

Meaning: An intersemiotic perspective

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Meaning is not well described as a merely linguistic notion. Yet in the majority of works in semantics, what someone means by doing something is strictly separated from what a linguistic expression means, what a visual sign means, what an action means, and from *what all this means*. What tends to be looked at is the meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence; in short, the meaning of a linguistic expression on its own or in the context of other expressions. To simplify, the meaning of such an expression is then secured by showing how its structure, its syntax, is related to a broader linguistic context and a referential background. This background is usually summed up as '*the world*', as, for instance, in the naturalist approach defended by Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny (1990).

A further step in this direction is the formalization of both syntax and world into a *tertium comparationis*, a fully formalized language, such that natural language and world can be compared without loss or surplus.¹ This has been the arena of formal semantics which has achieved formidable complexity, a complexity, however, of a very different kind if we compare it with that found in natural languages. From the work of Rudolf Carnap (e.g. 1967b) to that, for instance, of John N. Martin (1987) the formal tradition has not only played its separate scientific language games but has also had a powerful influence on non-formal semantics.

I shall address these and related issues elsewhere and concentrate here on presenting an alternative starting point. In doing so I draw on a range of writers and fields: among others, from Peirce to Eco, from Husserl to Heidegger, from Frege to Davidson; from semiotics to analytical philosophy, from Reinach's phenomenological speech act theory to Derrida's critique of Searle. What unites these disparate writers and fields in this project is the holistic assumption that meaning is best described if it can address under one broad theoretical umbrella what is meaningful *in toto* to a community, as well as the meanings of specific signifiatory acts: from reading a specific visual impression to a gesture of regret, the

utterance of a complex sentence in a natural language, reading a traffic sign, a chemical formula, or a digital identification.²

We must ask, of course, whether we are not in danger of losing all precision of description if we open up the field of meaning in this manner. No doubt there are risks. But I suggest that much of the precision achieved on account of a narrow focus is a precision of theoretical tools rather than a precision in accounting for what actually goes on. In other words, the more precise we are in formalizing natural languages, the more likely we are to miss significant aspects of the object of inquiry.

There is, unfortunately, no neutral standard against which we could judge the success of competing methods. The only available tests are the relative comparison between the competing descriptions themselves, each with its special relationship between the target language and a suitable metalanguage on the one hand and, on the other, the comparison between such descriptions and our intuitive grasp of what we sense is going on. The chosen relation between *definiendum* (a natural language) and *definiens* (a metalanguage) predetermines to a considerable degree what we will find. I believe that our method of investigation must ultimately be guided by our intuitive grasp of how meanings are typically produced. And if a semantics fails both to cater to our hunches and to give persuasive reasons why we need to reject our common-sense notions, the theory needs to be given a hard look.

To be sure, not all accomplishments in analytical and formal semantics are necessarily under attack in the present approach. A broad semiotic description of meaning must be able to grant formal insights a place value in the larger picture. But what would such a larger picture look like?

Alternative axioms

Let me begin with a number of axiomatic assumptions. Suppose meaning is not in any way a feature of language, but a broader feature of social doing of which language is a part. Let us say that social doing of any kind is regarded as meaningful or as meaningless by a community. The community could be a tiny group or encompass the people of the planet. If an act is meaningful, even if marginally and aberrantly so, it is interpretable; if it is meaningless, it is not. Or vice versa, if a community is able to put an interpretation on an activity it is regarded to have meaning, if interpretation fails it is meaningless. In this crude ontology, then, we have a world consisting of meaningful and meaningless acts.

To this scenario let us add an epistemic perspective. A community knows its world because its members have imposed and continue to

impose a significatory matrix on whatever there is. In other words, everything the community and its members can know they know via signs and not as such and in itself. This Peircean epistemic starting point, a semiotic form of a Kantian insight, furnishes a crucial part of the methodological axiomatics for everything that follows.

In this picture, there are no non-signs, at least not pragmatically speaking. As Peirce insisted, 'we think only in signs' (CP 2.302) and 'whenever we think, we have present to the consciousness some feeling, image, conception, or other representation, which serves as a sign' (CP 5.283). Non-signs can of course be stipulated as the general transcendental possibility for signs, without themselves being knowable: a kind of non-semiotic noumenon. For the purpose of describing meaning, though, this is of no further interest, since everything we can see, touch, and talk about is available to us only in the form of signs: more or less meaningful and very rarely meaningless.³

An important axiom in this general background is the assumption that meaning is the realization by a community of the relation between different sign systems. Members of the community are defined primarily by their ability to negotiate such relations according to the community's recipes for interpretation. Following a Peircean line of argument, we could formulate this assumption as a general principle which I have called the semiotic corroboration thesis. According to this principle, reality is the result of the corroboration of one sign system by at least one other sign system. Or, more simply, reality occurs when signs from different significatory systems support one another.⁴

