

1.

On meaning – a semiotic ontology

Abstract:

Against the predominant semiotic views of signs and meaning, I argue that meaning is based on two distinct capacities of the human mind, cognition and communication, and that these two parallel activities taken together yield a semiotic ontology of meaning.

In this short critical reflection, I would like to modestly approach a problem that is more important than anything else in semiotic theory, since it concerns the understanding of the sort of reality that semiotic research can be said to study, and since its treatment gives rise to strands of semiotics that are so different that, sadly enough, they hardly maintain any intellectual exchange at all. The problem is, simply phrased: What *is* meaning? How can ‘meaning’, the object of all semiotic studies, be characterized, as distinct from other objects of inquiry, whether philosophical or scientific?

1. Outside of semiotics, for example in analytic philosophy, meaning is predicated on propositions and is often defined as the conditions under which they are true. Here, meaning equals truth. The study of meaning in this sense is ‘truth-conditional’ semantics. By contrast, in so-called continental philosophy, meaning is instead predicated on words, which have lexical intensional meanings and co-textuel/contextual extensional meanings (cf., in German, the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*).

In F. de Saussure’s *semiology*, the meanings of words are *signified* concepts (of a *langue*), to be distinguished from the *referential* meanings of these concepts in use (speech, *parole*). The semantics of semiological systems would follow the linguistic distinction between signifieds and their referents, or referential meanings, in use; in practical research on texts or discourse, meaning would therefore refer to the semiological systems of textually or discursively signified concepts, for example ideological systems (as in R. Barthes).

In C. S. Peirce’s *semeiotic*, signs in nature or culture always have referential consequences, interpretants, determined by contextual grounds. Anything can in principle mean anything, *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, and this is in principle almost all that can be stated generally about meaning: it is determined by context, which is to say: the

world decides what means what. This is, in a sense, a fine poetic view of meaning that draws its beauty from its vacuity. It invites of course a pragmatic approach to the genres of actual 'meaning' production in the universe (physical, biological, zoological, sociological, logical, theological...). However, in this respect, Peirce and Saussure are on opposite ends of a scale running from reference to concept, or, as it is phrased in L. Hjelmslev's glossematic theory, from substance of content to form of content. So, in this phrasing, for Peirce, meaning is contextual, referential, 'substantial', whereas for Saussure, it is conceptual, signified, and 'formal'.

Structural semantics, which shaped modern French semiotics, has adopted the Hjelmslevian double distinction between expression and content (the terminology sounds nicer in Hjelmslev's Danish, using the contrast of *out* and *in*: *udtryk* and *indhold*, cf. German *Ausdruck* and *Inhalt*) and between substance and form. The result is a fourfold series of instances defining the sign function: substance of expression – form of expression – form of content – substance of content. The substances on both sides are called 'meaning', when considered as exterior to the inter-formal sign function, so we get an expressive meaning (material phonetics) and a content meaning (referential semantics). In Hjelmslev's (rather formalistic) dogma, the two 'planes' of the sign function must be regarded as equivalent in all respects and be analyzed in the same way.

It is not clear to me how contemporary mainstream semiotics manages to integrate or make sense of these contradictory conceptions; my curious reader should take a look on the W. Nöth's *Handbook of Semiotics* to get an overall impression of the magnitude of chaos and confusion that reigns as to the definitions of signs and meaning.

Before presenting the view of *cognitive semiotics*, a view that may have a chance to help semiotics clarify the notion of meaning and specify what follows from it as to its own practice, I would like to make a couple of further observations.

Let us again take a look at the current French 'Paris School' semiotics. In *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire de la théorie du langage*, by Greimas & Courtés (1979), under the heading *Sens*, Meaning, we find (here rendered in my translation):

"1. Being a property common to all semiotic* organisations (or systems) [toutes les sémiotiques], the concept of meaning is indefinable. [...] Prior to its manifestation as articulated signification*, nothing can be said about meaning without introducing metaphysical presuppositions that carry heavy consequences."

"2. L. Hjelmslev proposes an operative* definition of meaning by identifying it with the raw 'material' that allows any semiotic organisation, as a form*, to be manifested. Thus,

meaning becomes synonymous with 'matter' (the English term 'purport' embraces both words), and both are used indifferently when speaking of the two 'manifestants' of the plane of expression* and the plane of content*. The term 'substance' is then used to refer to meaning in so far as it is taken over [pris en charge] by a semiotic organisation ; the substance of content is consequently distinguished from the substance of expression."

The second part of this short dictionary article may sound rather strange to readers unfamiliar with glossematic theory; but at least I have prepared mine a little, above. Still, the conception that appears in the condensed form of these paragraphs is far from being intuitively intelligible. Meaning is considered as in itself indefinable; it is only to be grasped as articulated signification, that is, in short, as a signified or made into a signifier, as a formally organized expression or content of a semiotic function, in Hjelmslev's sense (Da.: *indholdsmening*, meaning of content).

