CODRUȚA HAINIC

Babeș-Bolyai University
Email: codrutap4@gmail.com

BETWEEN SEMIOTICS AND PRAGMATICS: SPEAKER-MEANING AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTS

Abstract: In this paper I investigate how semiotics and pragmatics intersect in order to produce discursive or communicative acts. I will show that, by doing this, pragmatics could be enriched by opening its perspective to non-human agency. Firstly, my paper argues for the utility of the Peircean semiotics regarding the pragmatic project of studying language from an actional perspective. Secondly, I will analyze the distinction between a successful and unsuccessful communication by taking into account the idea of the content of what a speaker means. This account is largely an extension of Paul Grice's concept of speaker-meaning which divides exhaustively into what is said and what is implied. My claim is that many of the pragmatic notions that are commonly attributed to Grice, or are inspired by his pragmatics, such as conventional implicature, assertion, common ground, common knowledge, speaker-meaning, and conversational strategies, have their origins in C. S. Peirce's theory of signs and his pragmatic logic and his philosophy.

Key words: communicative acts, speaker-meaning, semiotics, pragmatics

1. Introduction: Semiotics and pragmatics

A comparison between semiotics and pragmatics and an epistemologically critical examination of the two quickly show a partial solidarity and a partial incompatibility with their basic philosophical perspectives. Considering semiotics first, one could notice that there are many types of semiotics which have been elaborated in various traditions and with different purposes. *Grosso modo*, we can talk about two perspectives on semiotics, two orientations with specific and homogeneous philosophical implications, which seem to have developed separately and without intersecting: continental semiotics – a rationalist, and structuralist form deriving from the sign theory in F. de Saussure and its interpretation by L. Hjelmslev, and American or Anglo-Saxon semiotics – a more behaviorist and positivistic form, deriving from Ch. S. Peirce[1]. In addition, I prefer to use the denomination proposed by H. Parret, namely, *structural semiotics* for the semiotics of Saussuro-Hjelmslevian inspiration, and *analytical semiotics* for the semiotics of Peircean origin[2]. These two frameworks seem to ignore and distrust each other, so that comparing and evaluating one's projects, methods, and results from the point of view of the other could lead us to a more balanced perspective. Despite this lack of unity, the field of semiotics is broadly defined as "the necessary, or formal, doctrine of the signs"[3] that studies the production and interpretation of meaning.[4]

Moreover, semiotics has been acclaimed by Morris (1938) and Carnap (1939) as the queen of all social sciences or the unified science *par excellence*, and, as is generally acknowledged, they divided the study of semiotics into three categories: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. In Carnap's view, "if, in an investigation, explicit reference is made to the speaker, or, to put it in more general terms, to a user of a language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics. … If we abstract from the user of a language and analyze only the expressions and their *designata*, we are in the field of semantics"[5]. In this respect, Bentley and Dewey have noted that Carnap had left pragmatics and the problem of gaining and communicating knowledge for others to deal with, while further developing his logical analysis in the light of his syntacticism. The latter considers the structural properties of reality to belong to a totally autonomous formal mode – syntax –, rather than as qualitative and empirical properties of the world[6]. Of course, this tendency is an immanent-oriented one, i. e. the tendency to deny that neither the structure of the objective world, nor the structure of the producing subject have the constitutive force to shape significance and sign systems. I can also mention here structuralism and Saussurean linguistics and the philosophical perspective derived from it, or the conversational theory of meaning in the pragmatics of Paul Grice (1968), where the syntactic and semantic component in the mechanism of meaning tend to be merely

implicit. As we shall see, a semiotically integrated pragmatics corrects this tendency.