The visual image of a tree is meaningful because it can be and has been corroborated by tactile and other significations. I am able to recognize by touch, i.e., classify as a meaningful part of a set of experiences, a bolt underneath my car's gearbox even if I cannot see it because the tactile signification is corroborated by recollected visual signs (bolt-signs), as well as other signs. Such linkage between sign systems is what Wittgenstein's term *Lebensformen* appears to point to, though he did not pursue the question far enough to allow for the construal of a Wittgensteinian semiotic (Wittgenstein 1963). On the other hand, strong support for this kind of thesis can be found, for instance, in Edmund Husserl's work on 'appresentation' (1973), in some papers by Roman Jakobson (1987), in Umberto Eco (1984), Thomas A. Sebeok (Sebeok 1977; 1986), as well as in Fernando Poyates (1982), to name a few important signposts in the literature.

The more complex signs that make up a sexist or racist comment are understood not alone on the grounds that they stand in a long linguistic chain of similar and already familiar verbal signs. We understand them

because they are embedded in a web of non-linguistic signs such as speech stance, construed speech attitude, and, importantly, imagined, quasi-physical, social situations which in our example amount to an ugly world. A useful introduction to the study of language against this kind of problematic can be found, for example, in Cate Poynton (1986).

Evidently, we are not talking here of sense data. If anything, sense data could be argued to be a supporting stage in the chain of meaning making, but are not themselves interpretive perceptions of any kind. Retinal images are not meanings, though meanings are certainly produced with their help. What we should focus on is the kind of interpretive activity without which we cannot make any sense of how we conduct our daily social routines in which sensory information and habitual acts of meaning constitution play their roles. And if interpretive processes are our focus rather than the givenness of physiological mechanisms, then signs in Peirce's sense are the most promising starting point.

The limits of the signified world

Such a signifiatory picture of the world collapses traditional ontic and epistemic descriptions into the one field of *semiosis*. Having said this, we need to circumscribe our world a little more clearly in terms of its limits and structure. What are the limits of this world? The answer we will give here is not the suggestion made by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, but its semiotic extension. The limits of our world are not constituted only by our language but by our sign systems *in toto*: the limits of our signs are the limits of our world ('Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt', Wittgenstein 1963: 5.6).

If we say that sign systems are the limits of our world rather than accepting 'the world' as an empirical *primitivum*, we must clarify the consequences of this assumption. Since we cannot know anything outside semiosis, the dynamic totality of signs, whatever world we so experience is a signifiatory or textual construct. Yet if we were not to say anything else about this world, this textual reality would amount to a radically relativistic construal. Radical relativism, however, is marred by two fundamental impediments: self-contradiction and intersemiotic constraint.

As to self-contradiction, radical relativism is incapable of arguing its own case consistently because it has demolished any non-relative basis on which to do so. This is its methodological weakness. In addition, radical relativism also has an impossible task in persuading us that its field of description has no limitations whatsoever and is entirely the result

of our tools of inquiry. This point can be made clearer by the notion of *intersemiotic constraints*.

Let us understand intersemiotic constraints as those features in the diverse sign systems of different communities, as, for instance, cultures which in different ways point to the basic boundaries of being. Organic death, the fact that humans die if they drink mercury instead of water, the realization of gravity, the distinctions between the starry sky and the firm earth are all signified consistently, however differently, in quite unrelated communities. From this and a vast amount of similarly corroborating significations we must not conclude, as does a naive empiricism, that we have direct, i.e., non-significatory, access to 'the world'. We still live in a textually interpreted world.

The conclusion which is ineluctable is that if there is no evidence of any fundamentally different or contradictory significations on a range of basic matters concerning being, radically relativist explanations fail to be cogent. To be sure, the constraints which our various sign systems reflect are still textual, those suggested by the latest tools of physics included, but they are massive. The intersemiotic constraints of the sign systems of diverse communities form a frame for living which bounds our intersubjective world, in the broadest sense of Husserl's term. What emerges from all this is that we must reject both the kind of metaphysical realism found, for instance, in naturalist accounts as well as all forms of 'radical' relativism. In this I tend to follow the argument offered by Michael Dummett who finds both convictions unsatisfactory because 'it is unclear whether the realist's defence ... can be made convincing [and] whether the anti-realist's position can be made coherent' (1978: 24).

