

“Babeş-Bolyai” University
Faculty of History and Philosophy
Department of Sistematic Philosophy

Summary of the doctoral thesis

Meaning and Sign in Communication

A Semiotic Approach to Communication

Coordinator:
Prof. Univ. Dr. Aurel Codoban

Doctoral student:
Porcar Codruța-Mariana

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

The subject of the present doctoral thesis is researching the relations between semiotics and communication, with the objective of understanding the universes of meaning which our world – so often drained of all meaning – relies upon. The premise on which our paper relies is that communication is ubiquitous in contemporary society and that it rapidly invades all places that host organized social life. As a result, along with the intention of a systemized society, it is also necessary to take into account the practices of communication. Despite numerous disciplines that study communication and its effects, the undisputable progresses that have been recorded rather complicate the paradigmatic approach to communication.

Taking into account this praxiological reconfiguration, the concept of sign becomes a central one. Our preference for the researched theme is accounted for by the belief that the approach to communication can take place through a semiotic grid that is concerned with all sign systems, as communication colligates a number of signification systems: linguistic, iconic, symbolic. As such, our doctoral thesis studies the ratio between semiotics and communication, two concepts out of which each relies on such a vast complex of theories and practices that their combination creates a wide space for semantic maneuvers. Consequently, we cannot but agree with Jean-Marie Floch's position, according to which one cannot talk about two such different realities "unless one approaches them from a single point of view, i.e. relating them to the problem of meaning and signification"¹.

Honoring J-M. Floch's invitation, we set out to show that, on the one hand, semiotics articulates and manages meaning within a permanent exchange on the social scene and that, on the other hand, a revival of the analysis of meaning is not possible without defining the stakes, forms and contexts of communication. A characteristic element for the semiotic project is its interest in the ways in which signification is produced. The production of signification – if we also consider the case of communication – does not take place only at the source, within the intention of the transmitter, but rather reveals an entire function of

¹ Floch, Jean-Marie (2003), *Sémiotique, Marketing et Communication. Sous les signes, les stratégies*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, p. 1

structuring and negotiating the meaning between the participants within the communicational act. Conversely, from communication to the examples of daily life, we once again reach meaning, i.e. the general core of semiotics.

One of the central working hypotheses of our study is that within the theory of communication one can note a “centrality” of the semiotic and of the pragmatic element – in the sense of correlating signification with action. Yet, this “turn” (the famous *pragmatic turn* that marks the return of the third semiotic dimension – pragmatics – in the early ‘80s) may be regarded as a response to the approach focused on the philosophy of technology and information or cybernetics, towards a semiotic approach that is interested in the semiotic aspects (textuality, intertextuality and context) of communication.

Therefore, two main paradigms can be evoked when approaching communication. The first, named “the process school” by John Fiske², is rooted in social sciences, psychology and sociology and sees communication as the process of transmitting messages. This perspective is interested in the efficiency and accuracy of the communicational process, i.e. it is interested in the way in which transmitters and receivers code and decode messages and the way in which transmitters make use of the means of mass communication. Communication designates, from this point of view, the process through which a person influences the behavior or the mental state of another person, and the message is that which is being sent within the process of communication, determined by the explicit or implicit intention of the transmitter. In this approach, if the finality of communication is different from what has been intended, one can talk about the failure of communication and thus one can further analyze the respective steps of the communicational process to see where the failure has stemmed from.

Nevertheless, the semiotic approach, which is this paper’s object of study, regards communication as a production and an exchange of significations. In this case, we are interested in finding the way in which messages or texts interact with people with the purpose of producing signification. Therefore, the various semiotic approaches will take interest in the problem of signification and in the role of texts within the Western culture. From this perspective, misunderstandings are not necessarily a proof of the failure of

² Fiske, John (1990), *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2nd edition, London-New York, Routledge

communication, but the result of cultural differences. In other words, from a semiotic perspective, the study of communication is related to the study of texts and culture, through a science of signs and significations. Tightly connected to linguistics, the various semiotic perspectives will approach the message within communication as a construct of signs, which, through interaction, produces meanings. Thus, one cannot talk about failure in communication, because the transmitter has a less important role compared to the text or to the reading of the text as a process of negotiating the significations as regards a cultural experience that can also play the role of the referential.

