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SIGN AND MEANING: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION

Abstract: In the following paper we will analyze the theoretical assumptions regarding semiotics and communication, with the intention of outlining the productive tension installed between them. We shall frame the semiotic discourse and show that, although it seems to be limited by its linguistic options or by the objects that defy logocentrism (e.g. images), the domain of signs leads to the symbolic space of communication. According to the information theory, semiotics, being centered on message and code, will follow the same route that communication does, towards some intersubjective, contextual, social and pragmatic variables.

Key words: sign, meaning, signification, semiotics, communication

Introduction

One can indeed argue that man descends from signs and that his humanity pertains to a certain signification or symbolic order. This is all the more true if we think of Baudelaire's phrase from his famous sonnet *Correspondence*, which states that we do not live amongst things, but rather within "a forest of symbols". An empire of signs reduplicates our natural world, determining us to think about how could have theoretical ratios been built and consolidated around the concepts of sign and signification alongside the so-called semiotic models and generations. If communicating first of all means "having something in common", the actual world and the networks that define it constantly refresh our manner of being together, and this staggering diversity of communication levels, from the interpersonal one to the global one, implies the idea that a science which would study this vast field is practically unattainable. Undoubtedly, such a discipline, in search of its self consistency, can only be found by means of debate and through the confrontation with other disciplines.

This paper's premises are the omnipresence of communication within contemporary society and the fact that it rapidly invades all places where social life is organized. The founding principle of the School of Palo Alto, according to which "it is impossible not to communicate" therefore seems to have extended to the ensemble of social structures. From this perspective, the generalization of communication, especially of the publicized one, would be nothing more than a prolongation and an adaptation that uses the actual technological means present in daily communication. If society is slowly overwhelmed by communication, this is definitely owed to the effect of the seductive discourse that communication uses and disseminates. We can thus already talk about a communicational imperative that would resemble some kind of modern "iron law", and yet its ascension is far from completed. Communication, Baudrillard would say, corresponds to a strong tendency based upon the quality of the human action: "to do" would outrun "to act", which results in the disappearance of the message itself from within human communication (and, with it, the disappearance of the poetical and expressive functions) to the profit of the phatic and "playful" function. The search for contacts and relations would therefore become essential for human interchanges.

The present paper questions whether the qualities most often attributed to communication are justifiable. While some consider that communication would embed all modern virtues, others look upon it reticently and fearful due to the possibilities of manipulation with which it promises to empower those who can control it. We should also notice that, at a global scale, communication is about to enter a new stage; this is revealed by the usage of the new communication tools, which are the object of some debates that go way beyond the discussions carried out by experts. Additionally, the society which is about to be built will be increasingly dependent on communication and on its technology. Another important aspect is that in order to analyze the changes owed to communication, we can now use a wide array of scientific results, though still "partial", but also an undeniably wider diversity of theories which do not limit themselves to the functionalist-empirical current or to the cybernetic model, as it was

the case in the past. Today there are numerous disciplines concerned with the study of communication and its effects, such as the sociology of techniques, of culture or of social interaction, the studies in public policy, the semiotics of images and the pragmatic linguistics – a series of disciplines that often confront their methodologies and sometimes share the same objects of study. On the other hand, as far as these disciplines are concerned, various philosophical perspectives also set out to study the complex phenomenon of communication and what it implies for society. In spite of this, the conceptual abundance within the study of communication, although it offers a more clear image on the complexity of the phenomena, does not lead to a better understanding of the meaning of recent evolutions. We are therefore right to say that these certain progresses render the paradigmatic approach of communication quite complicated. In what regards the information and communication sciences, i.e. the ones that reclaim communication as their object of study, these are, according to B. Miège, paradoxically “less able than ever to offer surety regarding the effects of the mass-media or the techniques of communication”¹.