Realist textualism

An attractive solution to this old problem seems to me what I have called elsewhere a realist textualism. This is a position which acknowledges the reality of constraints, while at the same time emphasizing the textuality of everything we can know, including those very boundaries (Ruthrof 1992a, 1992b). Including the realist textualist perspective, we have so far sketched the following picture: there is the broad ontological category of doing or acts which are largely meaningful, though meaningless acts are also possible. The epistemic correction of this state of affairs is achieved by adding that none of this would be knowable were it not for signification. Whatever we know we know as signs. Reality is guaranteed by the corroboration of signs from different sign systems (visual, tactile, olfac-

tory, proximic, auditory, verbal, gravitational, thermal, etc.) and meaning occurs as the result of the relational instantiation of such signs.

General semiosis has been stipulated as that which gives cohesion to a community and in turn is sanctioned by the community. As such, semiosis is all there is, subsuming as it does both ontic and epistemic perspectives. Rather than saying that our language constitutes the limits of our world, we have extended this to the claim that our sign systems are the limits of this world. We have asserted that we neither have access to the world outside signification nor are able to argue consistently for a radical relativism. Hence we are forced to accept something like a realist textualism, a position which acknowledges the broad intersemiotic and intercultural agreement on fundamental constraints on the way in which we can textualize the world. At the same time a realist textualism insists that those very constraints are available only in the form of texts.

Significatory acts

The remainder of this paper is designed to clarify and flesh out some of these incipient observations, claims which I hope will gel into a coherent picture of an alternative approach to semantics: a community sanctioned *directional theory of meaning*. To start with acts, why not argue for objects or states of affairs in the world? The preference of the notion of acts is partly an acknowledgment of the work of Husserl tempered by Peirce's emphasis on the control over meaning by a community. In this sense, objects and states of affairs as well as all else are subsumed under significatory acts. While these acts have Brentano's and Husserl's directionality and certainly require a consciousness, they are by no means merely mental or subjective. The acts we are speaking of here are species bound and socially regulated and hence can be performed by typical members of the semiotic community, that is, a community which to a significant degree shares and guides and is itself constituted by a common semiosis, the social semiotic (cf. Hodge and Kress 1988).

The preference of 'acts' over 'objects' also suggests a dynamic rather than a static view of the background to meaning. All signs are enacted, so that the constitution of meaning is never a 'now' like some point in a coordinate system but a process which links into previous meaning constitutions as well as subsequent ones. To use Husserl's notion of retentions and protensions, meanings are acts which retain the shadow of proceeding meanings and, by way of protensions, already gear into subsequent meaning events. Nor should we remain happy with Husserl's limited critique, as Jacques Derrida has persuasively argued in 'Difference'

(1973). Likewise, Umberto Eco's net of semantic relations is a compatible way of approaching the matter, as long as such a net is seen as a dynamic field that changes its total structure as it moves along its historical trajectory (Eco 1979).

What is the advantage of insisting on the signficatory acts of knowing 'the world'? Would we not be equally well off by simply referring to a house as a 'house' instead of insisting that we can only be aware of a sign? Indeed, the fact that we put the metalinguistic version of the item in inverted commas suggests that we are drawing the reader's attention to the sign quality of the word. But why should our visual cognition of a house be a sign? Why our tactile bumping into it? Why our varying proxemic impressions as we drive past it? The commonplace assumption that all these processes point to the same 'item' without our ever being able to get to it except by mediation, that is, by using some sort of signficatory process, provides itself the answer. Our noun 'house', just as our various visual and or tactile readings of it, marks the diverse acts by which we are able to construe into meaningful units what we then term an experience.

Experience and world: Begging the question

Should we then not simply speak of 'experience' and 'world'? After all, the majority of works on semantics uses both terms quite comfortably without their authors feeling compromised by the convention. To quote a fairly typical example:

A promising suggestion for explaining the meaning of indicative sentences is to focus on explaining *truth conditions*. For it seems that the core meaning of such a sentence is its truth conditions: its property of being true if a certain situation in the world obtains and not true if the situation does not. (Devitt and Sterelny 1990: 15)

And yet it is precisely terms such as 'experience' and 'world' which beg the very questions that semantics is addressing. If meaning has in any way to do with the manner in which human communities understand the world, the notion of 'experience' short-circuits the argument. For we want to find out precisely what this experience of making sense of the world is.

The situation is more dramatic with the term 'world'. Even in other ways fairly sophisticated approaches to the question of meaning tend to address in great detail one part of the problem: expression, syntax, sense,

and the way they determine reference. On the other hand, most semantic theories resolve in one sweep the remainder of the equation under the notion of 'the world'. And yet it is the way in which signs refer to the details covered by that collective noun which tell us about the nature of reference. Hence we cannot accept 'the world' as that to which signs refer. Rather, the world is both that which is construed by signifying acts and the whole within which specific links between different kinds of signs take place. In this revised picture, the world as the sum of our signs and the arena in which we negotiate only partially commensurable sign systems cannot be used as a measure against which meanings are checked, as, for instance, in truth-conditional theories. What prevents our signs from being random is not the signified world but rather the constraints which shine through various sign systems.

