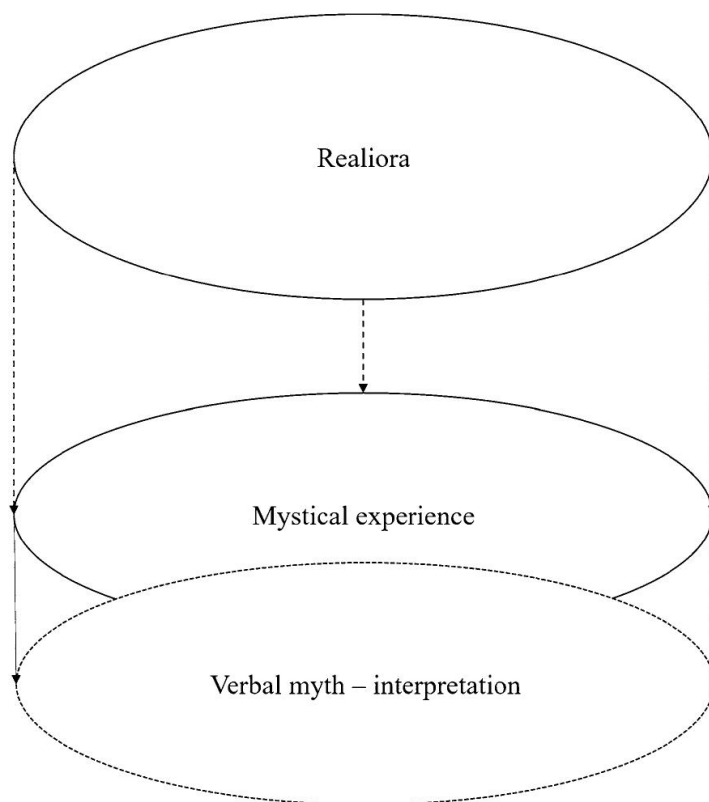
Losev's definitions of myth encompass both ontological ("a substantial unification of the ideal and the real" (Losev 2013, p. 570)) and specific linguistic ("personalistic history given in words" (Losev 2003, p. 142), "an unfolded magical name" (Losev 2003, p. 186)) formulations.

For Ivanov, myth can be presented as *a posteriori*³ in relation to the mystical vision of the *a priori* epiphany of the impersonal archetype, knowledge, judgment, marking, revelation of immanent truth, and denotation of a supra-sensory essence, i.e., "a recollection of a mystical event, of a cosmic sacrament" (Ivanov 2003a, p. 31). In contrast, Losev conceives of myth as inherently miraculous, not merely denotative but as a direct articulation of the synthesis between the transcendental and the immanent. Losev considers myth as a moment of the primordial essence, and this moment is not attributed to the primordial essence in the process of cognition, but derived from it, that is, manifested by it. In the epistemological sense Losev's myth is fundamentally *a priori*, "but this *a priori* is not subjective but objective" (Losev 2022, p. 276).

It is characteristic that in his discussions of myth, Losev, similar to Ivanov, uses Kantian terminology. However, he primarily draws on the typology of purposiveness from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In his analysis, he identifies the epistemological limitations of this typology and argues for the need to introduce a special type of purposiveness in relation to myth: a "realization of personality" (Losev 2003, p. 161). Losev explains that in a myth "we are dealing, in the first place, with the coincidence [...] of two different plans of being" (Losev 2003, p. 152) with the unity of the transcendental and immanent. At the same time, he locates "the very nature of both miracle and—through this—all myth" in "personality purposefulness" (Losev 2003, p. 161). Unlike Ivanov, Losev does not describe myth as an impersonal archetype. He speaks of it in an absolute sense as of the God-man personality (The Incarnate

³This epistemology does not deny the ontological nature of myth, which turns out to be involved in the supra-sensory and supra-experienced *realiora*, due to the presence of the theurgic (according to the above classification) aspect.

Fig. 1 Conventional scheme of the genesis of “Ivanov’s” myth



Word), which directly manifests itself through verbal “revelation” and represents the epistemological and ontological ultimate telos.

In this sense, every relative (non-absolute) myth is also a “realization of personality,” i.e., it combines the subjective and objective, *a posteriori* and *a priori*, epistemological and ontological, whether or not it aspires to absolutization. Hence Losev’s personalistic definition: “the image of personal being, personal form, the visage of person” (Losev 2003, p. 69). Thus, building on Ivanov’s intuitions, Losev affirms the ontological totality of myth and its fundamental personalistic nature.