In so far as semiotics, aspiring to be a scientific discipline, studies meaning, it has to become, according to Greimas and Courtés, a *metalanguage* superimposed upon an *object language*. Sometimes, in the Dictionary, phrased as 'metasemiotic' and 'object semiotic', respectively. So meaning must be inscribed in a 'language', or be considered as a language, in order to be studied semiotically and be the object of such studies. A curious consequence of this presupposition is that it is impossible to specify what is here meant by 'object language' (object semiotic) before it is analyzed by semiotics as its metalanguage; the only way to specify what the entire enterprise is about is therefore to describe the (consistent, coherent) metalanguage of semiotics. This takes a meta-metasemiotic approach, of course. And the regress is inevitable. But let us remain at the first level: the discipline of semiotics thus needs to be a 'language', a 'metalanguage', in order to be described. It needs to be endowed with an internal, immanent coherence, a systematic and logical (non-contradictory) grammar of syntagmatic and paradigmatic articulations, which controls the structure of its propositions. This 'metalanguage' has a form of expression and a form of content, as any other semiotic organization; its content notably contains the object language, which it is 'about'. So, since this metalanguage literally *contains* its object (substantially and formally), the object is part of it, and describing the metalanguage is by definition describing its object. Can this be true? The description absorbs its object? Describing the description-of-meaning is studying meaning, and is the only possible way to approach meaning?

To my knowledge, no scientific 'discourse', including presentations of analyses, theoretical discussions, critical debates, comparisons of contrasting results, etc., can be characterized as constituting an immanent metalanguage. Science instead needs contradiction and competing models in order to critically develop knowledge; it needs a good dose of cartesian doubt. What instead characterizes a scientific discipline is its empirical field. But here is the conspicuous problem: *the field seems already taken* – by philosophy, linguistics, biology, the humanities and the social sciences. Nothing is left to semiotics; it has to rely on its particular 'metalanguage'.

2. The alternative view, which is that of cognitive semiotics, is the following. The study of human and animal *cognition* is incomplete, if it limits itself to perception. It has to include communication. But the study of human and animal *communication* is incomplete, if it limits itself to signs and language. It has to include cognition. The reason for this set of inverse inclusions is that *meaning* is involved constitutively both in cognition and in communication. The cognitive mind is communicative and would not be the mind that it is without being communicative.

There are consequently two aspects of meaning that should be distinguished in general semiotics: *cognitive meaning* and *signified meaning*. They should be distinguished and correlated. They are the two complementary ontological modes of manifestation of meaning, so to speak.

By cognitive meaning is understood: projections onto parts of our experienced (perceived) reality that we wish or need to better understand. Example: We see a suffering animal and think that it suffers from an evil spirit that has slipped into its body; or we think it has been hurt by a car; or that it suffers from an infection. Our explanatory projections are meaning productions. They produce meanings but do not depend on any language. Of course, the content of our 'sense-making' projections depends on what we think and remember – the sources of which are manifold and most often chaotic. But the elementary source of cognitive meaning production is the post-perceptual, conceptual operations that make experience possible at all, as imaginary 'gestalts' and episodes containing states, events, acts, and emotional dramas.

By signified meaning is understood: intentionally communicated information expressed by subjects and interpreted by subjects. Example: the musicians in a symphony orchestra interpreting the gestures and other expressive acting of the

conductor, while the conductor is interpreting the writing of the score, which expresses the intentional musical thoughts of the composer. This example is particularly rich, because it shows how signified meaning can be transmitted through (infinitely) multiple instances. Signified meaning is transitive: S1 *shows* to S2 what he thinks S3 *means* to communicate. The example also demonstrates that basic deictic signs, like the signs of the conducting and of the score, consist of two signifying layers, the first of which *symbolically* expresses what the addressee is supposed to do immediately (*here* is the beat, *this* is the rhythm...), and the second of which *iconically* expressively offers an image of an intended content (the desired soundscape, the timbre, the volume...). This is possibly a general feature of human exchanges of signs: an internally ordered string of *symbols* whose signified meaning deictically embeds *icons* of a content.

By contrast, what we call (pure) cognitive meaning is *indexically* related to the world, in the sense that some salient feature experienced (i. e. the 'index') triggers our projections as its possible meaning or explanation. To put symbols, icons, and indices in the same classificatory box, as Peircean scholars do, is to ignore the ontological distinction between signified and cognitive meaning.

The philosophical or scientific task of general semiotics as a general science of meaning is evidently to study *the dynamical relation holding between cognitive and signified meaning*: the ways in which they influence each other, their inter-determination. Whereas the humanities and the social sciences (including classical semiotics) exclusively study signified meaning, and psychology, biology, cognitive science and philosophy of mind exclusively or predominantly study cognitive meaning, the privilege of cognitive semiotics is to study the interaction between cognitive and signified meaning – to include cognitive findings about semantic structure (categorization, schematization, narrativization...) in the account of linguistic and textual semantic structures that inherit such semantic structures, and to compare the semantics of discourse to semantic accounts of known forms of causal and intentional thinking, imagination and feeling, for example. Cognitive meaning undoubtedly has a neuro-biological foundation that determines basic informational and integrational operations; but it is nevertheless deeply influenced by signified meanings developed in cultural intersubjectivity, so deeply that communication in some respects, and over time, changes the neural structure of the brains hosting these communicative minds. The

evolutionary *semiotization of the human communicative mind* is an ongoing process that for many researchers constitutes the most fascinating perspective in the study of meaning.

To conclude: Far from being indefinable, the object of semiotic research – meaning – is in fact described by the characterization of the two legs of research, on which semiotics walks: cognition and communication. The way it walks in turn determines the way it talks.