

‘TO BE *MEANS* TO COMMUNICATE’

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Ens et verum convertuntur, “communication and being are co-extensive”. To be for nature is to be intelligible for the animal whose being is to understand (Deely 2003: 39)

La questione dell’*io* é inevitabilmente connessa con quella dell’*altro* (Ponzio 2001: 137)

The main idea underpinning the position outlined in this paper is a very common one. In fact, it is also quite old. Put simply, it is the notion that structure facilitates. This basic formula could also be said to characterize the central insight of that enduring pre-Socratic practice, semiotics. Without wishing to reduce semiotics to a mere definition, nor to posit it as some kind of master discipline, it can still be stated that semiotics is where “the ‘life sciences’ and the ‘sign sciences’ converge. This means that *signs* and *life* converge. Therefore, it follows that the human being is a sign in a universe of signs” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2001: 5). This paper, then, attempts to sketch a picture of the human as a sign. In doing so, it also attempts to negotiate an understanding of the human as constituted by ‘selfhood’ on the one hand and by what has become known as ‘subjectivity’, on the other. In effect, Thomas A. Sebeok nicely sums up the fecundity of the ‘structure facilitates’ idea in this sphere when he writes that “Semiosis is the processual engine which propels organisms to capture ‘external reality’ and thereby come to terms with the cosmos in the shape of species-specific internal modeling systems” (Sebeok 2001: 15). The following paper, of course, is in no way equipped to resolve the nature/nurture, biology/culture or, also, the structure/agency debates. However, it attempts to provide one way of approaching such dichotomies through the investigation of semiosis.

In an earlier paper (Cobley 2008), it was suggested that poststructuralism was doomed from the outset for reasons to be found among the insights of two sub-branches of semiotics: social semiotics and biosemiotics. Although poststructuralism has been enormously influential, particularly in providing accounts of identity from the vantage point of modernity, it has typically encountered difficulties in theorizing agency. Likewise, it has often been unable to explain away biological factors without either incorporating them into a conception of ‘discourse’ or by singling out aspects of discursivity and bestowing upon them a quasi-biological countenance (see, for example, Foucault 1975 and Lacan 1977). It would seem necessary in the present, then, to suggest preliminary ways of reconciling issues to do with agency and biology. Put another way, the matters of choice and determination for humans can be thought through signs, especially the imperative of ‘dialogue’.

In the modern literature concerned with the human subject there is often a tension between what is referred to as ‘selfhood’ and what is understood as ‘subjectivity’. The former, broadly, involves a conception of the human as *conscious* of its own existence and most of its intellectual capacities as well

as its distinction from others; the latter, generally, has come to mean the human as *constituted* by the range of ‘practices’ which precede its existence and subsequently — or ‘always already’ — shape its existence, thought processes and options. Such practices are ‘cultural’ in their bearing or, more pointedly, signifying practices. What has probably become axiomatic in much of the writing on identity, the subject and the self in modernity is that subjectivity and selfhood are synonymous mainly because they are no longer considered to be unitary or intrinsically constituted in character (see Benhabib 1992; Cascardi 1992; Giddens 1991; Taylor 1992). Elliot (2002: 2) writes:

Selfhood is flexible, fractured, fragmented, decentred and brittle: such a conception of individual identity is probably the central outlook in current social and political thought. As the pace, intensity and complexity of contemporary culture accelerates, so too the self becomes increasingly dispersed. Displaced and dislocated within the wider frame of postindustrial capitalism, the individual self turns increasingly to consumption, leisure and travel in order to give substance to everyday life. Or so some have forcefully argued.

The coda here, of course, is crucial. To be sure, there are other ways to conceive of subjectivity and selfhood that embrace the concepts of choice, agency and flexibility whilst retaining an anti-humanist perspective on the limits to human freedom.

As Elliott suggests (2001: 11), perspectives from “Freudianism and feminism to poststructuralism and postmodernism” have saturated the study of subjectivity in modernity. Central to such perspectives has been the implementing of the work of Saussure, leading to a body of speculations on ‘language’ which has not only misunderstood or distorted its source (for a comprehensive overview, see Harris 2003) but has also been cripplingly limited in its purview. Lacan, for instance, paints a picture of the human subject as captive in the quasi-Saussurean ‘pure differentiability’ of ‘language’ (Lacan 1971a, 1971b, 1977, 1993; see also Copley 2008). It is this captivity which underlies Lacan’s contention that the attempts of humans to make reference, to gain meaning, are illusory. Yet, to dwell on reference would be to miss the point: humans display an insatiable tendency to *actively mean* in a number of diverse ways. Indeed, the tendency is so variegated that it is difficult to see how humans might be in thrall to just one small part of it, that is to say ‘pure differentiability’. It is analogous to suggesting that the inside of a gene has a character or projects behaviour as complex as selfishness. This former reduction, then, is fairly typical of the perspectives that Elliot describes: clearly, such perspectives cannot avoid recourse to some view of semiotic processes; nevertheless, they commit two major errors. Firstly, they are involved in the *pars pro toto* fallacy in which human semiosis is reduced to (one part of) human verbality. Secondly, they engage in the necessary, but risky extrapolation of linguistic structures from surface phenomena, drawing conclusions about ‘language’ that are not always borne out by actual language use (or *parole* in Saussure’s terminology — 1983: 13-14).