It should be noted that, according to Losev, the *a priori* given of myth stated above does not imply its direct given to “ordinary” consciousness. The experience of myth is conditioned by the necessity of the intentional act of its implementation. “Achieving” the objective foundation of myth necessitates an intentional (personality) effort to overcome the inherent detachment within myth itself.⁴

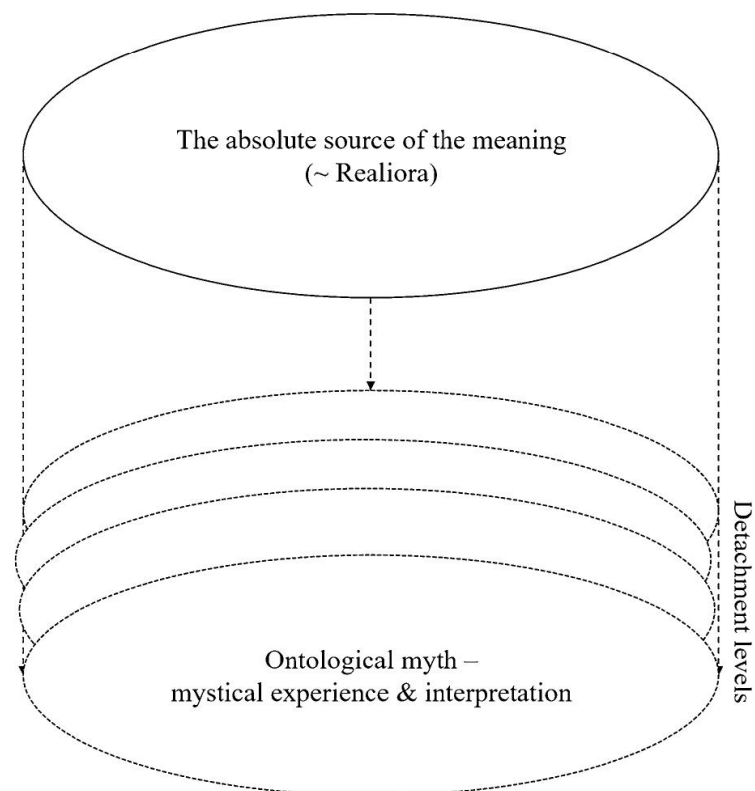
Thus, we can argue that, in contrast to the Ivanov’s two-stage symbolic diagram⁵ of myth genesis (objective mystical experience → subjective interpretation) (see Fig. 1), Losev’s conception of myth can be described in the form of a monistic diagram, potentially containing various detachment-mediated myth manifestations⁶ (objective- subjective mystical experience and interpretation coexist simultaneously) (see Fig. 2).

⁴The detachment overcoming can be accomplished by philosophical means—for example, through the construction of a dialectical diagram adequate to myth; see: (Marchenkov 2004).

⁵As Titarenko notes, “Myth in the work of Vyacheslav Ivanov acquires an ontological status and becomes a category of thought immanent in the poet’s self-consciousness”; see: (Titarenko 2014).

⁶Each manifestation is characterized by its level of proximity to the absolute.

Fig. 2 Conventional scheme of the genesis of “Losev’s” myth



The concept of detachment,⁷ fundamental to Losev’s theory of myth, determines a certain “transcendence” of myth in relation to the “ordinary” sensory image of reality. Thus, Losev argues that myth is “actually, tangibly, and sensuously created reality, which is, at the same time, detached from the ordinary course of things and thus contains various degrees of hierarchical character, various degrees of detachment” (Losev 2003, p. 33).

At the same time, detachment contains the potential for personality involvement in the myth. Symbolism researcher Robert Bird noted that Losev’s myth is necessarily detached from everyday⁸ reality (Bird 2004, p. 144) and thereby presupposes mythically-minded subjects (Bird 2004, p. 146) (a kind of agents of detachment (Bird 2004, 152)), “ascending” to the foundation of myth and carrying out its detached “knowledge” (Losev 2022, p. 247). Bird draws an analogy of this “ascent” to aesthetic admiration of an artist and ascetic praxis of a mystic (climbing the Ladder of virtues (Bird 2004, p. 147)), revealing a kind of stepped hierarchy from aesthetic detachment of various types to mythological one (Bird 2004, p. 146). Thus, through the concept of myth, Bird highlights and emphasizes the personalistic dimension of Losev’s methodology (Bird 1999, p. 231).

Following the similar symbolist logic, Bird (2022) explored Losev’s concept of the model as the ideal foundation (paradigm) of any aesthetic or mystical image.