Read Only and Communicative Sign Systems (ROSS and COSS)

Objections have been raised to treating visual and other forms of perception as sign systems, mainly on the grounds that we did not design perception as a process of communication. Since they are simply natural processes, any sort of perception should not be treated as a sign system. My counter argument is that anything that has to be deciphered, interpreted, in short, *read* must be treated as a form of signification. Even if we did not literally invent seeing or hearing in the laboratory, the way cultures tend to see or hear amounts to an imposition of historically and otherwise differing readings on sense data. Moreover, these construals on top of sense data are learned rather than 'natural' and so carry the instructions of the community. However slight, any difference in readings so produced must result in semantic drift, a feature which is the hallmark of fully developed sign systems. In sum, what needs to be read must be regarded as a sign system.

Paul Grice's famous distinction between natural and non-natural meanings supports the view that we are dealing with sign systems even in a case where we only observe such natural phenomena as spots on a person's skin (1989: 213ff.). What I would like to stress, however, is that the interpretive weight in either of Grice's meanings is on the part of the deciphering process. From this perspective, the notion of a natural meaning is odd. To get around this misleading nomenclature we should emphasize that all meanings are interpretive, even if habitually so.

This, of course, leaves intact the distinction made by Grice, but it has to be redrawn in a somewhat different frame. To satisfy the reader who wishes to mark off cognitive from communicative signification, we could

introduce the notions of Read Only Sign Systems (ROSS) from Communicating Sign Systems (COSS). This distinction could be pursued considerably further without, I think, requiring a shift in the axiomatic observations made so far.

The semiotic corroboration thesis

Further to my comments on the *semiotic corroboration thesis*, I should add that we cannot simply assume that different sign systems picking out the 'same' item from our world produce significations which could in any sense be claimed to be identical. Rather than presuppose the congruence of objects projected by different kinds of signs, we should be happy with a less formal result. Roman Jakobson speaks of a transmutational relationship between different kinds of signs in 'On Linguistic Aspect of Translation' (in 1987: 429). We recognize objects which we touch and hear and smell, or touch and see, or taste and touch as 'the same'. But this is an approximation and not any sort of strict identification. I suggest that a semantic theory reflects better our intuitive grasp of things if we speak of a *negotiatory assimilation* between signs of different systems.

The hole in the tooth felt by the tip of the tongue is quite different from the 'same' hole seen in a dentist's mirror. And it would be misleading to say that the tongue has produced the wrong impression which was then corrected by our much more accurate vision. What Niels Bohr had to say about the interdependence between measuring instruments and subatomic events equally applies to our banal example. It is impossible to separate the tools of observation from what is observed. Or as Nietzsche put it, 'there is no right standard', and one should perhaps add that there is no such thing as no standard either; there are always only standards.

This debate has a long history. In *De Anima* Aristotle speculates 'for what purpose we have several senses and not only one'. He arrives at the following intriguing tentative answer. First, he finds that it would be very difficult to perceive 'common-objects' (as against 'special-objects' which are signified singularly) as distinct if we had to rely on one sense alone. His second important observation in this context is that of continuous perceptual self-reflexivity: 'we perceive that we see and hear'. Here his resolution is an either/or. 'Either there will be an infinite regress or there will be some [sense] which is concerned with itself'. The 'right standard' in Aristotle's account is sight, which rules the other senses by virtue of its close association with the imagination. After all, he says, 'the name for imagination (*phantasia*) is taken from light (*phaos*), because without

light it is not possible to see'. This still leaves the possibility, not further pursued by Aristotle, of the infinite regress of perceptual self-reflexivity. (Aristotle 1968: III, 425b4ff.; III, 2, 425b12; III, 2, 425b15ff.; III, 3, 428b30ff.)

The two positions of the signification of objects as distinct and that of an infinite regress of perceiving perception can be reconciled by agreeing with C. M. Meyers in 'The determinate and determinable modes of appearing' where he proposes that an item of perception 'is apprehended incompletely but is not apprehended as incomplete' (1958: 45). The fact that we cognize objects as complete has to do with *sufficient semiosis* (see below) which always allows for the thesis of underdetermination. No matter how far we pursue the signs which constitute an object, we can always discover at least one more additional sign.