These three partitions mentioned above belong to the study of language and Morris claims to have derived them from Peirce, who proposed a three-part division of semeiotic inquiry into *speculative grammar*, *logic proper* and *speculative rhetoric*. *Speculative grammar* studies the general characters of the signs themselves, and in this respect does not go beyond the signs that are its concern. *Logic proper* studies the general conditions of the reference of signs to their objects, and in this sense seeks to provide a theory of truth. Finally, *speculative rhetoric* analyzes the general conditions of the reference of signs to their interpretants, and, in this respect, replaces the notion of meaning given by the semantic account.

Peirce's pragmatic ideas found their way into philosophy and study of language through Morris' perspective, which derives his own version of the triad. Heavily influenced by Peirce, Morris introduced the notion of pragmatics as a legitimate scientific field. He argues that pragmatics is the study of the rules and relationships between a language and the interpreters of that language, while syntactics is the study of the rules and relationship between the signs within a given language, and semantics is the study of the rules and relationships between language and the objects to which the language refers. This shift in Morris' conceptualization is for many thinkers, as Parret noted[7], remarkable and is attributable to his integration and intermediation of the three subdisciplines: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. Thus, the semantic relation denotans/denotatum (sign/object-world) becomes eclipsed by the notion of *designative mode* of meaning production: the semantic function of the sign is designation rather than denotation, and this implies that the semantic relation is mediated by the productive activity, and, thus, by subjective production conditions. In this respect, the act of referring is no longer purely denotative, and now the typology of modes meaning production becomes central to semiotics. Furthermore, the semanticist's position, where the sign-object relation is presented as unmediated is transcended through the integration of the three subdisciplines, in particular semantics and pragmatics.

2. Differences and common grounds

Although semiotics and pragmatics are two separate disciplines, one analyzing the functioning of the signs and the other focused on the practical effects of language use, there are a lot of recently works interested in the common grounds of these two approaches. These common or mutual interests have their origin in the work of Ch. S Peirce, who was considered by Ch. Morris, as we have already seen, the founder of the two main theoretical perspectives. While semiotics takes into

account the functioning of various signs – various objects like pictures, books and so forth – without necessarily involving the relation between a speaker and a hearer from the classical schema of communication, pragmatics approaches language use in a given communicative interaction which requires at least two interlocutors. In other words, pragmaticians tend to focus primarily on utterances and their meanings in given face to face contexts, while semioticians tend to focus on the functioning of the relatively inert objects.

Having highlighted these differences, we can claim that, far from being incompatible, semiotics and pragmatics have much to say one to another, as evidenced by the work of renowned semioticians like H. Parret (1983), A. J. Greimas (1983), E. Carontini (1984), Deledalle (1989), and more recently, M. Sbisà (2001, 2002). Although the intersection between semiotics and pragmatics may open various directions of study, my paper takes interest in only one, that is, discursive or communicative acts, because I believe that a semiotic approach to communication allows us to open up the traditional speaker-hearer schema, by showing how many different non-human entities can also be said to be doing something discursively. Considering the fact that semiotics in Peircean traditions is open, at the same time, to linguistic and non-linguistic objects, I claim, alongside F. Cooren[8], that pragmatics finds some benefits from opening its perspective to non-human agency. By focusing mainly on what humans do when they speak to each other, everything happens as though pragmaticians were, in fact, neglecting something that semioticians have already been pointing out for some time, that is, that we live in a plenum of agencies where many different things can be said to be doing things: texts, paintings, architectural elements, artifacts, technologies etc. My opinion is that this semiotic perspective underlies the pragmatic project which consists in accounting for how the process of communication works. Of course, we usually communicate by means of language, but even the moving of a simple object can be a communicative act. Therefore, the expression "communicative act", as used in my paper, applies to those forms of interaction where interlocutors use openly intentional acts, such as utterances, gestures, or controlled facial expressions.