Our study interacts with punctual applications and comparative discussions and asks to be understood in a double meaning: firstly, as a conceptual background, through its systematic integration of recent acquisitions of the semiotic research and secondly, as a concrete analysis which prolongs R. Barthes' gesture from *Mythologies* and which considers daily life through the observation of numerous activities of signification and communication. Despite the methodological difficulties stressed out throughout the paper, as well as the absence of an agreement between the different perspectives, our attention constantly focuses on semiotics' effort and capacity to bloom in certain areas.

With the intention of further defining the space of our investigation, we should state that the structure of the paper is organized in four different chapters, as follows: *Semiotics and Communication*, *The Paradigm of the Signal or the Telegraphic Function in Communication*, *The Paradigm of the System or the Orchestral Function in Communication* and *Semiotics and Advertising Communication*.

Semiotics and Communication – the first chapter of our doctoral thesis – is a synthesis and an illustration of the theoretical propositions regarding semiotics and communication, based on the premise that an empire of signs duplicates our natural world, determining a re-thinking of the way in which theoretical relations could have been built and consolidated with regard to the concepts of sign and signification, along the so-called semiotic models and generations.

In a certain manner, semiotics appears to be a paradoxical discipline, being everywhere and, yet, nowhere at all. It sets out to occupy a destination towards which various disciplines converge: psychology, sociology, anthropology and, from a more general point of view, the cognitive sciences, philosophy and especially epistemology, linguistics and the sciences of communication. What is more, semiotics claims to be applied to such a vast area of objects that their mere enumeration would resemble a surrealist collage. As U. Eco notices, the project of a discipline that seeks to research culture in general (meaning an immense variety of objects and events) may seem like an arrogant semiotic *imperialism*. “When a discipline defines its object of study as *anything* and, thus, reserves the right to define the whole universe through its own categories, the risk is undoubtedly high”³.

One may say that in its attempt to include so much, semiotics ends up retaining so little. This, however, would be an erroneous understanding of semiotics, as the latter does not claim to substitute any of the disciplines enumerated above. Its intervention is in fact a much more modest one, as semiotics hopes to trigger a dialogue between different perspectives and approaches.

To this effect, semiotics deals with anything that can be regarded as a sign. If, for example, anthropology claims that it attributes a meaning to the conducts and rituals within a society, semiotics will strive to explore the signification and possibilities of that society, as well as the ratio that it establishes with action and knowledge. Semiotics, thus, sets out to “explore what for the others is a mere postulate”, to paraphrase a well-known expression of Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, which is quite an ambitious mission if we think about it, because carrying it out would essentially turn semiotics into a meta-language, a meta-text or meta-theory, a theory of theories.

The differences of opinion which come up between the different approaches to semiotics are the result of various factors and are owed to the place and importance that semiotics may gain in relation to each of the disciplines with which it establishes connections. Within this first chapter, our paper deals with the diverse mechanisms for generating and using signs and especially refers to the instruments and methods pertaining to philosophy and linguistics. Our analysis uses the theoretical frame of Peirce’s sign and

³ Eco, Umberto (1982), *Tratat de semiotică generală*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, p. 17

semiosis, but also considers the possibility of using the term “semiology” as a tribute brought to the line inaugurated by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. We refer first of all to L. Hjelmslev (The Glosematic School from Copenhagen) but also to A. J. Greimas, the structuralist semiotician that carried on Hjelmslev’s original project and founded the School of Paris, besides other representatives, such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Fontanille, Joseph Courtés, Christian Metz, Jean-Marie Floch, Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov.

The need for semiotics as a distinctive discipline, with its own object of study and methods, or as a domain of investigation of various phenomena, is tightly connected to the transformations that stand for contemporary society, e.g. noticing and accepting cultural differences, multiple languages, images and codes – things that would not be possible without a symbolic perspective on signs. But what is characteristic of the semiotic discourse is its interest in the conditions of possibility for meaning, in such a way that it is not signs that represent the object of semiotics, signs being nothing but surface units which combine and account for the play of underlying significations, or “the similarity within dissimilarity”⁴, as Jakobson puts it. Signs do not appear worthy unless they belong to a context, so to cite L. Hjelmslev, whose studies resume and deepen Saussure’s project: “The so-called lexical significations of certain signs are nothing but contextual significations, isolated or paraphrased artificially. Taken as such, no sign bears signification. Every signification of a sign is born from a context”⁵. We will thus understand why linguists and semioticians are rather skeptical when confronted with research methods and models that account for words no matter of their contexts. Consequently, Greimas’ semiotic project was born from a critique of the sign as a pertinent unit for analyzing significant forms and signification systems. According to his own testimony, he saw that, after five or six years’ work in the domain of lexicology, this leads to nothing, he saw that lexemes or signs do not lead to a proper analysis and do not support the global structuring and understanding of a phenomenon. The conclusion that Greimas reaches is that “semiotics is clearly the study of

⁴ Jakobson, Roman (1984), *Une vie dans le langage*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, p. 155

⁵ Hjelmslev Louis (1971), *Prolégomènes à une théorie du langage*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, p. 62

signs, provided it offsets these signs and sees what goes on underneath them. This type of postulate or intervention I had to live so as to truly adhere to it”⁶.