Our research studies the ratio that is instituted between semiotics and communication, two concepts which relate to a complex of theories and practices, which are so vast that their combination permits a wide range of semantic possibilities. As Jean-Marie Floch argues, we cannot talk about such different realities “unless we approach them from a single point of view, namely by relating them to the problem of meaning and signification”². One of the premises of our study is that the discourse of semiotics concerns the manners of producing meanings, which, if we take into account the case of communication, does not only take place at the source, within the intention of the transmitter, but reveals an entire structuring and negotiation function of the meaning between the participants to the communication process. Reversely, as we observe communication and the examples offered by the daily life, it is still the meaning that generally constitutes the core of semiotics.

Meaning in semiotics

From a certain point of view, semiotics appears to be a paradoxical discipline, meaning we find it all around us and, yet, nowhere specifically. It perceives itself as a place of convergence for other disciplines: psychology, sociology, anthropology and, in a broader sense, cognitive sciences, philosophy and especially epistemology, linguistics and the sciences of communication. Moreover, semiotics asks to be applied to objects so different from one another that their enumeration would resemble a surrealist collage. One could say that the attempt to study so many objects renders semiotics somewhat shallow. It would be erroneous to fall into this trap, as semiotics does not ask to replace any of the disciplines from above. Its intervention is of another nature, because semiotics hopes to trigger a dialogue between different perspectives and approaches, it strives to be their interface. If, for example, anthropology argues that it attributes meaning to conduits and rituals within society, the goal of semiotics would be to explore this meaning and the way it operates, as well as the relation it establishes with action and knowledge. Semiotics thus essays to explore what for others is merely

postulated, to rephrase Jean-Marie Klinkenberg's well-known idea, a quite ambitious mission if we think about it, because carrying it out would render semiotics a meta-theory, a theory of theories. The divergences between different approaches to semiotics are the result of various factors and relate to the place and significance that semiotics attains with regard to each of the disciplines with which it establishes connections.

In the case of our paper, the manner of relating to the different approaches of semiotics, which will be correlated with communication, is associated with the image of a cognitive and pragmatic semiotics. Let us consider these two terms: cognition and pragmatics. The first concept is justified by the will to overcome certain difficulties generated by an understanding of semiotics which supports that for describing its own internal coherence suffices in order to be adequate to its object. We think that this epistemological view is not objectionable in itself because it consists of the idea of not being seduced by the illusion that a certain object constitutes the evidence of what is being said about it. From this standpoint, *in extremis* some semioticians have come to totally put aside the issue of an intersection point between the signs and the world. Of course, in this manner a high degree of stringency is reached in what regards the theoretical description of meaning, but this implies a conception of the sign that tends towards self-empowerment. The second approach to semiotics that we have mentioned is concerned with the pragmatic dimension of the sign; this implies the idea that the sign is both an instrument of acting upon the world, but also upon other people. To restate the idea in the terms of Jean-Jacques Boutaud, because we cannot isolate the text – be it verbal or visual – from its social, cultural and interactional context, “semiotics sees in communication the proper setting for a pragmatic accommodation”³.

More or less explicitly, semiotics and communication have constantly (re)built relations of cohesion, be they symmetrical or of reciprocal inclusion. Understood as a symbolic activity, communication constantly administrates the exchange between signs, in such a way that circumscribing and defining this universe of signs constitutes an extremely complex project, whose first objective is accounting for meaning within communication. Alongside this, the so-called information and communication sciences are constituted as separate disciplines. As a result of reflection from an anthropological point of view on redefining culture, the new discipline makes some important steps towards understanding some ample processes within which the problems regarding images, identity and relation shake the foundation of what has stood for the mirage of the first semiotic generation: the absolute power of the code, of the system and of arbitrariness. Under the empire of these first illusions, centered on the linguistic exchanges and formalizations researched by Lévi-Strauss's, Barthes's or Jakobson's structuralism, semiotics has first of all focused on the formal seduction and conceptual richness offered by linguistics. But when communication erects its foundations beyond the structuralist postulates on the language, the question rises whether semiotics remains captive to its own options, regarding everything as signs dependent on the structural model of the language. It is certain that the structuralist perspective influences from the beginning the relations that are established between semiotics and communication; however, it does not limit itself to the idea that these relations

