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# **Language and the Play of Differences**

**Robert E. Innis**

Review-essay on Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*.  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Umberto Eco's recent book lies at the point of intersection of two semiotic trajectories and pursues—through seven interrelated studies on 'signs,' 'dictionary vs. encyclopedia,' 'metaphor,' 'symbol,' 'code,' 'isotopy,' and 'mirrors'—"the capital question of any philosophy of language: what does it mean for human beings to say, to express meanings, to convey ideas, or to mention states of the world?" (7). It combines the fundamentally inferential or abductive definition of Peirce that a sign is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (CP 2.228)—a definition which foregrounds the five factors of semiosis: sign, interpreter, interpretant, object, ground—with the differential concept of the sign deriving from Saussure and Hjelmslev. The Peircean trajectory leads to the thesis of unlimited semiosis, to Eco's greater proximity, in spite of many of his examples, to philosophical rather than literary issues, to his focussing upon signification rather than communication, and hence to his fundamentally cognitive approach to signs as representational de-

vices. The Saussurian and Hjelmslevian trajectory leads to Eco's opposition to any attempts to reify signs and to his central thesis on signs as labile sign-functions, to the consequent nomadism of semiosis as interpretive activity, to the foregrounding of the matrix of oppositions and differences within which semiosis is located, and hence to a field or objective theory of semiosis as such which decenters the sign-producing and interpreting subject, but in a way rather different from certain strands of French work with which, nevertheless, there is a certain affinity.

One of Eco's primary goals is to dismantle the formal theory of meaning that has guided much contemporary semantic theory and that is the source of many of its 'cramps' (46). Underlying the drive toward a formal theory of meaning, Eco argues, is the picture of meaning as formalized in a dictionary or in a Porphyrian tree as the paradigmatic focus of semantic space where all the routes between signifying items would be able to be rigidly and hierarchically charted and ordered. Implied in the hierarchical structure of the Porphyrian tree is the necessity of a finite number of semantic markers that delimit one semantic unit from another. Unlimited semiosis, however, the unlimited chain of interpretants that signs give rise to and that effect the play of differences in the content continuum, looks upon any ordering or systematization of semantic markers as merely local and transitory concretions of the global encyclopedia that makes up the knowledge system of any culture at any particular time.

In an ingenious argument concerning the role of differences in the Porphyrian semantic universe and representational schema, Eco points out that the logical theory embodied in such an image is exploded when we recognize the role of *differentiae* in specifying the genera and species which make up the nodes in the tree. "Genera and species are only the names that we assign to the nodes represented by disjunctions of *differentiae*" (65). In fact, "the tree is entirely made up with *differentiae*" (65). "Genera and species are linguistic ghosts that cover the real nature of the tree and of the universe it represents: a world of pure *differentiae*" (65-66). More apocalyptically: "The tree of genera and species, the tree of substances, blows up in a dust of *differentiae*, in a turmoil of infinite accidents, in a nonhierarchical network of qualia. The dictionary is dissolved into a potentially unordered and unrestricted galaxy of pieces of world knowledge. The dictionary thus becomes an encyclopedia, because it was in fact a disguised encyclopedia" (68).

The heart of Eco's semiotic project is Peirce's contention that

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"a sign is something by knowing which we know something more." Using this dictum as his heuristic clue, Eco is able to take dead aim at the primarily linguistically induced equivalence or identity model of the sign and of sign processes according to which the meaning of a sign is some unified whole captured in equivalent signs and encapsulated in a dictionary and all guaranteed by some sort of super-subject. Instead sign-systems, the ultimate foundations of our apprehension of significant units in the experiential flow, are without a stable center, resembling (being) labyrinths, rhizomes, clusters of sign functions and content nebulae, and so forth. Eco wants to show that signification is a continuous process or chain of inferential acts, based on complicated relations of implication and correlation between the two components of a sign-function—the expression plane and the content plane—that have no substantive or extra-semiotic reality or foundation. Their reality is that of a coded relation, of a set of differential oppositions in the expressive medium or in the content continuum, both of which are 'cut' or 'segmented' in the articulatory process. This cutting is, in the case of external signs, not a private act but a social process that takes on a stable, extra-subjective form, as distillates of socially encoded acts of sense-giving and sense-reading, to which the linguistic subjects submit and that brings into play and into relation functional units of opposition. In this way Eco is able to wed successfully the Peircean theme of infinite semiosis and the indefinite chain of interpretants to which all sign functions give rise with the Saussurian and Hjelmslevian theme of the play of differences.