3. Interpretants and meaning

One of the harsh critics of Morris's division of semiotics was John Dewey[9], who considers this attempt to divide semiotics into three separate dimensions a great mistake because each of them was inextricably embedded in the other two. In the first chapter of Dewey's co-authored book, *Knowing and the Known* (see *LW*), Arthur F. Bentley argues that the separation of semantics and pragmatics from one another is "to leap Peirce back toward the medieval"[10]. In their view, Morris misinterpreted Peirce's

concept of an *interpretant*, conceived by the latter as a set of signs that provides interpretation for a sign. Instead of this, Morris had taken *interpretant* to mean the user of the language, rather than the system of signs within which a sign is used. This error is quite serious since the *interpretant* in Peirce's perspective is a sign itself, and not a personalized subjectivity producing and understanding the significance-in-the world, as it is, for instance, in hermeneutics.

We can see now that Morris's theory is fundamentally different from that of Peirce in restricting these three functions of signs to contexts defined according to behavioral criteria. The contexts are radically limited, because only the users of the language were taken to function as sign interpreters. His more deviant approach to Peirce's semiotics is apparent in his characterization of pragmatics as "the science of the relation of signs to their interpreters"[11] while for Peirce semiotics is the science of the relation of signs to their interpretants for which he provided a rich analytic classification. In his quality of intermediating term the *interpretant* is an essential ingredient of any sign relation: it turns the sign into an action[12].

Thus, following Peirce, some semioticians like Carontini (1984) have pointed out that such an investigation actually consists in analyzing the sign's action or what Peirce calls *semiosis*. My claim is that such a perspective is intrinsically linked to the pragmatic project of studying language from an actional perspective. In this respect, Pietarinen notes that Peirce did not draw any dividing line between the meaning of the sentence and the differences the sentence may give rise to in terms of force, because meaning is understood as a "multifarious concept that reveals several faces depending on whether the emphasis was on the interpretants created in the minds of the speaker or on the interpretants created in the minds of the hearer, or possibly on those that both the speaker and the interpreter share" [13]. And such a mutual interaction between the speaker and the hearer fits very well with a pragmatic perspective. The first type of interpretant includes *intentional interpretants* which will incorporate the future Gricean concept of speaker-meaning.

4. Communicative Acts

It seems that someone, given appropriate circumstances, can communicate almost anything by almost any kind of doing. As recent studies from biology, evolutionary psychology and anthropology show, in comparison with other primates, humans are an extraordinarily cooperative species, and this deep cooperation predisposes us to do a lot of different things. Conversely, philosophers argue that communicative interaction, even in antagonistic forms, such as verbal conflict, rests on a deeply cooperative understructure (Reich, 2011).

For pragmatics, a reasonable hypothesis is hence that the structure of communicative exchanges, and that of the individual communicative acts, might reflect their evolutionary-functional roots in social cooperation. Pragmatic theories in the tradition that runs from Grice (1957) and Austin (1962) to Levinson (2000) address this fundamental intuition through the notion of a cooperative speaker. If, as Wendelin Reich (2011)[14] recently shows, communicative acts can be more generally considered social interactions (see also M. Sbisà 2001, 2002), it may be useful to analyze how various actions in given situations can be reconceptualized as proposals or requests for the addressee to carry out a cooperative response.

Reich's pragmatic model of communicative acts states that communicative acts are interpreted as "overt attempts to influence an addressee, either in the form of soliciting specific and momentary cooperation or in the form of providing it" [15] . In his effort to reconceptualize communicative acts by correlating pragmatic theory to cognitive and neuroscientific studies, Reich claims that his perspective is more "social" than Austin's and Searle's original conception of speech acts because it examines how the agency of addressees is implied by the performance of many communicative acts. With regard of Reich's notion of "cooperative response act proposal" and "self-realizing communicative act" we can say that one of the essential properties of communicative acts is intentionality. In other words, the occurrence of a communicative act is overtly intentional, that is, when a communicative act is produced, it is always directed to something such as a person, an object or an event. Whether it is made verbally, gesturally, facially or posturally, a communicative act normally carries with itself an intention to convey some information and to have that intention recognized as such. If the communicative intention is recognized, then it is appropriate to talk about what a successful act of communication is. In doing so, I am taking into account Paul Grice's idea of the content of what a speaker means.

