Semiotics as a tool box

with focus on
A.J. Greimas's narrative semiotics

Summary

- In the first part of the lecture, assuming that Semiotics is a theory of signs, I illustrate three main models of the SIGN and show what are the pros and cons of each. The structuralist conception is most apt to develop into a toolbox for the analysis of text.
- In the second part of the lecture I consider the development of structuralist semiotics from the semiotics of code into the semiotics of text and introduce some ideas from A.J. Greimas's narrative semiotics (the semiotic square, actants, the narrative scheme) as tools for the analysis of text.

Charles S. Peirce, American philosopher, 1837-1914

- Initiator of the philosophical tendency called "pragmatism", with contributions to logic and epistemology
- uses "semiotics" with reference to the study of signs
- thought as mediation (inference)
- obsessionally triadic way of thinking (all contents cast into triads...)

- A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, it object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (C.P. 2, II, 228)

Three trichotomies

- 1st trichotomy, according to the nature of the sign in itself
- 2nd trichotomy, according to the nature of the relation of the sign to its object
- 3rd trichotomy, according to the kind of relation that the interpretant of the sign bears to the sign

- trichotomies are NOT classes of signs but each describes one aspect of the sign, so that each sign occurrence can be classified according to every trichotomy

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second trichotomy

- icon - a sign which refers to the object that it denotes merely by virtu of characters of its own
  - it acts as a sign only if the object exists
- index - a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object
  - as a minimum there should be co-presence of sign and object
- symbol - a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, which causes the symbol to the interpreted as referring to that object
  - it must be general (a legisign) and its object is of a general nature too

Peirce: pros and cons

- no sign can exist in isolation (it must generate an interpretant and therefore a chain of interpretants)
- the notion of representamen applies to events without any conscious agent
- attempts to draw a map of signs in their heterogeneity
- representation, standing-for, referring, denoting and meaning have unclear relations with each other - do all they mean the same?
  – representing and standing for are explicity identified
- the ideology of triadicity may become a drawback

typology of signs

is there any use for Peirce's trichotomies?

- does it make sense to classify signs? does classifying signs help us with meaning assignments?
  - purely theoretical contribution!
- do the trichotomies help us seeing differences among signs or rather assimilate too many kinds of event to each other?

Gottlob Frege

- German logician and philosopher of mathematics: 1848-1925
- his views about language and meaning have posed the bases of the analytical philosophy of language, from which both formal semantics and linguistic pragmatics have developed

Frege

distinguishes various aspects of meaning playing different roles with respect to logic and knowledge

- Sinn (sense) vs Bedeutung (reference, denotation)
- Gedanke (thought, proposition) vs Kraft (force)

Sinn vs Bedeutung

Sinn vs Bedeutung of names:

Sinn (sense) is the way in which the object is given by the sign

Bedeutung (denotation) is the object indicated by the sign with the mediation of its sense

Semantic principles

the compositionality principle

- the sense and, respectively, the denotation of a complex linguistic expression depend on the sense and, respectively, on the denotation of the component linguistic expressions

the context principle

- a linguistic expression has denotation only in the context of a sentence

Frege

pros and cons...

- compositionality of meaning + truth-conditional meaning make truth-values calculable
- interesting themes for pragmatics such as presupposition, force, tone, context
- focus on assertion and truth
  – limited scope?

Ferdinand de Saussure

- Swiss French-speaking linguist,1857-1913
- Initiator of structural linguistics
- uses "sémiologie" with reference to the study of sign systems
- with his "Course de linguistique générale" posthumously published in 1916 there begins structuralism
- from structuralism various trends in semiotics have derived, among which generative semiotics and deconstruction

Saussure and the delimitation of linguistics

langue (language) vs *parole* (speaking)
- essential vs inessential
- social vs individual
- objective vs subjective
- stable vs continuously changing

the linguistic sign

- signifier/ signified
- both psychological (sound-image and concept)
- dual nature of the linguistic sign /no role for reference to the extralinguistic object
- the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary

langue

- language is a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas
- it is the sum of the associations between sound-images and concepts stored in the minds of the members of a given community thanks to the practice of speaking
- language is not a function of the speaker, but a product that is passively assimilated by the individual

the linguistic system

- differences
  – in language there are only differences without positive terms
- distinctions
  – signs (associations between signifier and signified) are positive terms that are not different but merely distinct from one another (relation of opposition)

Saussure vs Frege

- binary vs triadic conception of the sign
- role of reference
- meaning as social
- meaning as psychological
- the linguistic system

Saussure vs Peirce

- binary vs triadic conception of the sign
- no sign exists in isolation: because it is generated by the system vs because it generates an endless chain of interpretants
- Saussure's theory primarily applies to languages and either excludes or assimilates to languages all non-verbal semiotic facts
- Peirce does not seem to have a distinct place in his typology of signs for anything like Saussure's language