remained anchored in some linguistic postulates. The confrontation between the basic systems, primarily linguistic, and certain enunciation and pragmatic discursive techniques, already pass as a first semiotic-linguistic (or, more precisely, socio-semiotic) step towards communication. Progressively, the frame, context and relation effects, the effects of discursive strategies confer a pragmatic image upon what could have been perceived until now under the form of some entirely arbitrary and immanent system of signs. Agreeing to this perspective, we believe that semiotics has not distanced itself from communication, but has rather taken refuge first of all in the bounds of the systems of language recognized in all systems of signs.

Meaning in communication

The reflection on communication and on its interferences within other disciplines implies an understanding of the mutations that have been produced within contemporary society. A first consequence is connected to a critique of logocentrism as – being reevaluated from a communicational standpoint – the linguistic signs lose their autonomy and, according to G. Bateson, fit in a semiotic orchestra to which also belong other signifier layers, such as the image, the indexical sign, along with the expression and the body language. The word is no more the only tool we have in order to reveal the truth, as from photography to video recordings, the development of other visual mediums of memory and information has eroded the transcendence attributed to words, in favor of the development of a larger semiotic orchestra, more comfortable with our usual exchanges⁴.

Accordingly, it is not by accident that, for example, the image has been of major importance for theoretical progress along the semiotic stages of development. It has also been a challenge for the multidimensional research of communication. Beginning with Barthes's "rhetoric of the image" and up until the present semiotic stage, the image foresaw a communication that renders all acting semiotic acting, both in transmitting, as well as in receiving. Surely, until it reached this status, the image had caused several disputes regarding its form and its functions. Constrained to use the first interpretative models, which were conceived by Peirce and confronted with the first structuralist models inspired by Hjelmslev, the notion of image has dispersed to the profit of complex figurative devices – both iconic and visual – from which the information and communication sciences had a lot to learn. From theory to practice, the semiotics of the image seems to have thrived, along with the research on the visual sign (Hjelmslev) and the iconic sign defined by Peirce. Alongside these "semiotic adventures" (Barthes), the reevaluation and thoroughgoing study of the problem of the image and, in its extension, of visual and iconic communication, have deepened. No matter what typology of signs or codes, they will always concatenate with the language of the image, which will determine what we know as the "structuralist adrift". These new perspectives are a decisive step towards communication. However, we should acknowledge that it was under the impulse of structuralism that a research of the fundamentals of the image was conducted, a research that has offered to visual communication a major perspective into some ontological, epistemological and

methodological problems. The theories and models of the first semiotic generations encouraged the edification of some solid and rigorous foundations through structuralism, even if it had to progress through other means towards the image.

Subsequent to the age of code and system enclosure, thanks to Peirce the research conducted both on the images and on the signs within images discovered a new ontological, epistemological and methodological horizon. Ontologically speaking, the evolution of a semiosis (firstness, secondness, a thirdness⁵) represents a philosophical reflection on the act of thinking and on the unlimited interpretative process that continuously undergoes changes. Thus, the notion of code that thrived up until that moment, and an enclosed assemble of meaning units, become only moments of the sign's (legisign's) constitution in the virtually infinite play of dynamic interpretants. From an epistemological standpoint, the interpretative process, as well as the definition of sign as *relatum* by means of the internal relations to a foundation, will propel semiotics not only towards a phenomenological perspective, but also towards a pragmatic one. This is of crucial importance for shifting semiotics in its relation with communication, especially in rethinking the processes of meaning or a dynamic perspective on the sign. Methodologically, we see an orientation of Peirce's triadic model towards taxonomies, typologies of signs, classes and subclasses, a fact that caused a change of course for Peirce's model in what regards its initial purpose: the model was rethought to free imagination within the movement of an infinite semiosis. Additionally, certain disputes on the iconicity of the sign or on the trichotomy icon - index - symbols caused the arousal of interest for new semiotic elucidations, exemplified by numerous applications within communication.

