Some Basic Semiotic Categories
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1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

It is not necessary to give a survey of the problem of verbal and non-verbal signs in order to reach the conclusion that Western thought has traditionally assigned a position of priority to the language of words (verbal signs). Locke's approach to this problem provides a good example. When he discusses semiotics as "the doctrine of signs," he immediately adds a restriction about such signs, by remarking: "... the most usual thereof [are] words."[1] In modern linguistic science there is widespread recognition of the existence of semiotics. De Saussure, for example, anticipates the recognition of the special field of inquiry of semiology as a general science of signs. Though he considers linguistics (i.e. the theory of verbal language) to be only a branch of semiology, he nevertheless claims that the language of words is the most important of all sign systems. Recent terms, like para-linguistics, trans-linguistics and meta-linguistics, proposed by R. Barthes, amongst others,[2] emphasize the language of words to such an extent that semiotics again reverts to the position of a subdiscipline of linguistics.

However, this kind of problem is not indigenous to the disciplines of linguistics or semiotics. Several other special sciences similarly confuse the dimensions of things and functions (or entities and modal aspects). In jurisprudence, for example, there are strong tendencies to connect the juridical function solely with the state, and thus to recognize the legal character of constitutional law only. In aesthetics the dominant tradition since the nineteenth century only allows for works of art to have an aesthetic function. Even in theology, the universality of the confessional or certitudinal function of faith is often reduced to, and identified with, the nature of the institutional church. And in current historiography, the identification of the techno-formative modal aspect with the concrete events of history is almost self-evident.

2. THE DISTINCTION: MODALITY/ENTITY

In order to escape from this ubiquitous dilemma we should take into serious consideration the insights achieved by reformational philosophy into the fundamental difference between the two dimensions of modal aspects and entities. As universal modi, the aspects in which entities have concrete and individual functions serve simultaneously as points of entry for our analysis of any given entity. Or in a reversed formulation: all scientific disciplines must employ both point-of-entry concepts (concepts of function) and concepts of things (typical entitary-structural concepts).

The universality of the juridical aspect, for example, implies that this modal aspect cannot be identified with any one entity--such as the

state--qualified by its typical functioning in this aspect, since many other entities also function in the juridical modal aspect. In this connection churches, marriages and businesses can be mentioned, i.e. the existence of internal ecclesiastical law, matrimonial law, and (commercial and corporate) business law. For semiotics and linguistics, this means that an identification of the modal sign function of reality with concrete verbal language will result in a theoretical confusion of the dimensions of modalities and entities. In practice the resulting primacy assigned to the language of words confounds the issue still further.

3. SEMIOTIC OR LINGUAL?

The universal modal structure of every aspect of reality displays a correlation of a law or norm side, and a factual subject and object side--all these moments being stamped by the unique, irreducible and indefinable nature of the aspect in question. The traditional indications of the sign aspect of reality probably latched on to these structural moments. Thus 'semiotic' appealed to the norm (or code) of signifying ('beteken'), 'semantic' appealed to that which is signified ('betekenis') or the factual object function, while the indication of this aspect as the modality of 'symbolic signification' ('betekening') latched on to the subjective lingual activities of human creatures. The confusing result of these valid insights was the interchangeable indication of the fundamental sign modus of our existence by the alternate terms: semiotic, semantic and lingual. Furthermore, these three terms formed the basis for alternately naming the scientific discipline that studies this modal aspect semiotics (or semiology), semantics or linguistics.

All three of these sciences of signs, with their conflicting theoretical interests, have traditionally disregarded the universality of the sign aspect, which can of course not be reduced to any one of the three structural moments on which they position themselves.

4. SIGNS

The meaning of the sign aspect is revealed only in the unbreakable coherence between signify as norm, signification as subjective activity, and the sign functions of entities that function objectively in this aspect. The different ways in which entities of various kinds function in this aspect, result in a similar diversity of typical specifications in the universal meaning of the sign aspect, and establish the possibilities for a theoretical classification of the diverse sign functions.