Twentieth-century physics has enlarged our available sign systems considerably without, however, altering the relation we are trying to capture by the term 'semiotic corroboration thesis'. Take an example from John Gribbin's *In Search of Schrödinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality*. The strange behaviour of electrons in superconductivity can be explained 'in terms of Bose-Einstein statistics' (sign system 1), by way of experiments at the subatomic level (sign system 2) and actually demonstrated at the level of ordinary human perception by spinning 'helium cooled below 2.17 K' in a cup. Defying the laws of classical physics, 'the spinning helium will never stop' (sign system 3) (1984: 146).

What we can say beyond the minimal requirement for our signifiatory reality stipulated in the corroboration thesis is that the more sign systems corroborate one another, the more real the world appears for us, the more we are at home. The apparently high degree of cohesion and self-righteousness which we can observe in certain cultures has to do with multiple confirmations and reconfirmations of their dominant readings of 'the world'.

This should not lead us to assume the inherent stability of meanings. Strictly speaking, it makes little sense even to speak of 'the meaning' of a sign. To do so would suggest a static empirical basis for the production of meanings, an assumption introduced by the wrong sort of analysis. It would be more appropriate to use a phrase such as 'the meaning process' of the sign. As far as the meanings of visual images, auditory information, or words and phrases are concerned, we have to be able to account for more or less dramatic semantic drift. Traditional standard semantic theories find it hard to cope with this phenomenon. Instead, analytical and formal semantics tend to treat the stability of meaning (or sense) as given. I suggest that a very different approach is needed.

The negotiatory directionality of meaning

Having provided a schematic axiomatic in the form of a realist textualist view of the world, in which our sense of reality is the result of a lattice of signifiatory confirmations, we can now proceed to present a brief account of a directional semantics. Such a semantic cannot assume, as do the majority of current theories of meaning, that intension or definitional certitude is a sound slab on which to build further and increasingly elaborate structures. Summing up the field, John N. Martin, for example, argues that 'in the case of extensional languages ... the structure of intensions is also homomorphic to that of referents' (1987: 313). This would mean that referents would likewise be ruled by definitions proper rather than by networks of open-ended signs. This, I think, is putting the horse before the cart. After all, we begin with culturally saturated signs from which we can abstract their formal cousins by acts of dematerialization. Intensional meaning or strict sense turn out to be a special case in an otherwise much less prescribed reality.

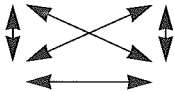
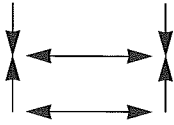
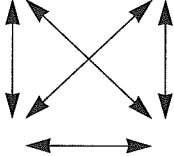

Let us start, then, from the premise that semiosis *works*, that is, communities function by way of sign systems. Having said this, we should not be tempted to conclude that the reason for this functioning is a fully shared set of meanings. There are other and more probable possibilities. For example, it is quite sufficient for most social interaction that participants understand *more or less* what is expected and required. In highly technical exchanges and certainly in strictly formal signification, this understanding amounts to actual identical meanings being exchanged.⁵ For the vast mass of exchanges in a natural language, no such identity is either required nor indeed possible. Here we are in a different landscape.

Consider meaning production in terms of two axes: (1) an axis along which meanings are negotiated between the boundaries of determinacy and indeterminacy and (2) an axis along which meaning is viewed as a directed process between the boundaries of an always underdetermined directionality, on the one hand, and communicative chaos, on the other. In highly fluid meaning 'exchanges', utterer's meaning and (re)constructed meaning require a generous spectrum for negotiation. The more ludic the discourse, the greater the spectrum. On the other hand, the more pragmatic and technical the exchange, the narrower the range of meaning possibilities. This suggests two extreme cases: fully determinate and directed signification and its opposite, the dissolution of signification. In the first case, the spectrum of meaning negotiation shrinks to zero, as in the strictly formal semiosis of symbolic logic (though underdetermination is still operative). In its extreme alternative we have a disrupted 'dis-

course' with an infinite number of meanings from which to choose: the breakdown of social interaction.

Let us take the signs of everyday life, as, for example, linguistic expressions or touch, as typical of meaning transactions. We could describe this process as a more or less directed negotiation between possible modalities (in the broadest sense) and propositional contents. Unlike in Jakobson's model where the addresser and the addressee of the message are locked into the process of exchange as it occurs, in this version of meaning production both sides, individual as well as collective readers, are always in a position to renegotiate the modalities and propositions which they attached initially.⁶ More radically, such renegotiation, whether uttered or thought, is the rule rather than the exception in the process

Table 1. *The Directionality of Intersemiotic Meaning*

Kinds of Communication	Utterance of signs	Degree of Inter-semiotic Constraints	Meaning Acts
Pragmatic		high; multiple systems required to guarantee viable social cohesion	narrow negotiation
Formal		zero; no other systems required (though possible)	strict sense
Ludic		low; any system; directionality of play	broad activation
Breakdown of Social Semiotic		none; multiple systems active without exerting control: random interaction of signs	all meaning amounts to no meaning

Axis of Directionality (underdetermination)

Axis of negotiation
Determinacy/ Indeterminacy

of meaning 'exchange'. On this view, misunderstanding and a myriad of shades of partial understanding replace the ideal of perfect meaning transactions.