This renders Greimas’ statement *Hors du texte point de salut* (“There is no salvation beyond the text”)⁷ quite suggestive and, in the same time, enigmatic. Semiotics is a thorough work with the text and is interested in the forms and practices of communication. It thus depends on the need of practitioners to define its concepts and methods. As Thomas Sebeok shows, this explains why today a great number of research areas are considered to pertain to semiotics, no matter if they are concerned with natural or cultural phenomena.

Alongside these examples of particular semiotics, the sciences of information and communication seem to become a separate discipline as a result of an anthropological perspective on redefining culture, advancing towards understanding some complex processes within which the problems pertaining to images, identity and relation undermine what we could call the illusions of the first semiotic age: the absolute power of the code, the system and of arbitrariness. Under these illusions, semiology, focused on the linguistic exchanges and formalizations carried out by Levi-Strauss, Barthes or Jakobson, has studied the formal seduction and the conceptual bouquet offered by linguistics. But when communication has erected its foundation beyond the structuralist postulates regarding language, the question has risen whether semiology remains captive to its own options, regarding everything as a sign dependent on the structural model of the language.

Undoubtedly, the structuralist perspective influences from the beginning the relations established between semiotics and communication, but it does not limit itself to the idea that these relations remained embroiled as some linguistic postulates. The confrontation between the basic systems, first of all linguistically, and some assertive and pragmatic discursive techniques, is already a semio-linguistic (or, more exactly, socio-semiotic) step towards communication. Progressively, the effects of the frame, context and relation, of the discursive strategies, confer a pragmatic image upon what was perceived until now as the totally arbitrary and immanent systems of signs. Supporting this perspective, we claim that

⁶ Greimas, A.J. approaches this problem within the conference from Cerisy; the papers presented within the conference are published in *La sémiotique en jeu, à partir et autour de l’oeuvre d’A. J. Greimas* (1987), Paris/Amsterdam, Editions Hadés-Benjamins, (M. Arrivé et J.-Cl. Coquet éd.), pp. 302-303

⁷ Greimas, A.J., apud J-M. Floch, (2003), p. 3

semiotics has not parted from communication, but has rather isolated itself at the borders of the language systems acknowledged in all the systems of signs.

How we relate to the different approaches to semiotics, approaches which are also concerned with communication, is best revealed through the image of cognitive and pragmatic semiotics. The presence of the term “cognition” is justified by the need to overcome some difficulties generated by a conception of semiotics which supports that the internal coherence of semiotics suffices in order to describe languages. This epistemological standpoint is not objectionable in itself, as it resides in the idea of not being seduced by the illusion that an object, whatever its nature, may be a proof of what is being said about it. But this perspective has led, for some semioticians, to the total elimination of the intersection between signs and the world. Of course, in this manner a high degree of stringency is reached in what regards the theoretical description of signification, but this stringency implies a conception of the sign that tends towards self-sufficiency.

The second approach to semiotics within our doctoral thesis is interested in the pragmatic dimension of the sign, which implies the idea that the sign is an instrument of action both upon the world and upon others. As the process of communication does not represent a neutral and out-of-context operation, but is rather built as action and interaction within a context, we believe that semiotics gains consistency through the constant intertwining of the following three components: syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Out of these three, pragmatics – the “speech-acts” theory developed by J. L. Austin and J. Searle, or Julia Kristeva’s “semanalysis” – stresses out that language is an action, a discursive practice that pertains to an institution, a certain place, certain positions, roles, conditions and rules that belong to different communicative contexts.

The Paradigm of the Signal or the Telegraphic Function in Communication – the second chapter of our paper – is concerned with the analysis of the communicational process, presented under the form of the following scheme: a transmitter transmits to a receiver, by means of a channel, a message about something, a message built with the help of a given code. This classic and objectionable scheme has been used to describe linguistic communication, but was also valid, at least as a starting point, for all types of communication

and for all studies in communication.⁸ Throughout this chapter, each term of the scheme is considered for observation. The paradigm of the signal summarizes the idea that in a process which takes place between two machines, the signal has no power to signify, being only capable of determining the receiver. In other words, there is no signification, but only information. When the receiver is a human being – it is not necessary for the transmitter to be a human also, but it must transmit according to the rules known to the human receiver – we are in the presence of a process of signification.