Due to the abundance of semiotic theories of the image, we may say that these rather left the impression of dissipation in various perspectives on approaches rather than supporting interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary with the help of communication. In an attempt to simplify things, we may state that some semiotic approaches will only retain the structuralist tendency to think of the sign as the only instrument of universal configuration and to see actants where others saw subjects. Analogously, Peirce's epigones ostentatiously put up the banner of the sign's trichotomy, moving through the definition of the icon or raking, as U. Eco did, for classes and typologies of signs which afterwards the authors themselves would give up searching for. Looking back in time, it is not hard to see, considering the diversity of discourses on semiotics, what exactly caused its apparent alienation from communication and the abridgement of its competency to some simple linguistic operations which wish to stand as immanent to communication.

The productive tension between semiotics and communication

In agreement with Jean-Marie Klinkenberg's opinion, we wish to outline the usefulness of a general principle of solidarity, i.e. that "signs cannot be isolated from the codes that confer upon them a status, nor can these codes be isolated from the channels through which their signs manifest themselves or the context in which they are updated"⁶. A specific problem of this approach is related to understanding the complex

relation which is established between two phenomena which may be, each in its own right, the main object of study for semiotics: communication and meaning. We believe that this standpoint, interested in grasping the productive tension between semiotics and communication is up to the task of conferring upon semiotics its solid and rigorous foundations regarding meaning and signification in communication, the distinction between the two residing in valuing the effects pertaining to the context.

If from the beginning the semiotic discourse seems to enclose itself within its own linguistic options or within the bits and pieces which revolve around the objects that defy logocentrism, e.g. all types of images, the sign also leads us towards the symbolic space of communication. In the classical theory of communication, the process of transmitting information is often presented under the following form: a transmitter sends out a message towards a receiver by means of a channel, a message about something, a message built with the help of a given code. This classical schema has been used with the purpose of describing linguistic communication but was thought to be valid for all types of communication. From this theory's point of view, within a process that takes place between two machines, the signal has no signification power and it is only able to determine the receiver, i.e. there is no signification, but only information. If the receiver of the message is a human being – it is not necessary for the transmitter to be a human being itself, but only to send the signal according to the rules known to the human receiver – we are already in the presence of a signification process. We should also note that the signal does not have to function as a mere stimulus, but it must also request an interpretative answer on behalf of the receiver. Additionally, the process of signification requires the presence of a code, a notion that seems to be central for this theory. Consequently, being centered on the message and on the code, according to Shannon's aforementioned information theory, semiotics will basically go walk the same path as communication, towards some intersubjective, contextual, social and pragmatic variables.

With regard to the first founding articles concerning semiotics and communication or culture (Barthes and Eco), within this paper we have not confronted semiotic theories with one another, but have preferred, as J.-M. Floch advises us, to “test semiotics”⁷ within the vast and ample field of communication. This requires new discursive practices, shapes and objects, which stand for just as many semiotic universes in communication.

The interdependency between semiotics and communication was analyzed both from the perspective of communication on semiotics and vice versa. In the first case, we cannot refrain from noticing that the introductory works to the matter somewhat neglect semiotics, as terms such as sign, code, structure are all in all very briefly analyzed, while connections and intersection points between communication and anthropology, the different types of linguistics and social psychologies – to offer only some of the interdisciplinary directions – are very well traced and framed. In the latter case, nonetheless, when semiotics defines its terminological field in an attempt to approach communication, which was at the beginning conceived functionally, as transmission of messages, we can see that the merging between the two is also

troublesome. A chronological analysis of this relation allows us to consider the effort of semiotics to adopt pragmatic perspectives on discourse and to overcome its tendency of focusing on the message within communication, instead of the message's conditions of negotiation. Another reductionist trap which is to be laid aside resides in the focus on the linguistic dimension in the detriment of the multimodal character of communication. As U. Eco states, describing a semiotic field may initially resemble a collection of communicational behaviors, which is why one may argue that semiotics studies all cultural processes as if they were communicational processes. Still, "each of these processes seems to exist only because it has an underlying system of signification"⁸. This distinction must be made to avoid any confusion; we should also mention that although it is very true that there are great differences between the semiotics of communication and the semiotics of signification, this differentiation should not generate two opposed approaches which rule out one another.