For many commentators on subjectivity in modernity, semiotic capacities are either ‘just there’ in the human or ‘imposed’. At best, there might be a more sophisticated position in which human semiotic capacities are ‘just there’ in a human in such a way that dovetails nicely with the always already ongoing acts of ‘imposition’. This, crudely put, is Lacan’s corner. Yet, subjectivity is undoubtedly a matter of the dynamic *development* of various semiotic capacities of the human. There is a tradition in linguistics, semiotics and the theory of subjectivity that offers a different route through these issues, avoiding the *pars pro toto* error and concomitant gambits on the nature of linguistic structure. Beginning in the 1930s

in what Harris (1988 ix-xi), following Austin, has dubbed the “no man’s land” between philosophy and philology, this tradition grew out of the work of J. R. Firth (1890-1960). As an experienced linguist, Firth was not unaware of the importance of linguistic structure; but he also initiated a strain of thought which foregrounded concern with the *meaning* and import of utterances for language’s users. In this, his work prefigures that of his student, M. A. K. Halliday (b. 1925) as well as that of Basil Bernstein (1924-2001) and, later, Halliday’s student, Gunther Kress (b. 1942), all of whom have been associated with leading posts at colleges comprising the University of London. Consistently, their work has been concerned with language acquisition, early language use and language in educational settings.

What this tradition demonstrates, among other things, is the importance of a general issue in semiotics that is obviously germane to the theory of subjectivity: the sheer complexity of the grounds of utterance and meaning-making in communication. One has only to compare, say, Saussure’s map of the speech circuit in the *Course in General Linguistics* (1983: 11) and Halliday’s cartography of utterance (or semantic systems and their realizations) (1978: 118-20). It is true that the latter is a research paper and the former was conceived in order to introduce arguments to an undergraduate audience, but the wealth of difference in terms of form and detail is nonetheless notable. Saussure’s work on linguistic structure is acknowledged by Firth et al, although it should be said that Halliday, Bernstein and Kress all underpin their work with references, rather, to ‘grammar’. Above all, the British tradition is interested in semantics and, in comparison to other linguistic traditions, there is a distinct shift from identifying syntactic structures towards the issue of meaning-making. The key point for subjectivity about this shift, however, is not just complexity. Rather it is the lead taken from the Bakhtin School in eschewing linguistic structure as the primary focus of linguistic study and favouring, instead, an analysis of the concrete nature of utterance.

It is fairly easy to understand that linguistic signs are concrete: even Saussure’s speech circuit with its telementational aspects implies this as instances of *parole* pass between speaker and interlocutor. Such a schema represents a fairly low level of the theorisation of dialogue. However, the Bakhtin School’s conception of dialogue, which informs the British tradition in focus here, is much more thorough. It refers to the palpably concrete signs involved in utterances, but also expands upon the fact that signs in consciousness are a response to other signs; most importantly, signs of both kinds “can only arise on *interindividual territory*” (Vološinov 1929: 12). The idea of individual consciousness explains nothing, according to Vološinov; instead, there is a need to think communication across the sorts of organisation that distinguish societies. Halliday’s formulation of ‘language as social semiotic’ (1978) seems to concur with this; famously, he lays out the main features of utterance as distributed across a terrain comprising text, situation (field, tenor, mode), register, code, linguistic structure and social structure. In venturing onto this ‘interindividual territory’, humans are compelled by dialogue. Moreover, the semantic realm in which dialogue might be actualised is so varied and multiply-determined that dialogue will inevitably meet impediments. That is to say, conflict and struggle are much more likely than consensus or subordination. So, even if it were possible to contain subjectivity within a frame of language as ‘pure differentiability’, guaranteeing that the human is always already disempowered by a reductive structure, the site of dialogue as described by Halliday, would always be where power was redistributed.