According to U. Eco, the signal is not limited to a mere stimulus, but will also require an interpretative answer from the receiver. Additionally, the process of signification requires the presence of a code. As a result, a process of signification is considered to be an autonomous semiotic construct, bearing abstract ways of existence, and a process of communication requires a system of signification. This is why, during our research, we dissociate between the semiotics of signification and the semiotics of communication, the two approaches following different methodologies. If the first of may be studied independently from the second, the semiotics of communication is impossible to found without a semiotics of signification, the two perspectives being strongly intertwined within cultural processes.

Beginning with the theories on sign and meaning, we are interested in questioning the possibility of constituting a scheme that would account for the communicational situations. In this respect, we offer three examples. A first standpoint on communication stems from the works related to the informational theory and cybernetics, inspired by the research of Shannon and Weaver. This scheme is afterwards assumed and analyzed by R. Jakobson. A third scheme of communication, belonging to U. Eco, integrates all previous analyses and, unlike them, reaches out farther into the analysis of the sign, paving the way for the reception theory. Our objective is not to choose one of these three conceptions, but rather to show where they are incompatible, which are the implicit or explicit interpretative hypotheses they rely on and, finally, what does each one of them imply as far as the process of communication is concerned.

⁸ Lemaire, P-M. (1989), *Communication et culture*, Presses de l'Université Laval, p. 45

The Paradigm of the System or the Orchestral Function in Communication regards the critique brought to the mathematical theory of information, which decomposes communication in a material process which is only concerned with the physical aspect of the phenomenon. This model – the “billiard ball” model – is based on the communication scheme elaborated by Jakobson and in-forms and generates a great diversity of variations, but in all cases, it assures the domination of the representative theory. The message represents the transmitter beside the receiver, through localized agents. The process is almost totally visible and maintains its distance from the active and passive poles of communication. This is by itself the principle of representation, which is a result of the metaphor of the machine.

As a result of the critiques and the reviews brought, some open directions of study appear to be profiled on the essential axis of the transformation: we do not communicate as from a distinct atom to another distinct atom, through an isolated channel, but rather through parts that are equal with the whole, the whole being itself equal to its parts. In this case we are dealing with an approach deemed “organic” in which communication is studied and understood as a dynamic process, where the relation between elements prime. The reciprocal inclusion replaces the discursive and expression replaces representation. The reference point is thus situated beyond the mechanical parts of a whole that is already prepared to be disassembled and remounted. From this point of view, the notion of interaction between partners and codes becomes a crucial one. Semiotics intersects with disciplines such as conversational analysis or communicational ethnography.

Consequently, more and more focus is put on the everyday, on the common places, and oral practices are being revalorized so that the purity of the language yields to the *qui pro quo*'s, to the sound effects, to the deformed words: “this is the place of the true artifice, of the body in passion, of the sign in seduction, of ambivalence in gestures, of the ellipse in language, of the mask on the face, of the characteristics that alter the meaning”⁹. The first to be subjected to the analysis are ordinary communicative subjects that were initially excluded from the non-pragmatic linguistic theories, as they did not belong anywhere but in speech.

⁹ Baudrillard, J. (1988), „Le xérox et l’infini”, Paris, *Revue Traverses*, nr. 44-45, *Machines virtuelles – Revue du Centre de Création Industrielle*, Centre Georges Pompidou, p. 18

The edification of an interactionist theory of communication is carried out by the members of the “Invisible College”¹⁰ or the so-called School from Palo Alto, mainly represented by G. Bateson, Birdwhistell, Hall, Goffman, Watzlawick, Jackson etc. Their most important contribution to the study of communication remains, without a doubt, the axiomatic model of communication. Borrowing concepts and models from the systemic model, but also from linguistics and logics, the researchers from Palo Alto try to explain a global situation of interaction and not just to study a few isolated variables. According to them, pragmatics aims at studying the effects of communication upon behavior, two terms that are in fact treated as synonyms. Consequently, communication has a very vast definition, in which verbal and non-verbal relations between a transmitter and a receiver are also included. This is the main difference with regard to the canonical scheme of communication: the researchers of Palo Alto favor the ratios established through messages between the participants within the act of communication.