⁷On Losev’s connection with the tradition of using the concept of detachment in European philosophy, see: (Bird 2004, pp. 147–149) (Troitsky 2021, pp. 93–95).

⁸The reality, designated here as “ordinary” and “everyday,” is also grounded in myth, detached from some other myth (see the characteristic passages about “modern philistine,” “liberal-humanistic and Enlightenment philistinism” and “capitalism and philistine principle” in *The Dialectics of Myth*; see: (Losev 2003, pp. 102, 104, 109).

According to Bird's reconstruction, Losev's model potentially contains all possible expressive forms, although it fundamentally differs from them (Bird 2022, p. 144). At the same time, the model is a purpose of the person experiencing aesthetic or mystical image (Bird 2022, p. 166). Thus, the concept of a model, should it be extrapolated to Losev's theory of myth, denotes the transcendent and detached core of the myth⁹—the purpose of the “realization of personality”.

Linguophilosophical Conceptualization of Myth

The relationship between myth and language has been explored not only within the framework of the religious and philosophical tradition discussed earlier, but also across fields such as cultural studies, ethnology, psychology, etc. The role of myth as a fundamental element of any culture could be studied from the perspective of various research perspectives, including the linguophilosophical one. In this sense, the approaches discussed above contain practical potential.

On one hand, Losev's ontological view of myth allows it to be seen as a metaphysical foundation for its religious and philosophical system. On the other hand, it allows us to carry out its rational reduction through the analysis of its individual aspects. Thus, in addition to the aesthetic reduction described above (by Bird), the verbal “revelation” of myth implies the possibility of its linguistic analysis and linguophilosophical conceptualization.¹⁰

In this sense, from a linguophilosophical perspective, the analysis of the relationship between language and the mythical reality can be narrowed to the connection between the language and the object described by this language (extralinguistic referent).

In both Ivanov's and Losev's definitions of myth, the linguistic dimension appears to be a necessary condition for its existence. However, while Losev's myth is rooted in an absolute ontologism, in contrast to Ivanov's myth, which is shaped by a more developed epistemology, it offers greater potential for full linguophilosophical conceptualization. Ivanov's view of myth as *a posteriori* and Losev's idea of myth's detachment both imply a specifically “indirect” linguistic diagram. The meaning given in the linguistic mythological image turns out to be mediated. That diagram was developed in Lyudmila Gogotishvili's linguophilosophy, where the “indirectness” of semantic expression became the leitmotif of her main theoretical positions.

In her research, Gogotishvili proceeded from both Losev's and Ivanov's developments in the field of myth theory, considering the concept of myth as one of the basic categories of all Russian symbolism. According to Gogotishvili, “In symbolism myth was not thought to be a type of thinking being overcome. Myth was considered as an archetypal layer of that thinking [...] counterbalance to analytic philosophy and rationalism” (Gogotishvili 2004a, p. 149).

⁹For more on Ivanov's primordial myth as the primary generative model see (Titarenko 2014, p. 87).

¹⁰It is important to note that Losev's myth scholars Anatoly Panasyuk (Panasyuk 2019) and Andrey Tashchian (Tashchian 1998) do not explore linguophilosophical conceptualizations of myth.

Following symbolist theories, Gogotishvili adopts and develops the idea of an inextricable link between language and myth (Gogotishvili 2004a, p. 151), which substantiates the possibility of a linguophilosophical conceptualization of the myth.¹¹

Gogotishvili also differentiates between mythological and ordinary judgments that generalizes Russian symbolism (Ivanov, Bely) and Philosophy of Name (Florensky, Bulgakov, Losev) (1997). She argues that the main distinctive characteristic of mythological judgments is the emphasis of their personality-communicative dimension as connecting the symbol (spoken word) and the mystical reality being (extralinguistic referent¹²) symbolized.

The mythological judgment, in this context, is also based on the direct communication¹³ of the speaker and the listener/responder. There is myth as a “dialogue” between the “transcendent” speaker utilizing a referent and the “immanent” word perceiver. In this mythical interpretation, every word about any object implies communication with the personalities involved by this word who gave birth to it and reproduced it¹⁴ (in the linguistic sense—pragmatics¹⁵). Thus, mythological judgments personalize (personify) the reality they describe (Gogotishvili 1997, p. 588).