Nor should we feel that the most successful meaning exchange is that of formal signs; they are a heuristic fiction for special technical tasks not altogether suited to the operations of ordinary discourse. In ordinary social intercourse the wobbliness of meaning production is not to be seen as a drawback. Rather, it should be acknowledged as an important emancipatory potential which guarantees the possibility of historical political progress.⁷

This may strike the reader as an unwarranted and improbable extension of our discussion so far. I merely state my conviction here to indicate the political stakes attached to any kind of theorizing in semantics and the specific politics underlying the sort of stance I am offering. Not that standard formal semantics in the line of Tarski and Carnap could be accused of entailing an anti-democratic attitude. What can be said and shown is that the will to rigorous formalization of cultural signification, such as natural languages, makes it difficult for the description of meaning to address, for example, the complex ideological saturations we discover in gender- or class-dependent meanings. As we shall see later, the distillation of meaning into strict sense compatible with formally empty signs is the sort of procedure I have in mind. Ironically, the popular notion of an empty signifier very much shares this problem.

It must be remembered in this context that Tarski himself never argued for the application of purely formal methods to natural languages or their colloquial ingredients: 'it is only the semantics of formalized languages which can be constructed by exact methods' (1956a: 403). As to colloquial language, 'the results are entirely negative. With respect to this language not only does the definition of truth seem impossible, but even the consistent use of this concept in conformity with the laws of logic' (1956b: 153).

Having said that formal signification is an extreme case rather than a center, origin, or basis of signification, what can legitimately be regarded as central is the discourse practice of everyday life, in its verbal and non-verbal forms. Along the axis of directionality, guidance is neither formally strict nor so loose as to invite elaborate meaning exploration. Hence the axis of meaning negotiation displays a range of meaning possibilities which are pragmatically sound, that is, which allow daily business to be conducted free from the hard rule of formal signification.

Any semantic must be able to cope with this phenomenon of negotiation. It is important in ordinary social semiotic because even if a message were to be regarded as unequivocal, no sign has only information content;

it is also always modally charged. This means that a sign is also always a socio-political act. When a person is asked again and again to open the window, the information content begins to pale before the political modality of oppression. To say that the meaning of the expression 'open the window' remains the same under these conditions is a stance which runs into difficulties. Suffice it to say here that we will need to debate whether we can speak of the meaning of a text, a sentence, or words, in the manner adopted in traditional semantics. On the view taken here, meaning is not a property of any sign, either linguistic or non-linguistic. Hence neither words nor sentences are by themselves in a position to mean anything. They need to be activated in a process which is typically negotiatory.

Instantiation and directional schema

For meanings to be construed in a dialogical manner, dynamic signs must be activated. I prefer to call this event of activation an *instantiation*. Without instantiation, there is no language. Without instantiation, there is no signification whatsoever. Without instantiation, no meaning. Even *langues*, formalized language systems, at whatever level of abstraction are *paroles*, or speech events, as soon as they are formulated or read, i.e., instantiated. Without being instantiated in some way, they are not available. This suggests the collapse of the two Saussurean terms into one kind, instantiation. The difference pointed to by Saussure is thus transformed into a distinction of degree between instantiations which mimic the phenomenal level of discourse and those which we construe at different levels of formalization (1966: 9–15).

Likewise, the clear distinctions postulated between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics introduced by William Morris and sharpened in the work of Carnap and his followers collapse into pragmatics (cf. Carnap 1967a: 79). For as soon as we instantiate any natural language expression, we are willy-nilly performing a pragmatic speech act. Without it, even the starkest logical observations could not be made.

If instantiations by addressers and addressees negotiate meanings in the use of an expression (typically characterized by sound waves or, more generally and following Derrida's usage, an inscription) a gesture (supported by sense data or a camera), or an olfactory signification (corroborated by chemical analysis), then signs must have a special kind of structure. The minimal requirement of a structure allowing for this sort of explanation is that signs are schematic. Accordingly, I have previously referred to words and expressions as directional schemata for meaning

making (Ruthrof 1992a). I now want to extend this notion to include all signs such that semiosis is the process of transforming the directional schemata of signs into meanings. And a social semiotic is the sum of such meaningful signs produced in a particular community.