In principle all entities function either subjectively or objectively in all the modal aspects of reality, and thus every entity also has a specific sign function. All the multiple functions of an entity, including the sign function, are of course grouped and characterized by an entitary structure with a typical foundational function and a typical qualifying function.[3]

To account for the typical specifications given to the universal sign function by various kinds of entitary structures, semiotics tries to classify the kinds of entities and their typical sign functions. In terms of the sign function at least three basic categories can

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be distinguished:

A. The first category includes the sign functions of entities which have an objective-technical foundational function, and which are qualified by a sign function.

B. The second category includes the sign functions of entities which are founded in an objective-technical function, but which, instead of the sign aspect, are qualified by diverse other modal aspects.

C. The last category includes the sign functions of all entities lacking both an objective-technical foundational function and a qualifying sign function.

In order to honour the universality of the sign aspect, it should initially be sufficient to stick to examples of latent, objective sign functions, i.e., categories of the signifiability ('betekenbaarheid') of entities:

A. Curiously enough it seems that there are no entities with exclusively latent, objective sign functions of the kind which can be classified in category A. However, when the latent, objective sign function of any entity is made patent by a distinctive second kind of entity, then this second kind of entity would, when considered on its own, have a latent, objective sign function belonging to category A. For example, an entity like a chair has a latent, objective sign function (of signifiability) that can be made patent in the name /chair/; the latter is a secondary kind of entity in distinction from the signified chair, and it has its own latent, objective sign function which can be made patent in its turn by synonymous names like /stool/ or /seat/, or by a diagrammatic representation of a chair.

B. In this category one finds the sign functions of various man-made entities, such as the brand or trade-mark of manufactured goods, the badges, serial number and insignia of rank on a uniform, the emblems and icons in a painting, the photograph and vital statistics on a passport, the registration number of vehicles and guns, sacramental wine, bread and water, commemorative monuments and gravestones, engagement and wedding rings, geographical and statistical maps and charts, primitive mutilation and tattooing of the body, musical scores, catalogues, directories and dictionaries of various kinds, and so forth.[4]

C. To this category belong the latent, objective sign functions of all entities and events which are not man-made, such as animal tracks, metereological cloud formations, symptomatic colour, temperature and texture of the skin, the bee-dance phenomenon, scents, colours, tastes, sounds, etc.
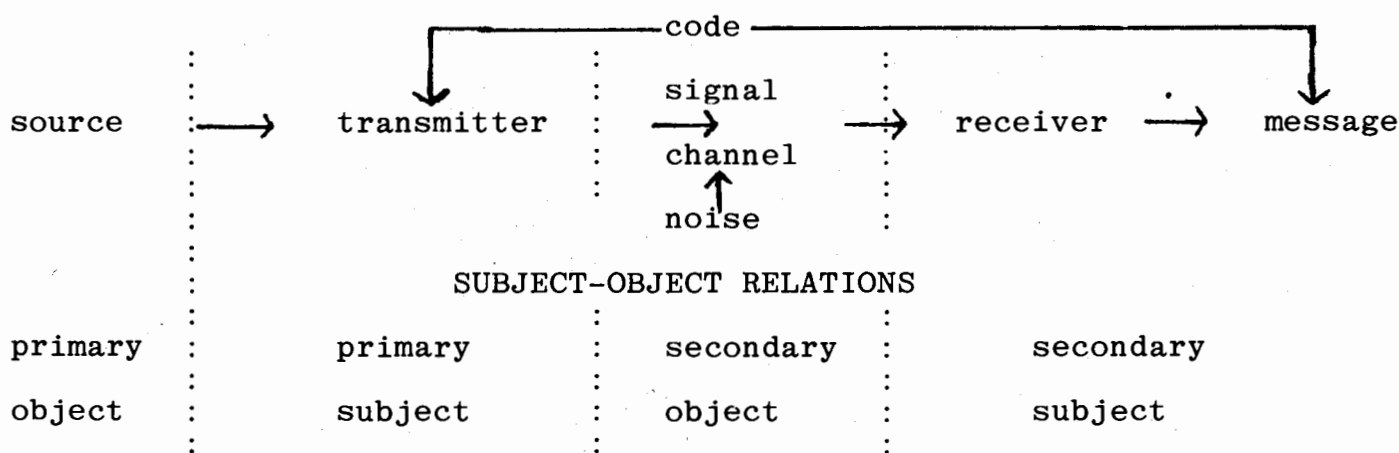