But let us first recall that in the initial chapters of *How to Do Things with Words* Austin shows that an utterance cannot be performative (that is, perform a social action having a conventional effect) unless it is issued in the appropriate circumstances. But, "the identification of performative utterances with explicit ways of performing speech acts enables us to see that the contextual requirements for the suitability of performative utterances also hold for speech acts performed by using sentences that do not contain explicit performative formulas". [16] Thus, the context of a speech act seems to be conceived by Austin as a cluster of actual states of affairs or events of various kinds, related to the issuing of an utterance and to its intended force. Searle[17], on the other hand, agrees with Austin upon the fact that speech acts have felicity or successfulness conditions to be satisfied by the context, but he provides another perspective for context,

i.e., context begins to be considered rather as a set of propositional attitudes of the participants than as a cluster of actual states of affairs. Most of those conditions are formulated in terms of beliefs or intentions belonging to the participants.

In the reformulation of speech act theory by K. Bach (1994), deeply influenced by Grice's intention-based and inferential view of communication, the success of the speech act is defined in terms of the recognition of the speaker's communicative intention by the hearer: "Communicative success is achieved if the speaker chooses his words in such a way that the hearer will, under the circumstance of the utterance, recognize his communicative intention"[18].

Likewise, Searle writes that:

> "Human communication has some extraordinary properties not shared by most other kinds of human behavior. One of the most extraordinary is this: If I am trying to tell someone something, then (assuming certain conditions are satisfied) as soon as he recognizes that I am trying to tell him something and exactly what it is I am trying to tell him, I have succeed in telling it to him…. In the case of illocutionary acts, we succeed in doing what we are trying to do by getting our audience to recognize what we are trying to do."[19]

But not everybody shares this view that someone already communicates successfully if the respective communicative intention is recognized by the addressee. In this respect, Wayne Davis claims that: "We seek to define communication, which is not the same as attempting to communicate. People often attempt to communicate but fail. … Intentions are not enough for communication, however. While attempting to communicate requires attempting to produce understanding, success in the former attempt requires success in the latter. That is, X cannot communicate with Y unless Y understands X. … An American tourist may very well mean the usual when he says "I want a cup of coffee" in a Tibetan restaurant. But he will not communicate his desire unless the waiter understands him"[20]. This perspective is also shared by Ch. Plunze, who argues that there is no "conceptual connection between communicative acts and such an understanding-intention"[21] because it could be, for example, that someone communicates something to another although that someone has not got the intention that the other recognizes his or her communicative intention. This contradicts the general view according to which it holds that someone's doing is a communicative act only if that someone intends that the addressee understand what he is doing. Since to understand what someone is doing is to recognize the intention behind the doing, this assumption is similar to the assumption that a doing is a communicative act only if someone intends that the addressee recognizes his or her communicative intention.

5. Speaker-Meaning

This dilemma can be overcome if we can grasp the idea of the content of what a speaker means. The concept of speaker-meaning has remained the main focus of pragmatics since Grice's inquiry on the so-called "non-natural meaning" and speaker intentions generated in order to study the meaning that goes beyond what is said. Many authors share Strawson's view that Paul Grice's analysis of speaker-meaning was, undoubtedly, offered as an analysis of a situation in which one person is trying, in a sense of the word *communicate* that is fundamental to any theory of meaning, to communicate with another[22].