The cutting of the expression and content planes is for Eco a pure play of differences, and in this he continues, without, however, fully exploiting its implications, the development of the great phonological model and the model of the sign built on it espied by Saussure, developed by Bühler, Trubetzkoy, and Hjelmslev, and widely exploited, with unclear results, by the French structuralists. Both the differential theory of sign constitution and the inferential model of the sign stemming from the Stoics and more recently from Peirce entail that signs are not ontologically special types of objects but only perceptible things which are 'taken' as signs. This is ultimately a process of coding, which is labile and historically variable. As an attack on the possibility of, and an effective dismantling of, a formal theory of meaning, with its underlying model of the dictionary, Eco is certainly right, and he continues, in the semiotic key, the paradigmatic, if fragmented, work of Wittgenstein.

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Wittgenstein's primary intention was to destroy once and for all the search for a certain cognitive touchstone upon which our intercourse with the world could be based, and he constantly adduced parallels and differences between linguistic and perceptual forms of apprehension. In the semiotic framework the relation of the expression plane to the content plane, the relation of signifier to signified, is always, in one way or the other, coded and hence 'arbitrary.' Articulate systems, however, still have to be applied or fitted to the world of experience, where things are mentioned through referential acts. The epistemological and criterial problems of how the content units and the experiential units are related to one another is not subsumable, strictly speaking, under the rubric of coding, for there has to be some 'fit,' no matter how we understand it, between the sign, as the indissoluble union of signifier and signified, and the object domain upon which it bears. While Wittgenstein both tried to uncover the 'grammar of perceptual takings' and to reconcile his 'phenomenological' findings with his famous thesis that "grammar tells us what kind of thing an object is," and thus was forced to try to specify, fundamentally through the notion of a form of life, how the 'grammatical' and the 'perceptual' were to be related, Eco runs the risk, as do in fact his French parallels, of leaving the two systems free-floating, independently of one another.

Now we have to admit that the 'arbitrariness' of sign-systems over against experience is not absolute. Just as sign systems are composed of a vast array of pertinent features, on both the expression and content planes, so perception itself, the ultimate ground or field of semiosis, is guided by a parallel process of pertinentization. A perceptual object is for us a fusion of pertinent features that are encapsulated in the categorial system borne by the expression system *and* those pertinent features which are resident in the material structures of the sensory array itself. 'Knuckle fat' (Danish) and 'elbow grease' (English) (to take an example supplied by my bilingual wife) 'cut' the perceptual continuum differently and constitute two different 'focal objects.' Pertinentization is learned by assimilation of articulate semantic markers that belong to the encyclopedic knowledge and competence of a particular linguistic culture *and* to the natural lines and contours resident in the perceptual field itself. Perceptually pertinent in the perceptual field is either the knuckle in contact or the moving elbow. The foregrounding of one rather than the other is due to the lability of perception itself and not to the extrinsic application of an already structured and ready-made sign-system to the perceptual continuum.

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The perceptual continuum in fact is subject to certain laws of self-organization which strictly delimit the range of possible cuttings, although the explicitly semiotic processes of interpretation are underdetermined by experience itself. Pre-existing sign systems and systems of meaning 'motivate' our conception of the 'play of differences' in the perceptual field, while the actual play of differences in perception display Gestalt characteristics such as pregnancy, good form, closure, and so forth, which, in fact, as René Thom has shown in the application of his catastrophe theory to semiotics, are also the characteristics of those special types of objects called 'signs.'

The problem is to see what an interpretation of perception in strictly semiotic terms would look like. This Eco simply does not supply, or even attempt to foreground, although elements for it lie ready to hand in the model of sign processes that he has adopted and in his occasional comments, both in the present book and in his *A Theory of Semiotics*, on the parallels between 'meaning' in the linguistic and perceptual realms. For instance, in his discussion of 'mirrors' we find Eco saying that from an ontogenetic point of view "we are not sure whether semiosis is at the basis of perception or vice versa (and, therefore, whether semiosis is at the basis of thought or vice versa)" (203). Paradoxically, had Eco seen the heuristic implications of his own model of sign processes he would have proceeded rather differently, for example, modifying his account of metaphor, which displays his own position on the issue of the semiotic closure.