5. TYPICAL SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE SIGN RELATIONS

Attention must be given to the role of subject-object relations if we are to gain greater insight into the sign modus with its norms of signifying, its subjective activities of signification, as well as its objective sign functions of signifiability ('betekenbaarheid') and nuances of significance ('betekenismomente'). The relations between these normed subjective and objective sign functions are differentiated

in a typical fashion on the entitary horizon. In this differentiation we are confronted with the difference between latent and patent sign functions--the latter being disclosed by signifying subjects in secondary entities.

Objective-technically founded and encapsulated entities and events are secondary entities with patented sign functions. Examples of such patent, objective sign functions can be discovered in speech (as spoken verbal language), in texts (as written or printed manuscripts of various kinds), and in languages of gestures and codes. These secondary entities (and their patented sign functions) are always enkaptically interlaced with various contexts which are not qualified by sign functions.[5] The resulting diversity of entitary kinds implies that we cannot uniformly experience 'language as such,' and that the actualizing subject[6] must avail himself of exegesis, interpretation, translation and understanding, as studied theoretically in general hermeneutics.

The characteristic subject-object-object-subject relations which are foundational to all cultural activities of man, exist also as typically specified and differentiated sign relations. These relations have been discovered and attended to by information theories, communication theories and cybernetics, in spite of their operational, physical-technical reduction of the semiotic idea of communication. The current communication model that was constructed in these disciplines, reveals the following subject-object relations:

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COMMUNICATION MODEL[7]

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            ┌──────────── code ──────────────────────┐
            │                                         │
            ▼            signal                       ▼
source :──→ transmitter  ──→    ──→ receiver  ──→  message
                         channel
                           ↑
                         noise
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SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATIONS

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primary	primary	secondary	secondary
object	subject	object	subject

The primary object (or 'source') in fact indicates the latent, objective sign functions of both non-technically and technically founded entities and events. In entities or events that lack a technical foundation, the latent, objective sign function is synonymous with primary signifiability; in entities or events that are technically founded the latent, objective sign function corresponds with secondary signifiability. Thus the primary object includes both primary and secondary signifiability.

Apart from the correct distinction of primary and secondary subjects and objects in the communication model, a serious mistake is made by imputing that the primary object or 'source' is of an 'uncodified' or normatively unstructured nature. This mistaken conception can only be corrected when we take into account (i) that the factual, primary object is structured (this normative structure was the basis that made

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possible the categorical classification of sign functions in paragraph 4 above), and (ii) that the primary and secondary signifiability of the primary object can only be made patent in a secondary object--or objective-technically founded entities with patented sign functions, encapsulated in enkaptic wholes not qualified by sign functions--in obedience to norms (i.e. morphemic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic norms).

Thus significance ('betekenis') is <u>not</u> an arbitrary human creation, because it is the normed patenting or disclosure of normed, latent objective sign functions. This normed subjective signification is the <u>performance</u> of human creatures who function in the universal sign modus as <u>signifier</u> ('betekenaar' or 'transmitter' as primary subject) with a definite <u>competence</u> of a typically specified character (for example, as speaker or author in a particular context). According to its nature, a norm always allows the human subject the freedom of alternative applications (en- and decoding of <u>langue</u>, or positivation of norms). The idea of arbitrariness in signification detaches this freedom in the responsible formulation of norms, evident, amongst else, in the variety of historical sign systems, from the relatively constant and universal sign norms.

NOTES

1. Cf. his <u>An essay concerning human understanding</u>, Book IV, Chapter 21, Paragraph 4 (London, Fontana-edition, 1964, p. 443).