According to Grice's initial proposal, it is necessary and sufficient for speaking-meaning that an agent does something with an intention of producing belief in an audience, while intending further that the recognition of this intention be part of the audience's reason for accepting this belief. Because of this connection between the recognition of an intention and the production of certain effects, it is usually assumed that Grice's analysis of speaker-meaning – or a suitable modification of it – somehow delivers an explanation for communicative acts. I say "communication" deliberately because, as Martinich pointed out [23], although Grice explicitly analyses phrases of the form, "an utter U means" the total content of what a speaker means, he would have been better served by taking "an utter U communicates" as his primary analysandum and specifying "the total content of what a speaker communicates". In this respect, communication has priority over meaning because the latter would be pointless if there were no chance of it being understood. In other words, the utterer's meaning is one of the two correlative components of communication, the other one being the audience's understanding. According to Grice, speaker-meaning divides into what is said and what is implicated. Here is Grice's three-clause characterization of conversational implicature:

> "A man who, by (in when) saying (or making as if to say) that p has implicated that q, may be said to have conversationally implicated that q, provided that (1) he is to be presumed to be following the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; (2) the supposition that he is aware that, or thinks that, q is required to make his saying or making as if to say p (or doing so in those terms) consistent with this presumption; and (3) the speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (2) is required."[24]

In Greice's understanding of the speaker-meaning, anything that the speaker means but does not say must be implicated, and there are two

main kinds of implicature: conventional and nonconventional or conversational. But the distinction between saying and implicating is not that clear. Therefore, Martinich argues that "the natural antithesis 'to imply' is 'to express', and it is not obvious why saying something should be the only way of expressing something. Verb tenses and the connotations of some words express times and attitudes, respectively, without saying what time or attitude is being expressed."[25] In order to differentiate between what is explicit and what is implicit in what the speaker means, K. Back proposes to remove Grice's concept of conventional implicature, but Martinich argues that, in Grices's conception, what is described as conventional implicature is neither a part of what is said, nor of what is implied: it is a part of what a speaker indicates. In this respect, the Gricean schema can be improved as follows: what a speaker S means divides in what S expresses (says or indicates) and what S implicates (semantically or conversationally).

Very often, the distinction between what a sentence says and what a speaker conversationally implies is, in fact, the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. In short, when we emphasize the strictly semantic aspect of language, we tend to conceive it as a denotational structure immanent in rational propositional thought and communication. This view that the meaning of linguistic or semiotic sequences is immanent is argued in many versions of so-called structuralism, as a philosophy or even an ideology. As Parret also shows "syntax, from structuralism and distributionalism to transformational grammar, both Chomskyan and post-Chomskyan, never transcends the sentence, just as semantics, in its linguistic as well as logical version, never concerns units larger than the proposition." [26] Compared with this perspective, the pragmatic aspect of language is conceived as a resource for actualizing event and context-framed utterance acts.

More specifically, these two perspectives negotiate what was traditionally understood to be semantic notions, i.e., the notion of what is said in an utterance, the notion of the proposition expressed by a sentence, the notion of a sentence's truth-conditions, and, at the most basic level, the notion of meaning itself. Those who support a formal semantic approach to meaning and insist that deriving the proposition expressed by a sentence is purely syntactic-semantic enterprise, will agree with Emma Borg in that "in general, formal theories can be characterized as fundamentally syntax-driven theories, which claim that it is possible to deliver an account of the propositional or truth-conditional content of a sentence in natural language simply via formal operation over the syntactic features of the sentence, that is, over the lexical items it contains and their mode of composition"[27]. In this perspective, also known as

semantic minimalism[28], the Gricean schema of what a speaker-means, depends on the coherence of what a speaker says.

Opposed to this perspective, R. Carston argues that the "major development in pragmatics since Grice's work is the recognition that linguistically decoded information is usually very incomplete and that pragmatic inference plays an essential role in the derivation of the proposition explicitly communicated"[29]. Turning back to Gricean schema we can say that both saying and implicating are properly and immediately part of pragmatics, but as we have seen, semanticists try to keep away these notions from pragmatic intrusion.