Pragmatically, both the axis of directionality and that of meaning negotiation are cut short according to the requirements for effective social interaction or imposition of political rule. Theoretically, however, both axes are infinite. The exceptions here are our two extreme cases of signification: formal signs and signifiatory breakdown. In the first case the axis of negotiation has shrunk to zero, though the axis of directionality remains infinitely underdetermined. This is the kind of picture which we find in Kurt Gödel's critique of formal systems (1958, 1962, 1982). In the case of signifiatory breakdown, the axis of negotiation becomes pragmatically infinite, that is, all meaning is no meaning. At the same time, directionality has collapsed to zero. There is no directionality. Meaning can be explored in all directions, which turns out to be same as in no manner recognizable to the community at all.

Infinite regress

To return to the broad spectrum of socially negotiatory signification, even if purpose-rational and especially instrumental semiosis is typically short-lived in social practice we must not underestimate the importance of the potential of signs for infinite regress. This notion has become popular in recent years, mainly as a result of the critique of conceptuality in the writings of Jacques Derrida. We need to acknowledge, though, as Derrida himself does, that the idea of the fluidity of both our epistemes and our ontic projects has a very long history, which in Western philosophy goes back to Presocratic thinkers. What is not so well known is that one of the very targets of Nietzsche's relativist attack, Immanuel Kant, draws our attention to the instability of concepts in the first *Critique*. 'No concept given *a priori*, such as substance, cause, right, equity, etc., can, strictly speaking, be defined [and] the completeness of the analysis of my concept is always in doubt'. The same, says Kant, applies to empirical concepts (1965: A728/B756).

If Derrida owes far less to Kant than to Nietzsche, his immediate debt as far as his *mis-en-abyme*, a version of infinite regress, is concerned is to Charles Sanders Peirce. After all, it is not the traditional principle of *regressus infinitus* but its semiotic form that is central to Derrida's post-structural stance. In Peirce the signifiatory abyss is formulated thus:

The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation ...; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series. (CP 1.339)

And a little later Peirce sums up what this means for the process of meaning constitution. 'In general, we may say that *meanings* are inexhaustible' (CP 1.343).

The infinite regress of the sign is important for two reasons. First, taking a linear perspective, to brush this ad infinitum aside makes room for the claim that formal semantics is not so far off the mark after all. For if meaning making is typically not an ongoing dynamic but a process terminated in practice, there are good grounds for pairing its closed meaning entities with formal equivalents. To avoid this, we must draw a more complex picture in which pragmatically terminated signification goes underground, as it were, and lingers on, revivable at crucial thematic moments in future social interactions.

Second, from a multidimensional perspective, the theoretical potential of semiotic infinite regress is vital for our understanding of the network activity of distinct sign systems that make up the social semiotic as a whole. The phenomenon of experiencing a 'world' rather something seen or touched is the result of multiple sign systems impinging at the same time on the 'object' of our attention. Scientific apparatuses are attempts to reduce this multiplicity to singular systems of signification which are then paired with other such isolated systems. The multidimensional, infinite regress of signs has been noted in somewhat different terms by Umberto Eco. He draws our attention to the point that one could unravel the total of signs of any culture by beginning with an isolated sign and following its myriad interconnections.

Sufficient semiosis and community

The end of this process is, of course, forever deferred, for by the time the colossal task of extrication could be finalized, the culture under scrutiny would have evolved further, leaving the investigators with a dead system, a pale shadow of the actual target of the description. Again, the distinction between potential and actual cultural practice is significant. Both the linear and the multidimensional, regressive potential of signs is never fully realized in social interaction. Typically, both processes tend

to be terminated by what one could call, in Leibnizian fashion, sufficient semiosis.⁸

Sufficiency here is determined neither by logical limits nor by a grammar or *langue*, but by what a community judges to be communicatively economical. In technical instrumental interaction this limit is narrowly circumscribed. In symbolic interaction it can be more generously negotiated, while in art this very boundary becomes itself a target of ludic exploration.

We have postponed clarification of the notion of community to the end. The minimal description given at the beginning was that it could be as small as a tiny tribe, such as a clan, or as vast as the total of peoples on this planet. The point is that size is not a vital consideration. What is important is the perspective we employ. If we are interested, for example, in the digitalization of cultural production, then the largest possible description is appropriate. For any small-scale sign usage, such as family idiosyncrasies, the narrowest of focuses is what we want. If size is not a crucial factor in determining the role of the community in the production of meaning, what is? The short answer is, 'The guardianship over the dialectic between old and new signs'. A more elaborate explanation would have to address the means of such retention and production, both of which can be subsumed under *use*. The conservative part of use poses no problem in formalization and is not so interesting for the present argument. On the other hand, the question of how the community accommodates sign invention in its social semiotic is pertinent to what I wish to say.