Additionally, we see that from the beginning the triadic interpretative model put forward by Peirce (sign, index, and symbol) and also the pragmatic one (a sign is what it does in action, in context) enjoy the full legitimacy of being reinvested in objects or in situations that relate to communication. Of course, Peirce's philosophical reflections on signs (words, phrases, paintings and various reasoning) were not interested in a confrontation with communication, as the information and communication sciences did not exist *per se* in that time. Subsequent descriptive developments, faithful to Peirce's model, propose a reflection on signs and on the logic of relations between some signs that are open towards the process of communication.

The first semiotic definitions that include communication are very well outlined in Greimas's semiotic theory, and due to other theoreticians, cybernetics and the theories of information become popular models for structuralists. If some of these theoreticians extract a series of theoretical conceptions regarding information and, generally speaking, regarding communication, semioticians rather keep to the linear and mechanic perspective. One could see here a convenient schematic which allows semioticians to rely on a message transmission model from a transmitter to a receiver, but in the same time one can also notice a critique towards and a distancing from this model, which is regarded as being too simplistic. We cannot refrain from noticing the fact that the most interesting works concerning the semiotic approaches to communication firstly refer to the six functions of language proposed by R. Jakobson and to overcoming the emissive-receptive model by means of some other ways of conceiving the transmission of the information. This happens all the more when knowledge is modal: such is the case of persuasion or interpretation, phenomena that are rather related to manipulation than to communication (P. Breton, Perelman).

One of the effects of this movement is the critique of the communication theory's functionalism, based on an external view this transmission, so as to acknowledge in Austin's and Searle's theory on speech acts as pragmatic applications an opening that passes beyond the limit of mere communication, as it is firstly interested in its possibility of being produced and exercised. According to this reasoning, conceiving an axis for transmission and communication becomes natural in an anthropological

meaning, i.e. in the sense of people acting upon other people, which is a creative way of forming the intersubjective relations that found society. This double movement, cognitive on the one hand and pragmatic on the other, does no more accept treating the addresser and the addressed as bearing some voided roles of transmitter and receiver, but regards them as competent subjects, caught in a certain moment of their historical evolution and each of them inscribed in his own discourse.

Analyzing the major intersection points between semiotics and communication can clarify the deviations and promises of semiotics, with all their possible consequences for communication. Semiotics maintains its connections with a certain type of linguistics and a certain philosophy; nonetheless, through the intermediation of the linguistic, pragmatic and communicational turn, it evolves within the context of its relation to communication. The latter had to acknowledge the progress made by semiotics, beginning with the structuralist postulates and moving forward to the escape from immanence characteristic of various semiotic generations, as well as their focus on various communication practices.

¹ Bernard Miège, *L'information - communication, objet de connaissance* (Bruxelles: De Boeck & Larcier, 2004), 16. All English translations from French or Romanian belong to us.

² Jean-Marie Floch, *Sémiotique, Marketing et Communication* (Paris: P.U.F., 2003), 1.

³ Jean-Jacques Boutaud, *Sémiotique et communication. Du signe au sens* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1998), 10.

⁴ See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1987), especially 287-312.

⁵ Gérard Deledalle, *Charles S. Peirce's Philosophy of Signs: Essays in Comparative Semiotics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 9-13.

⁶ Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *Précis de sémiotique générale* (Bruxelles : De Boeck Université, 1996), 71.

⁷ Floch, *Sémiotique, Marketing et Communication*, 17.

⁸ Umberto Eco, *O teorie a semioticii* (București: Meridiane, 2003), 14.

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