Gogotishvili argues that myth is a necessary condition for the process of linguistic reference. As mentioned earlier, the concept of myth meaningfully implies a communicative connection between a word and objective referent. Moreover, myth implies the formation (syntactic and semantic) of language constructions that are supposed to have the adequacy of the meaning expression in them. In this sense, myth is a kind of ultimate form of objective meaning (Gogotishvili 2006a, p. 60). Thus, myth illustrates the connection between language (the immanent) and extra-linguistic reality (the transcendent) (Gogotishvili 2006a, p. 91). In this sense, myth is both verbal and eidetic (Gogotishvili 1999, p. 701). This is very similar to Losev’s diagram (see Fig. 2).

According to Gogotishvili, myth can be understood as an “eidetic syntax” that determines the logical and linguistic structure of a statement (Gogotishvili 2004a, p. 155). In this regard, we distinguish two main linguistic ways of constructing mythological judgments, namely poetic-allegorical and logical-diagrammatic.

Building on Ivanov’s theoretical ideas and poetry in her articles, Gogotishvili (2006a, 2006b) shows that a poetic symbol synthetically (in the Kantian sense) marks extra-linguistic reality through myth (Gogotishvili 2006a, p. 39). At the same time, from the point of view of structure, this mythological judgment turns out to be constructed here through such antinomies¹⁶ as semantic, grammatical, syntactic, etc. (Gogotishvili 2006b, pp. 109, 126, 128).

¹¹For more on Gogotishvili’s interpretation of the philosophy of Losev and Ivanov, see: (Fedotova 2019).

¹²In this context, this means a thing to which a linguistic expression refers.

¹³The remaining language forms (ordinary judgments) turn out to be less mythical and involved in myth to varying degrees.

¹⁴Compare this with Losev’s reasoning from *Dialectics of Myth*: “A layer of personalistic being doubtless rests on all things because all things are nothing other than person turned inside out” (Losev 2003, p. 87).

¹⁵Referring to Losev, Gogotishvili demonstrates that the pragmatic categories of intonation and expression inherent in the mythological dimension of language have “supreme power” in language (Gogotishvili 1997, p. 613).

¹⁶For numerous poetic examples from Ivanov’s (and others’) poetry, see the article (Gogotishvili 2006b).

The “logical-diagrammatic” path was developed by Gogotishvili as part of her studies of Losev’s work. In particular, Gogotishvili (1999) designates Losev’s dialectical antithetical diagrams as an adequate form of expressing meaning in logical form (Gogotishvili 1999, p. 689).

Gogotishvili considers both poetic antinomies and dialectical antithetical constructions as mythological judgments, the content of which is not self-evident, but is revealed by the individual in an intentional act. In this case, finding the meaning of a mythological judgment is ensured by the fact of its poetic, philosophical or mystical “contemplation” (Gogotishvili 1999, p. 698): it is the presence of personal consciousness (an agent of detachment, according to Bird), comprehending antinomic poetics or dialectical diagrams, that provides reference.¹⁷

That conclusion led Gogotishvili to affirm the connection between symbolism and language phenomenology. In her works of the early 2000s, she introduced the symbolist concepts into a phenomenological perspective: “symbolism reduces transcendental experience in the same way as the world of a natural attitude is reduced in phenomenology, and also receives pure consciousness as the sphere of phenomenological existence of symbols” (Gogotishvili 2004a, p. 154). “The layer in pure phenomenological consciousness” contains the reduction of mystical experience, Gogotishvili calls “mythological” (Gogotishvili 2004a, p. 154). Elena Sozina argues for the legitimacy of this approach (Sozina 2023, p. 40).

Building on this foundation, Gogotishvili developed the concept of eidetic language ((Gogotishvili 2004b) and (Gogotishvili 2006c)) as a certain linguistic “genome,” where *a priori* eidetic meanings act as “words” (Gogotishvili 2004b, p. 128). This is the sphere of pure consciousness as an absolute myth. In this context, mythology seems to be a kind of egology (Gogotishvili 2006c, p. 409), identifying the dimension of personality (myth) in language and linguistic elements. At the same time myth also provides an understanding of meaning for a referent and its fixation by linguistic means (Gogotishvili 2006c, p. 351) (compare with Fig. 2). To put it differently, the myth interprets the “eidetic speech” (Gogotishvili 2004b, p. 134) via linguistic means (Gogotishvili 2006c, p. 318). This leads to interpretations of varying levels of adequacy (compare with Fig. 3).