Whenever the ghetto, computer design, fashion, literature, or genetics offer new significations and hence also new linguistic expressions, such expressions become part of a social semiotic if they find a constituency, that is, a community of users, or die if they do not. The import of the community for semiosis was noted by Charles Sanders Peirce who claimed that the very conception of a signficatory reality 'essentially involves the notion of a *community*, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase in *knowledge*' (CP 5.311). Both community and knowledge, a collection of signs in Peirce's account, are conceived as open-ended and dynamic. Peirce does not say that human reality 'typically also goes with' what we call a community. Rather, he speaks of an 'essential' involvement. Without the notion of community we cannot consistently think human signification and, consequently, not even a single social sign.

If the community is such a crucial 'factor' in signification, how could one inscribe it, for example, into Jakobson's model of 'factors' and 'functions'? Community would have to be the holistic horizon of which all of Jakobson's elements are a part: addresser and addressee as mem-

bers, context and code as the world of a culture and social semiotic, and message and contact as a specific set of signs and a specific sign system channeling the message, respectively. Likewise, Jakobson's six 'functions' can be regrouped to meet the demands of communicative transcendentality, the frame without which human signification or social semiotic is not thinkable. This communicative metafunction would have to be regarded as the transcendental horizon for all of Jakobson's directional 'functions': emotive and conative indicating the personal direction of expression and impression; referential and metalingual pointing towards two kinds of outside, a 'denotative' non-linguistic and linguistic or 'glossing' function; and poetic and phatic indicating the direction of self-sufficiency of signs and aiming at the continuation of communication, respectively.

From a realist textualist perspective, this arrangement of operational aspects of communication can be modified to allow for the community as the necessary frame for all communication and the collapsing of the Jakobsonian scheme into a simpler structure: community, semiotic agents (addresser/addressee), social semiotic (context/code), and sign system (message/contact). The advantage of generalizing addresser and addressee into a plural category caters to the semantics of mass communication (Pratt 1986); the fusion of context and code into social semiotic emphasizes the textual nature of the 'referential' world (context) as the signifieds of social signifiers (code); and message and contact become the signified/signifier sides of any specific sign system activated in acts of communication.

As a discipline, semantics has not been keen to embrace such a fuzzy frame. It has shrunk the scope of its observations to a narrowly focused field: the sense-meanings of linguistic expressions. As a result, as Umberto Eco has rightly pointed out, 'the continuum, the pulp itself of the matter which is manipulated by semiosis, escapes semantics' (1984: 45). I want to go further and say that semantics has thus not only unduly restricted its vision but that many of the specific findings so produced are themselves not satisfactory. The meanings of linguistic expressions cannot be argued appropriately if we stay within language and merely gesture towards a cursorily invoked 'world'.

Notes

1. A study demonstrating the reverse motion, from a formalized ideal of natural language towards a holistic perspective, can be found in Martin Kusch (1989) in which the author traces stages in the writings of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

2. Such a holistic project is stipulated but not followed through by Martin Heidegger (1962: 188–213) and demonstrated in some of his later papers (1971a, 1971b, 1975).
3. It is because of the fundamental mediation which Peirce observes with reference to Kant that he writes, 'the *Ding an sich*, however, can neither be indicated nor found' (CP 5.525).
4. Cf. the concluding claim of chapter 6 in my *Pandora and Occam: On the Limits of Language and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). Earlier in this chapter I suggest a semiotic reformulation of Kant's notion of schematism.
5. I have argued this point in detail in terms of a 'ladder of discourses' in chapter 8 of *Pandora and Occam*.
6. Jakobson's six 'factors' (addresser, context, message, contact, code, addressee) and six 'functions' (emotive, referential, poetic, phatic, metalingual, conative) are designed to explain accurate meaning transfer even in complex situations. Cf. also Jakobson's many detailed studies demonstrating how this transfer works in practice; e.g., his analysis of multistage communication of the 'nevermore' in Poe's 'The raven' in 'Language in operation' (1971: 79–81).
7. I am in sympathy here with the position taken by Jürgen Habermas (1979: 1–68) and (1990).
8. Leibniz's 'sufficient' reason should be regarded as a pragmatic rather than a logical tool. There is no logical limit to when the signifying chain of empirical concepts is to be terminated; there are only political-pragmatic boundaries. Cf. 'The Monadology' (1934: 179–194). For a critique of the *principium rationis sufficientis* cf. Martin Heidegger, 'The problem of reason', in (1969: 11–33); as well as my comments at the beginning of chapter 5 in *Pandora and Occam*.

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