In making these connections, perhaps a little more should be said about the nature of dialogue to be derived from the work of the Bakhtin School and its impacts on the theory of the subject. ‘Dialogue’

appears to imply a desirable, consensual joining-together of consciousnesses as exemplified by co-operation in groups, thinking alike, and so forth. Indeed, there are some readings of Bakhtinian dialogue which attempt to bear this out. However, more radically, the Bakhtin School operated with an understanding of dialogue as inescapable. Bakhtin's commitment to analysing literature would seem to be an anomaly, here, because the dialogue to be found in literature is apparently fictional, dictated by form rather than function. Yet, for Bakhtin, the contrary is the case: dialogue, in literature as in life, is made up of signs. Moreover signs are not just formal, but concrete; they are the very stuff of the social world that people inhabit, giving information on what is true, what is hurtful, what is useful, what is relevant (see, especially, Vološinov 1929, Bakhtin 1929; Ponzio and Petrilli 2000 and Hirschkop 1999). The 'concreteness' of utterance enforces dialogue with the other; as Petrilli and Ponzio put it (1998: 28):

For Bakhtin, dialogue is not the result of an initiative we decide to take, but rather it is imposed, something to which one is subjected. Dialogue is not the result of opening towards the other, but of the impossibility of closing.

The extent to which dialogue and otherness are integral to being in Bakhtin's thought cannot be overstated. Commenting on literature, once more, Bakhtin's 'Toward a reworking of the Dostoevsky book' (in Bakhtin 1929) addresses the perennial question of subjectivity, "how do I become myself?" His notes (1929: 287) are worth quoting at length:

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a *thou*). Separation, dissociation, and enclosure within the self as the main reason for the loss of one's self. Not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the *boundary* between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the *threshold*. And everything internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience ends up on the boundary, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence. This is the highest degree of sociality (not external, not material, but internal) . . . The very being of man (both external and internal) is the *deepest communion*. *To be* means *to communicate*. Absolute death (non-being) is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered (Ippolit). To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another with the eyes of another*.

If the subject is subject-to-an-other, then, there remains a question of the extent, location and nature of human agency.

For the British tradition in semiotics and linguistics that has been discussed, some of the relevant questions are answered by a focus on the area of the semantic in communication. As has been indicated, the realm of the semantic is so variegated it gives rise not only to the potentiality of conflict between one and an 'other' but also to agency. In the sphere of sign use on "the *boundary* between one's own and someone else's consciousness", agency can be formulated in terms of 'choice' and 'interest'. That is, in terms of relying on resources available to consciousness and fashioning from them something that represents the character of a specific instance of gravitating towards the 'external'.

Gunther Kress' research is fitting here as it embraces both verbal language and nonverbal communication; indeed, his work exemplifies a pronounced movement through linguistics to 'multimodality' and questions of agency and subjectivity. Employing a number of examples that have justifiably become well-known, Kress re-examines the relations which constitute the sign, finding motivation in the 'interest' of sign makers, the nature of their objects, and the constitution of the communicational environment. The focus of one analysis is the drawing of picture by a three and a half year-old boy (Figure 8):



Figure 1 (Kress 1993: 172): "This is a car"

The boy drew four rough circles in the centre, two on the left and then one in the top right corner, proclaiming "This is a car". The form of the signs chosen, says Kress, are *motivated* by the 'interest' of the child. For the child, wheels outside and inside the vehicle are criterial attributes of cars, especially as the family car with which the child was most familiar was customarily parked on a slope which made the vehicle's wheels dominate the child's purview (1993: 172). In a later analysis, Kress notes that children's pictures of adults frequently depict excessively long legs which, given the size and position of children, is to be expected. It demonstrates that 'interest' in sign-making is a composite of experience and social circumscription (1997: 90).

An important point made in Kress' research is that the revelation of interest in children's meaning-making is largely dependent on the presence of the analyst when a particular sign is made (1993: 178). For example, a small boy's utterance when climbing a slope that it is a "heavy hill" utilises pre-existing linguistic material, but also enacts an abstract sense of 'heaviness'. The motivation for such a connection derives from an intuition that similar kinds of energy expenditure are required for the lifting of heavy objects and the traversing of a slope: "This activity takes considerable effort" (1993: 173). Such an exposure of motivation seems straightforward. However, elsewhere, and especially in adult signification, interest is shrouded by opacity, a difficulty exacerbated by the more allusive use of linguistic signs. In this case the idea of the 'stability of meaning' that accrues to such signs masks the fact that each use of a sign is actually a *re-making* of it (1993: 176-7).

'Re-making' is worthy of emphasis in this context, even at the risk of dwelling on what might seem a simple or overstated argument. General accounts of subjectivity put too much faith in the stability and dominion of pre-existing signs. The activities of the children studied by Kress, on the other hand, are helpful reminders that, while there is nothing new under the sun, the principle of signs being made anew is enshrined at the outset of human subjectivity. In addition, the *mode* of the interest in children's sign-making is salient: as Kress describes, children's sign-making is often of a tactile or sensual nature and is

heavily geared to *situation* (1997: 10-13). Children, especially those who have not been exposed to thorough literacy training, are less used to and have much less access than adults to the customary cultural paraphernalia of expression. They thus tend to make signs out of whatever resources are available — verbal and tactile materials which they “have to hand” (1997: 91). Children transform the stuff around them through a *multimodal* bearing that is often buried in adulthood. Indeed, the fact that all signs tend to be manifest in more than one mode — for example, writing (through layout, quality of handwriting, font, etc.) and speech (through all things understood as paralinguistic: intonation, rhythm and all forms of prosody) — is also often forgotten (Kress 1997: 97; 1993 : 188).