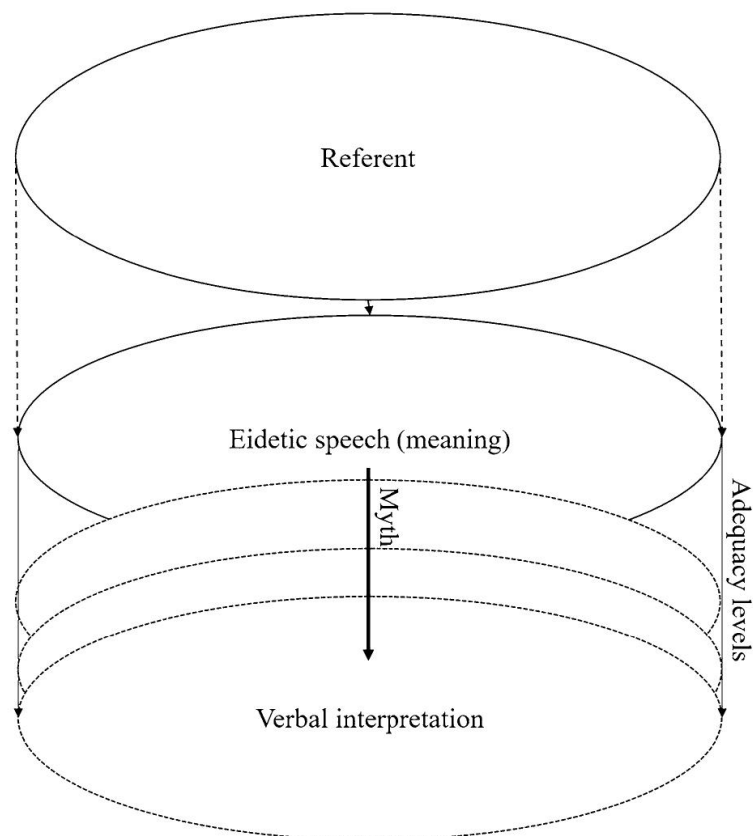
It can be said that at all stages of her work Gogotishvili referred to the concept of myth (based on the works of Ivanov and Losev). In Gogotishvili’s late work (Gogotishvili 2021b), the concept of myth also becomes one of the foundations of the linguistic concepts of binary and ternary types of symbols (Gogotishvili 2021b, p. 76).¹⁸ Overall, according to Gogotishvili, myth combines ontological communication, linguistic reference, and phenomenological eidetic reduction. In each of these perspectives myth is responsible for the “indirectness” (mediation) of the manifestation of meaning in language and the intentional overcoming of this “indirectness” via linguistic means.¹⁹

¹⁷This, in turn, supports the personalism of the Gogotishvili’s philosophy of language.

¹⁸To outline the content of these concepts in short, a binary symbol implies an adequate expression of meaning by means of language, and a ternary symbol stands for an expression of meaning mediated by an intermediate interpretation. Both the adequateness and the interpretation are explicable on the basis of the logic of myth outlined earlier.

¹⁹Primarily, pragmatic (Gogotishvili 2021a, p. 47).

Fig. 3 Conventional scheme of the genesis of “Gogotishvili’s” myth



Conclusion

To summarize the key aspects of the symbolist and linguophilosophical conceptualization of myth in the works of the thinkers discussed above (Ivanov, Losev, Gogotishvili), we can highlight the following points:

- 1) For Ivanov, myth can be considered in two dimensions, namely pre-linguistic (mystic) and linguistic. In this case, the linguistic dimension is formed *a posteriori* by the subject (the artist) in such a way that the verbal myth is an interpretation mediating the mystical meaning;
- 2) For Losev, myth is given *a priori* to the personality and objectively encompasses both an ontological and linguistic dimension. Due to its own detachment, myth is capable of being expressed in the form of relative images of varying degrees of its adequacy to the absolute source of meaning (God). In this case, overcoming mythical detachment is possible through the intention of the individual involved in mystical myth-making;
- 3) the ontological nature of Ivanov’s and Losev’s myth allowed modern researchers (e.g., Bird, Gogotishvili) to use this concept in an attenuated manner in aesthetic and linguistic studies, preserving its basic intuition of “indirectness” (interpretativeness, detachment);
- 4) in Gogotishvili’s linguophilosophy, myth is responsible for the mediation (or “indirectness”) of the expression of objective “eidetic” meaning in language, and implies the possibility of achieving adequateness between meaning and word in personal intentions.

In general, we can talk about the existence of the original tradition of a linguophilosophical understanding of the concept of myth in light of its ontologization. Formulated by Ivanov and Losev, it was adopted and applied in modern humanities research (e.g., Bird, Gogotishvili). The case of Gogotishvili, demonstrates the possibility of using the concepts of religious philosophy within the framework of non-religious humanities research.

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