Saussure

pros and cons
- synchronic methodology enables us to study semiotic systems
- applicability to any kind of meaning (not only to cognitive, reference-bound meaning)
- structuralist semiotics only applies to language-like systems (risk of reducing other ways for meaning production to the format of language)
- apart from recent work on semi-symbolism

summing up

- the Peircean model of the sign yields a theory of how signs function
- the Fregean model of the sign is suitable for calculating truth values
- the Saussurean model of the sign helps determining what the sign means

- the Saussurean model is most suitable for developing into a toolbox for the analysis of text

Structuralist semiotics
- **from the semiotics of the code**
- **to the semiotics of the text**

- What is needed are methods or strategies of analysis that enable us, given a certain text (endowed with meaning) to make this meaning more explicit and realize how the text can convey it.

- In so doing we start from the text rather than the code and this is the basic move for any **semiotics of the text**.

A semiotics of the code cannot provide us with instruments for improving our comprehension of texts:
- because comprehension does not take place by means of positing correlations between signifiants and signifiés (the signifié is not accessible independently of the signifiant)
- because a code is no recipe to be applied to the text in order to find out its meaning (in order for us to identify the pertinent code we are in need of some understanding ot the text!)
- because not all of the meaning of a text depends on the code used.

- **Louis Hjelmslev** (**1943, English translation 1961)** reformulated the Saussurean notion of the sign and the distinction between langue and parole.

  Hjelmslev replaces Saussure's distinction
- *langue*
- *parole*

  with the opposition between
- **system**
- **process or text**

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system vs text

- Hjelmslev replaces language vs speech with system vs process (or text)
- process or text can be studied by a methodology parallel to the synchronic approach to the system
- process or text is even epistemologically prior to system
- "for every process there is a corresponding system, by which the process can be analyzed and described..." (p.9)
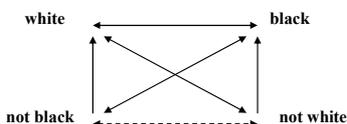

- Also the semiotics inspired by Peirce has become a semiotics of the text e.g. ECO
- this is "interpretive" semiotics, characterized by:
- *focus on the interpretive procedures that the text requires of its receiver*

- Algirdas J. Greimas's "generative" semiotics, belonging to the structuralist tradition, can be defined as:
- *an attempt to explain why a text has the meaning it does*
- to this aim, generative semiotics proposes a set of conceptual instruments to be employed in the analysis of texts (explicitation of meaning, justification of meaning assignment).

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generative trajectory
levels of meaning/ at which meaning
can be paraphrased
- **fundamental grammar**
- system of oppositions that governs the meaning of the text)/set of operations connecting terms in such a system)
- **narrative grammar** (actants, modalities, actantial roles, narrative schema)
- **discoursive structures** (thematic roles, actors, spatialization and temporalization...)
- **textual manifestation** (different substances of expression)

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fundamental grammar
the semiotic square

- **isotopy**:

recurrence of semic categories (elements of meaning) giving cohesion to a text

- the semiotic square gives articulation to an isotopy
- it has heuristic value: when it is apparent that in a text there is recurrence of meaning elements suitable for two or three positions on the square, the square suggests how to complete its structure, finding textual manifestations of the meaning elements suitable for the missing positions

narrative grammar

- doing
- the actant: that which accomplishes or undergoes an act
- the actants:
  - subject, object;
  - destinant, destinee;
  - anti-subject, negative object;
  - anti-destinant, anti-destinee
- actantial roles: actant + competence

narrative semiotics

- the narrative scheme
  - nb. the effect of the action or "narrative program" of the agent is basically represented in terms of conjunction or disjunction of subject and object

- manipulation
  - destinant to destinee
- action: competence+performance
  - subject vs antisubject
- sanction
  - destinant to destinee

Heuristic principles for the analysis of the narrative dimension of a text

- **to divide a text into segments: look for sanction syntagms**
  - each sanction syntagm closes an occurrence of the narrative scheme

- **to identify the actants manifested by the characters/actors: consider attributions of model competence**
  - modal competence indicates what is the actantial role played by the actor at that point and therefore the narrative actant manifested

Heuristic principles for the analysis of the narrative dimension of a text

- **where you find a subject, look for a destinant**
  - the subject is conceived as an agent in relation with and dependent on an agent belonging to a different order, source of the narrative program of the subject and of the values at stake in the narrative
- **where you find performance, look for an anti-subject**
  - performance is represented as intrinsicaly polemic (it is done for an aim, but also against the contrasting aim of the anti-subject)

- to make sense of a text as a whole, also consideration of discoursive features and of textual manifestation is needed
- but search for
  - **isotopies** (compatibilities, oppositions) at the fundamental level
  - occurrences of the **narrative scheme** (identifying actants, actantial roles, competence attributions...)

  has its own autonomous role in helping us make the meaning of the text more explicit and spell out why the text has the meaning it does