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Meaning Making in Communication Processes: the Role of a Human Agency

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Abstract

Social theorists often neglect the fact that human beings are not only recipients but also producers of cultural meanings. Peirce's theory of semiosis highlights the active character of human agency. Introducing the notion of interpretant into semiotics, Pierce considers the process of interpretation or interpretive thought to be a condition of signification, which necessarily involves an interpreting agent, a meaning-making human being. This paper offers a comparative analysis of Peirce's and Eco's theories of semiosis and examines the role of an interpreting agent involved in the semiotic process which is only possible in communication.

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1. Introduction

When social theorists apply quasi-evolutionary terms in order to emphasise some aspects that characterise the development of a human being in the contemporary society, they primarily refer to humans as recipients of information which the latter process and respond to in their actions and attitudes. *Homo sociologicus* (Dahrendorf, 1973), *Homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1955), *homo totus* (Jung, 1971, para. 419) – these terms populating social sciences texts qualify humans as cultural, communicating beings, largely taking into account a particular feature of a communicative act, which involves a sender, a message and a recipient. So do other, more recent descriptors of humans as *homo zwischens* (hesitant man) (Matveyeva, 2006) and *nowbrow* (human observing the ritual of consumption) (Seabrook, 2001).

Those who use these terms assume that a particular culture presents human beings with a certain behaviour model which humans follow, hence the aforementioned names that reflect human tendency to absorb norms and practices saturated with cultural meanings and respond to those meanings in various ways. However, those who use these quasi-evolutionary terms sometimes overlook the fact that the contemporary person does not only consumes but also produces new meanings.

Peirce's theory of semiosis (developed in the early XX century) takes into account this latter feature of human agency highlighting the active character of human agency. Introducing the notion of interpretant into semiotics, Pierce considers the process of interpretation or interpretive thought to be a condition of signification, which

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necessarily involves an interpreting agent, a meaning making human being (Nöth, 2001, p. 11). Peirce proposes the idea of semiotic connectedness by introducing the concept of a "man-sign" (Hartshorne et al, 1931–60, Vol. 5, para 314). The human being here is himself or herself a sign in the world of signs and, in the triad of representamen, object and interpretant, joins together the three components of the sign thus creating a meaningful whole.

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2. From Peirce's semiosis to Eco's theory of sign.

The sign/person dichotomy is the most important element in the meaning making process and is presented as a mediating link between thought and speech sounds. This pan-semiotic worldview creates a possibility of perceiving the semiosphere – semiotic space – as a real space of words and other meaningful symbols spanning the globe. As Lotman claims that only in the semiosphere communication processes are possible and new information can be developed (Lotman, 1999, p. 13). Various sign systems are thus presented as models of concrete fragments of the external world perceived as objective reality.

In other words, the concept of Peirce's unlimited semiosis is an integral part of the process of a human being's acquaintance with himself / herself and the world. Language as a manmade system of signs is the core of all communication processes. A person is the holder and carrier of language, and by using signs people are able to think in abstract terms and to reflect on their own nature and the world, thus entering into various forms of communication.

Eco expanded Peirce's theory of semiosis and interpretation considering it in the context of societal communication processes — he uses Peirce for constructing his own communication models. For Eco, the problematic aspect of a sign consists in the sign's dual role: on the one hand, the sign is the basic concept of the theory of semiosis, and on the other hand, the sign is what gives the process of semiosis its dynamic character. One of the sign's key features is its interpretability as a sign, and the sign acquires a meaning only at the intersection of interpretations inherent in the cultural milieu. The interpreter, which is understood as a translator of cultural traditions, defines the direction which semiosis takes. Thus the interpreter becomes a key figure in the process of signification, and Eco also emphasizes that the process of signification entails creativity.

3. Interpretation in semiotics and hermeneutic interpretation

In our opinion, Eco fully reveals the potential of Peirce's theory of semiosis and interpretation in his *The Role of the Reader, Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts, Saying Almost the Same Thing and The Open Work*. By "interpretation" Eco means the concept proposed by Peirce, according to which each interpretant of each representamen is another kind of representation, referred to the same "object" (Eco, 2006, p. 99).

Eco opposes interpretation in semiotics to hermeneutic interpretation: semiotics reveals a wide range of relationships within the object and outside of the object, while hermeneutic interpretation contributes to the revelation of another secondary meaning. For Gadamer, as Eco notes, every instance of understanding amounts to interpretation that takes place in the semantic field, conditioned by language. For example, deciphering the inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone by comparing hieroglyphic, demotic and hermeneutic inscriptions would be, for Peirce, already interpretation, whilst as far as Gadamer is concerned, comparison is not yet understanding.

Eco asserts that the Peircean interpretation is wider than hermeneutical interpretation (Eco, 2006, p. 275). He claims that a specific act of symbolic activity generates interpretation, thus treating interpretation as a result of communication. Following Peirce, Eco presents the process of interpretation as a purposeful communicative act and proposes his own idea of "unlimited semiosis", the process of infinite interpretations of signs using other signs (Eco, 2005).

4. Eco's unlimited semiosis

Eco does not equate culture with language, as the former is a strictly codified system of sign activity. This determines the philosopher's orientation towards the process of semiosis, rather than towards its result, as he introduces a human being into semiosis elucidating this by analysing the act of *transaction*.

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