Reassessing the Foundations of Semiotics: Preliminaries

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ABSTRACT

What justifies a discipline is its grounding in practical activities. Documentary evidence is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for viability. This applies to semiotics as it applies to mathematics, physics, chemistry, computer science, and all other forms of questioning the world. While all forms of knowledge testify to the circularity of the epistemological effort, semiotics knowledge is doubly cursed. There is no knowledge that can be expressed otherwise than in semiotic form; knowledge of semiotics is itself expressed semiotically. Semiotics defined around the notion of the sign bears the burden of unsettled questions prompted by the never-ending attempt to define signs. This indeterminate condition is characteristic of all epistemological constructs, whether in reference to specific knowledge domains or semiotics. The alternative is to associate the knowledge domain of semiotics with the meta-level, i.e., inquiry of what makes semiotics necessary. In a world of action-reaction, corresponding to a rather poor form of causality, semiotics is not necessary. Only in acknowledging the anticipatory condition of the living can grounding for semiotics be found. This perspective becomes critical in the context of a semiotized civilization in which the object level of human effort is progressively replaced by representations (and their associated interpretations).

Keywords: Anticipation, Interaction, Interpretation, Representation, Semiosis

1. INTRODUCTION

The foundation of semiotics around the notion of the sign explains its accomplishments. Nobody with knowledge in this domain can discard or exaggerate them. But it explains even more the failure of the discipline to become the backbone of modern sciences and humanities. In a certain way, the intention of this study is to argue that semiotics could fulfill such a function. Indeed, not living up to its possibilities affects not just its own credibility as a specific knowledge domain. Relevant is the fact that the sciences and the humanities are becoming more and more fragmented in the absence of an integrating coherent semiotic theory. Actually, we are trying to make a case for the necessity of such a theory against the background of interest in the emergence and evolution of semiotic questions in respect to the sciences and the humanities embodied and situated in semiotic process; biologically inspired semiotic models; and symbol grounding (to name a few current themes).

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You cannot practice physics or even chemistry, economics, cognitive science, etc., without mathematics—this is something everyone active in these disciplines knows. Only when semiotics acquires the same degree of necessity will conditions be created for complementing the obsession with depth (specialized knowledge) with an understanding of breadth, corresponding to an integrated view of the world.

Many attempts have been made to write a history (or histories) of semiotics: biographies of semioticians, history of semantics, history of symptomatology, anthologies of texts relevant to semiotics, and the like. Few would argue against the perception that we have much better histories of semiotics (and semioticians) than contributions to semiotics as such. What can be learned from the ambitious projects of the past is that semiotic concerns can be identified along the entire history of human activity. This is what prompted some authors (Eco, 1976; Lotman, 1990) to consider culture as the subject matter of semiotics. Initially, semiotic activity was difficult to distinguish from actions and activities related to survival. Over time, semiotic concerns (especially related to language) constituted a distinct awareness of what is needed to succeed in what we do and, furthermore, to be successful.

The aim being the grounding of semiotics, we will examine the variety of angles from which its domain knowledge was defined. In parallel to the criticism of conceptions that have led to the unsatisfactory condition of semiotics in our time, we will submit a hypothesis regarding a foundation different from that resulting from an agenda of inquiry limited to the sign. Finally, we will argue that the semiotics of semiotics (embodied in, for instance, in the organization dedicated to its further development) deserves more attention, given the significance of “organized labor” to the success of the endeavor. While the grounding of semiotics in the dynamics of phenomena characteristic of a threshold of complexity associated with the living will be ascertained (Figure 1), the more elaborate grounding in anticipation remains a subject for a future contribution.

2. HUMANNESS

Regardless of which semiotic perspective the reader has adopted, it should not be too difficult to settle on some very simple preliminary observations regarding what is of semiotic significance in the self-making of humankind. Furthermore, we can easily agree that prediction, as an expression of understanding dynamics, has led to the affirmation of humanity’s dominant role in nature. To refer to the human being’s domination over the rest of the living realm might not be politically correct, but it describes a matter of fact. The associated fact is the role of semiotics. Awareness of the semiotic nature of human activity is implicit in science and in the humanities. Semiotics empowered the human being to the detriment of the rest of reality.

We don’t really need an agreement on what the subject of semiotics is, or what a sign is, in order to realize that the underlying element of any human interaction, as well as interaction with the world, is semiotic in nature. Interaction takes place through an intermediary. Signs or not, semiotics is about the in-between, about mediation, about guessing what others do, how nature will behave. Even two human beings touching each other is more than the physical act. In addition to the immediate, material, energetic aspect, the gesture entails a sense of duration, immaterial suggestions, something that eventually will give it meaning. It is a selection (who/what is touched) in a given situation (context). And it prompts a continuation.

But there is more to this preliminary observation. Just as a detail, to be further discussed (as the line of argument requires), the following observation from brain imaging: The three most developed active brain regions—one in the prefrontal cortex, one in the parietal and temporal cortices are specifically dedicated to the task of understanding the goings-on of other people’s minds (cf. Mitchell, 2009). This in itself suggests semiotic activity related to anticipation. Actions, our own and of others, are “internalized,” i.e., understood and represented in terms of what neurobiology calls mental states. So are intentions. In this respect, Gallese (2001) wrote
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