6. Conclusion

Grice was concerned with pointing out that the concept of what a person means is the foundation for linguistic phenomena. It was conceived as the basis of semantics, where semantics is understood to be the study of linguistic meaning, that is, the study of what words and sentences mean. But the problem of meaning was conceived by Grice in a broader sense, and it provides an alternative to the view according to which sentences or words were the basic semantic phenomena. I agree with Martinich regarding the critique of the concept of the content of what a speaker means because, indeed, the concept of what a speaker says is often uncertain. This does not mean that Grice's perspective needs to be abandoned, but rather improved, because what is meant is determined by the speaker's communicative intentions, alongside other contextual features, as well as by the meaning of the words used.

Notes:

[1] Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress. *Social Semiotics.* (Ithaka, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 14.

[2] H. Parret, *Semiotics and Pragmatics: An evaluative Comparison Conceptual Frameworks*. (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1983), 2

[3] Ch. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Ch. S. Peirce* (edited by Ch. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-1963) 2.227.

[4] Algirdas J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: an Attempt at a Method*. (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983)

[5] R. Carnap. *Introduction to Semantics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 8-10.

[6] Only later in his career, Carnap supported that pragmatics was a subject in "urgent need" of development but with the addition that such a pragmatics would be a "pure pragmatics" that "would supply a framework for descriptive pragmatics" (see *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* edited by Paul A Schilpp, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, third printing 1997).

[7] H. Parret, *Semiotics and Pragmatics*, 12.

[8] See F. Cooren. *The Organizing Property of Communication*. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000).

[9] See John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953: Electronic Edition,* edited by Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, Va.: InteLex Corporation, 1996). The volumes of the *Later Works* are indicated by *LW*

[10] J. Dewey, *LW*, 16.33

[11] C. Morris. 1946. *Signs, Language and Behaviour*. (Englewood-Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1946), 287.

[12] The status and the function of the *interpretant* can only be understood by analyzing the concept of a *triadic* relation in comparison with a *dyadic* one. In a triadic relation, the terms of the relation **articulate** each other, but they do not **represent** each other (the meaning of an expression in the Peircean framework is its *logical interpretant*).

[13] Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen „Grice in the wake of Peirce," in *Pragmatics and Cognitio* 12, no. 2 (2004): 299.

[14] W. Reich, "The cooperative nature of communicative acts," in *Journal of Pragmatics* 43 (2011): 1349-1365.

[15] W. Reich "The cooperative nature of communicative acts" 1352.

[16] M. Sbisà "Speech acts in context," in *Language & Communication* 22 (2002): 422.

[17] See Searle, J. R. *Speech Acts*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

[18] Bach, K. "Meaning, speech acts and communication," in *Basic Topics in the Philosophy of Language* edited by R. Harnish (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Pretince Hall, 1994), 9.

[19] J. Searle *Speech Acts*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 47.

[20] Davis, W. *Meaning, Expression, and Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 86.

[21] Ch. Plunze. "Speaker-Meaning and the Logic of Communicative Acts," in *Meaning and Analysis: New essays on Grice* edited by Klauss Petrus, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 247.

[22] See Strawson, P. F. "Intention and convention in speech acts," in *Strawson Logico-Linguistic Papers*, London: Ashagate, 1971/2004, 115-130

[23] A. Martinich. "The total content of what a Speaker Means," in *Meaning and Analysis: New essays on Grice* edited by Klauss Petrus, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 253

[24] P. Grice. *Studies in the Way of Words*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 30-31.

[25] Martinich, A. "The total content of what a Speaker Means," 254.

[26] H. Parret, *Semiotics and Pragmatics: An evaluative Comparison Conceptual Frameworks*, 94.

[27] Borg, E. *Minimal Semantics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

[28] Semantic minimalism can be taken to the "natural descendant of formal theories of meaning" (see E. Borg, 2004).

[29] Carston, R. "Linguistic meaning, communicated meaning and cognitive pragmatics," in *Mind & Language* 17, no. 1 & 2 (2002): 133.

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