The point of connection to this problem-area is the phonological model itself. Phonology points directly to our powers of veridical abstraction in grasping the diacritical moments of produced forms, and the distinction between phones and phonemes bears witness to this abstractive power, our power to grasp ideal structures in the phonic flow, giving us sign-types which are realized by sign-tokens. Diacrisis is dependent upon differential moments in the phonic flow which are objective and coded. Perception is dependent upon differential moments in the experiential flow which are the analoga to phonemes and to Gestalt characteristics. These differential moments are objective, but only partially coded, and no sign-system could function which did not intersect with the 'significant joints' drawn in the experiential continuum, the problem of Plato's *Theatetus*.

The penetration of the inferential model of semiosis into an account of the semiotic structure of perception would have made Eco's program much stronger. Perception would be shown in principle to be semiotic or semiotic if the 'standing-for' relation-

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ship, the *stare pro quo* relationship, could be shown to be instantiated in perceptual processes quite generally. In the Peircean formulation, indexes are existentially connected with their objects. There is a real bond between them and their objects but the bond becomes semiotically relevant when it is stipulated by a process akin to coding. A semiotic model of perception would have to consider as indexes the real parts or traces of the object which are seen to point to, in a rule-governed fashion, their organizing ground of unity, the focal object on which they bear. The object itself would not be something separate from the perceptual indexes, which are in fact its particulars, but the figure drawn by the indexes in the field of consciousness. The coded aspect of perception (in the soft version of code, chapter 5) would arise from our grasp of types, of systematic correlations between different sets of indexes and the same types of objects whenever they appear in the field of consciousness itself. Coding in this case is the equivalent of our reading of natural signs. Perceptual particulars are natural signs of their objects which are their meanings: Polanyi's physiognostic meanings.

On this position meaning-object and the standing-for relation arise from an interpretative act which only seems immediate because it has now become habituated. The inferential labor of perception consists, in fact, of abducting the rule—which is the object—which binds the particulars, as indexes, together into a unity. A face is known only through its features which mean it and which are real parts of it. A melodic pattern is known only through the linear seriation of tonal particulars which point to their principle of completion, the melody itself. A probe or stick purveys to us indexes of what it itself is in contact with and is itself an index: it, and the tactile particulars mediated by its material reality, must be construed by the perceiving subject. The closing of the logical gap, in Polanyi's sense, between sensory particulars and the focal whole is then an act of interpretation, a 'taking,' although it is clear from the psychology of perception, especially Gestalt theory, that non-semiotic factors are also determinative in the grasp of the object.

Eco's account of metaphor, which is in itself a solid and insightful contribution to this topic, also raises questions concerning the constitutive role of varying semiotic factors and levels in the genesis of sense and meaning. Eco has already argued in "The Semantics of Metaphor" (in *The Role of the Reader*) that metaphoric expressions fundamentally *institute* and do not merely record a semantic connection between already existing items in the global

semantic field and that metaphor rests on the maze of possible connections between items which the keen linguistic consciousness is able to discern. He ignores, however, the inferential labor of grasping perceptual 'original resemblances' which, while certainly heuristically guided by pre-existing expression systems, is also rooted in the inferential labor of perception which grasps structural, figural, and functional continuities and differences in the experiential flow. The creative metaphorical twist has to follow certain lines that manifest perceptually verifiable properties, which are, admittedly, formulated in the system of semantic markers. However, the chain of interpretants which signs give rise to can also be a chain of perceptual interpretants, of iconic 'resemblances' which are 'read out of' experience and not merely 'read into' it. The fusion and translation of semes within the realm of linguistic metaphor raises the whole thorny issue of 'perceptual semes.'

For it is undeniable, as Karl Bühler argued, that a primary analogue to metaphor as the predominant linguistic 'trope' is to be found in the peculiar characteristics of binocular vision that are fundamentally 'abstractive.' The fusion of two images into one viewed object in binocular vision parallels the fusion of two (or more) semantic spaces (which Bühler represents by a superimposition of lattice-structures) that takes place in metaphorical apprehension and denotation. Eco does not speak of fusion and he makes no appeal to perceptual analogies. For him metaphor is primarily, if not exclusively, a linguistic phenomenon. The original generation of the signifying units, many of which are themselves already metaphorical (Quintilian: *paene omne dictum metaphora est*), is taken as a given and the adjustment of the novel sense, effected through a metonymic process, takes place through an exchange of semes, of semantic markers, which migrate from one conceptual space to another. This migration, I think, however, must always be governed by what Alan Gardiner (in *The Theory of Speech and Language*) called 'the thing-meant,' for otherwise we would have no control over the 'appositeness' of our articulation.