Towards the end of this chapter, our attention focuses on the uses or the symbolic effects of the means of mass communication, leaving aside their history.

Semiotics and Advertising Communication. Although our analysis pertains to general semiotics, within the last chapter of our paper we take interest in a certain domain of applied semiotics, i.e. that of advertising. The last chapter is, in the same time, an abductive approach to the general hypotheses and the examples that come to validate or deny their quality. The inaugural moment of the relations between semiotics and advertising was marked by Roland Barthes’ “La rhétorique de l’image” from the fourth issue of *Communications*¹¹, where, on the one hand, he establishes the general frame of the “elements of semiology” and, on the other, he expands the possibilities of its applications by proposing a model anchored in “the rhetoric of the image”, while conducting an analysis of publicity that the *Panzani* pasta have received. In the same time, the article marks a semiotic turnabout and a dissociation of the influential models: if, until then, advertising used manipulative and persuasive techniques when constructing the message, semiology reconsiders this perspective. As a consequence,

¹⁰ The name was introduced by Winkin, Y. (1981), *La nouvelle communication*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, p. 21

¹¹ Barthes, Roland (1964), „Rhétorique de l’image”, *Communications 4*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, pp. 40-51

the semiotic study, the analysis of the significant forms and of the processes of signification open up more than ever to anchoring meaning in the social medium, thus determining an evolution from advertising to a semiotic meta-discourse on advertising.

Along with Barthes' contribution, we also study U. Eco's approach, the research of Péninou, Porcher and, most importantly, J.-M. Floch's applied semiotics, whose originality consists of constructing, based upon advertising, a whole "theory of generative signification", inspired from Greimas. The last part of the chapter is dedicated to the function of figuration of the logo, which is defined as an official graphical "representation" of an organization or brand, thus "a significant form"¹² whose main purpose is making sure that the one who initiates the process of communication is recognized.

Conclusions. Taking into account the autonomy of various perspectives in what regards communication and, *in extremis*, even a right to supremacy which each of these theories tends to claim, our analysis has brought us to a preliminary conclusion, according to which one can still talk about a lack of convergence in what regards the object, the fundamental notions, problems and methods and that the multidisciplinary character of communication often eludes this ascertainment. Yet, alongside the vision according to which communication should be the study object of various disciplines, we have further seen that there is also a perspective on communication that is interested in the existence of common themes and activities susceptible of being approached specifically.

The results of our analyses refute the myth of total and transparent communication, which has circulated only due to the democratization and the intervention of the technique. Despite the undisputable development of communication, the latter will never be totally neutral or unproblematic. The main arguments for this statement are based on three facts: communication is often asymmetrical, clear and explicit messages are hard to formulate and inter-human exchanges are affected by implicit social stakes.

A chronological analysis of the relation between semiotics and communication has allowed us to apprehend the effort of semiotics to open pragmatic perspectives on the speech

¹² Semprini, A. (1996), *Analyser la communication. Comment analyser les images, les médias, la publicité*, Paris, L'Harmattan, p. 24

and an attempt to overcome the tendency of focusing solely on the message within communication, detrimental to the conditions of negotiating messages and searching some meaning effects. Consequently, beyond the messages, the problem is that of common usage; beyond the signs, it is all about understanding the meaning. There are two consequences of this: on the one hand, we pass from the social subject to the enunciative subject, which has the freedom to self-create himself throughout ample communication processes and, on the other hand, this enunciative subject stems from a world in which the meaning effects are equally complex. As we could see, the approaches both in theory as well as in practice are numerous and the debate is still open.

Within the last chapter of our thesis, we have chosen to cover the field of advertising from a pragmatic point of view, in the sense of correlating signification with action and, in the same time, measuring the effect on action resorts, as pragmatics studies the way in which the specific conditions of communication links backwards to producing and receiving assertions. The preference for analyzing advertising as a dominant paradigm of the semiotic research in the domain of communication is also justified by J-M Floch's argument according to which semiotics, moving towards "field research", is interested in gaining "a better understanding of the general conditions for producing and capturing meaning and for better accounting for various forms of signification"¹³.

Finally, we should like to mention that there are strong possibilities that the research of intersecting points between semiotics and communication will augment. This can be illustrated at a methodological level, by the inclination of semiotics to study social objects, at an epistemological level, by the articulation between theory and social communication, and at a practical level, within the domain of practical applications.

¹³ 13 Floch, J-M. (2003), p.16