2. Cf. Barthes, R., <u>Elements of semiology</u> (London, Cape, 1967), p. 11, Guiraud, P., <u>Semiology</u> (London, Routledge, 1975), p. 45ff., and Hawkes, T., <u>Structuralism and semiotics</u> (London, Methuen, 1977), p. 123ff., especially p. 134. Cf. also Kristeva, Julia, Semiologie-- kritische Wissenschaft und/oder Wissenschaftskritik, in Zima, P.V. ed., <u>Textsemiotik als Ideologiekritik</u> (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1977) for the following statement: "In einem entscheidenden Schritt zur Selbstanalyse vollzieht der wissenschaftliche Diskurs heute eine Rückwendung zu den <u>Sprache</u>, um deren (bzw. seine eigene) Strukturmodelle freizulegen.

"Mit anderen Worten: Sobald man die (gesellschaftliche) Praxis (d.h. im einzelnen: die Oekonomie, die Sitten, die Kunst usw.) als ein 'nach einer Sprache strukturiertes' Bedeutungssystem (système signifiant) betrachtet, wird es möglich, jede Form von Praxis als ein <u>sekundäres Modell</u> in Relation zur natürlichen Sprache wissenschaftlich zu untersuchen, insofern nämlich natürliche Sprache und soziale Praxis sich wechselseitig moderllieren lassen...

"Bereits die Definition dieser neuen Forschungsdisziplin führt hinein in ihre verzweigte Problematik. Nach Saussure, der den Begriff geprägt hat (<u>Cours de linguistigue générale</u>, 1916), hätte Semiologie der Name einer umfassenden Wissenschaft von den Zeichen sein sollen, von der die Linguistik nur ein Teilgebiet gewesen wäre. Auf einer späteren Stufe der Reflexion gelangte man jedoch zu der Einsicht, dass der Zeichen-Gegenstand der Semiologie--welcher Art er auch sei (Geste, Laut, Bild usw.)--der Erkenntnis nur in seiner Vermittlung durch die Sprache gegeben ist. Das führte zu dem Schluss, dass die 'Linguistik weder ein besonders privilegiertes noch überhaupt ein Teilgebiet der allgemeinen Wissenschaft von den Zeichen ist, vielmehr ist die Semiologie ein Teilgebiet der Linguistik, ganz genau gesagt: der Bereich, in dem es um die <u>grösseren</u>

<u>Bedeutungseinheiten des</u> Diskurses geht.'" [This last quotation is from Barthes].

3. We reserve the term 'typical' for the indication of matters on the entitary horizon and the term 'modal' for the indication of the aspectual or functional horizon.

4. The examples of objective sign functions of entities belonging to this category can only be considered as latent in terms of verbal language, since in itself the techno-formative foundation already constitutes a form of sign patency. The distinction between primary and secondary signifiability that is introduced in the next paragraph will clear up this problem.

5. The various contexts or enkaptic interlacements of such secondary entities naturally find their qualifying functions amongst the typical human facets of reality. Broadly speaking, this makes it possible to experience, for example, certitudinal, juridical, social or aesthetic speech, texts and gestural language.

6. The actualizing subject will be identified as 'secondary subject' in the further differentiation of subject-object relations. The role of such secondary subjects is indispensable for the functioning of all secondary entities and events.

7. A variety of communication models has been constructed; cf. for example, Guiraud, P., <u>Op. cit.</u>, p. 5, Hawkes, T., <u>Op. cit.</u>, p. 83, and Gadamer, H.-G. and Vogler, P. eds., <u>Kulturanthropologie</u> (Neue Anthropologie, Bd. 4) (Stuttgart, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verslag, 1973), p. 356. We have chosen as an example the model used by Umberto Eco in his <u>A theory of semiotics</u> (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 33.

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Editorial (Continued from page 1)

This is a question which deserves (renewed) debate. The readers of <u>Anakainosis</u> are hereby cordially invited to contribute to such a debate in the pages of this journal. (A.W.)