It is true that a consciousness embodied in a pre-given set of expressions will be guided to articulate the world in light of it and that this expression system will have a complex internal structure that allows it to be split and to set up new combinations. The tendency in Eco's general procedure is to try to eliminate all traces of motivation in the generation of systems of sign functions so that they have a fundamentally autonomous and constitutive role over against the experiential field. It is the significant cuts in the content continuum, which is a system of meanings, that filter the



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significant cuts in this field. However, the use of a system of contents, as filters, to mention states of affairs in the world raises criterial problems of epistemology that Eco does not adequately confront. For what ultimately constrains the generation of sign functions? Why do systems of expressions, and their corresponding contents, seem to fit experience, to work? A satisfactory answer to these questions would take us deep into the theory of judgment and evidence and into a further exploration of the intimate connections between perceptual apprehension and all the constitutive conditions to which it is subject.

Culture puts, it is certainly true, a transitory and provisional frame around the otherwise disordered turmoil of accidents, which is 'the world.' But once again, however, the issue of just how labile the clusters of differences are raises its head. Culture produces a vast array of contexts, topics, frames, scripts, stereotypes, commonsense knowledge, and so forth which mediate experience and sort it. The sorting is never a definitive one and the criteria according to which the segmentation takes place are rooted in subjective and objective factors that combine in numerous, but not totally arbitrary, ways. While to be sure linguistic systems are not merely reproductive of what lies ready to hand in the experiential field, being in fact selective and abstractive abbreviations that light up significant differences within the perceptual world, they must intersect at 'relevant' points with the lines of demarcation in the perceptually accessible world of objects.

Expression systems register differences as well as constitute them. Semantic fields exist that are not isomorphic with others which bear upon the same 'object domain' because, in fact, the object domain itself is intrinsically labile. Still, mercilessly exploiting the Hjelmslevian thesis on the forms of content and the variability of the segmentation process, it is for the most part the lability of the expression systems that is foregrounded in Eco's argument. Semiosis in external sign-systems has, to be sure, no fixed or stable boundaries, but semiosis in internal sign-systems, the 'internal signs' of consciousness itself, takes place through a peculiar fusion of external and internal systems. The heuristic fertility of a sign-system with respect to perception is well known, but Eco runs the risk of making his semiotic philosophy of language top-heavy—oriented around 'texts' and their meanings—and hence falling into a form of nominalism and even of deconstructionism, assimilating himself willy-nilly to "the new atheistic mystics of the godless drift" (156).

Linguistic systems are, I think, best thought of as matrices

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that guide perception and fuse with it. It is their very transparency that makes the world seen with their aid seem so 'natural.' But the generation of significant experiential harmonies is dependent upon the mutual adjustment of interpretive demands emanating from the expression system and from the play of differences in the experiential continuum itself. Experience gives us figures which emerge out of the continuous flow of qualia. These figures are systems of differences and hence an object is the name we give to that complex of perceptual differences that inscribe themselves on the field of consciousness. While a concept is a rule for bringing the manifold of intuition into a unity, there are properly perceptual categories that aid and mediate this process of synthesis. These categories, and the operations and matrices in which they are embodied, have been charted by perceptual theory and the task that now faces us, in light of Eco's fine and masterful defense of the play of differences in language, is to complete in detail the reformulation of the whole set of problems he has raised by making the circle of semiosis "where it would be difficult to spot a starting point" not just a postulate but the object of a nuanced phenomenology of semiosis in all its domains. In short, we still need to understand, from the semiotic point of view, the peculiar dialectic between form and meaning in perception and to sort out their various contributions before we can determine just how semiosis is ultimately a closed circle and how the play of signs, which is a play of differences, can be seen in all the forms of consciousness. Only then will we be able to complete the investigations collected in this book in the direction toward which they are so obviously heading.