Multimodality is thus crucially implicated in the agency of the child, through the interplay of choice and circumstance. It may be tempting for some to dismiss this summary of agency as a warmed-over humanist confection, blind to the power of institutions and economic conditions. However, Kress is clear about acculturation and the circulation of signs within social formations (1997: 94):

The cultural world into which children have to slowly work themselves is a world which already has form. So children’s making of signs takes place in a world which has the complex shape produced by all the previous sign-makers of that culture, in a particular society, all of them always expressing their interest in their making of signs. As a result, with few exceptions, members of a culture end up ‘acculturated’ - all having what appears as the same cultural knowledge, the same values, the same, recognizably similar traits and dispositions. All speak the same language, make signs in all the modes which are available in that culture, in quite similar ways. To all intents and purposes, it looks as though the culture has imprinted itself upon us, or we have actively acquired the culture in the sense of making a copy of it for ourselves.

Children *do* encounter pre-constituted cultural materials, Kress agrees; but (1997: 113): “My account is the story of the active engagement of bodily humans with all aspects of their cultural environment, which constantly transforms language, individuals, and their cultural world”.

As one of the most fruitful developments in the history of the British tradition of social semiotics, Kress’ research demonstrates that the subject is in the midst of a processual engine — semiosis — which propels it to capture ‘external reality’. That world which semiosis ‘captures’ is ineffable in its complexity and, even where recognizable structures can be discerned - semantic, linguistic, social, economic - their contradictory and conflicting nature dictates both ‘choice’ and ‘dialogue’. But this, needless to say, is not the end of the story. For the purpose of this paper and according to the aims stated at the outset it is necessary to offer some comment on the human (subject) *as* sign. In a sense, this is already present in the references to the work of Kress et al: humans, as active sign-makers, bring signs and objects together, to use the terminology of Charles Sanders Peirce. Sticking with this terminology, they act as interpretants that, in turn, are themselves signs related to objects mediated by further interpretants. This idea is fairly well embedded in semiotics, both in some commentaries on Peirce (for example, Merrell 1996, 2000) and in discussions of internalization citing Mead (for example, Wiley 1994 and Pickering 1999). Yet there is a more profound way in which the human can be seen as a sign, a perspective that has a biological basis but which illuminates the topics of subjectivity, agency and even dialogue without recourse to theoretical leaps or tentative fictions.

Any serious discussion of selfhood in general needs to acknowledge, at some level, the extent to which humans are a nodal point of biological determination. Even discussions such as this one, conducted

by someone who is far from being well-versed in the principles of biology, cannot overlook the fact that humans, despite any self-consciousness which might accrue to them, are animals. In some cases, poststructuralism has attempted to 'biologize' cultural phenomena with fairly partial and unconvincing results (for example, Sullivan 1991). To reiterate a key theme mentioned earlier "The key to human selfhood is the capacity to symbolize. Symbols condition experience and turn processes into things", as Pickering writes, citing Mead's observation that the internalization in symbolic form of the actions of others and the self provides the basis for self-awareness. Yet Pickering also adds that while selfhood depends on consciousness being conditioned by symbols that are assimilated from the cultural milieu, "consciousness *qua* awareness existed prior to this milieu and arose along with the evolution of all living beings" (1999: 66). Ultimately, then, the pertinent question is not "What signifying practices can be speculatively collapsed into a biological form of functioning?" but the subtly distinct question "Which biological forms of functioning carry over into general signifying practices?"

The putative resurgence of interest in biology in the late twentieth century which, at one pole, comprises the excesses of evolutionary psychology and its popular reception (see Cornwell 1998; Herrnstein Smith 1998; Rose and Rose 2000), and, at the other, the advances that have taken place in biosemiotics (Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1991; Hoffmeyer 1993; Hoffmeyer and Emmeche 1999; Merrell 1996; Kull 2001), entails that subjectivity must be recast. Sebeok's notion of the 'semiotic self' provides a programmatic re-visioning of the concept of subjectivity, placing an emphasis on communication as characteristic of life. His exploration of subjectivity takes place mainly in four published essays beginning with 'The semiotic self' (1979) and 'The semiotic self revisited' (1989), both reprinted as a brace in his 1991 book, *A Sign is Just a Sign*, and "'Tell me where is fancy bred?': The biosemiotic self" (1992) and 'The cognitive self and the virtual self' (1998), reprinted as a second brace in the 2001 volume, *Global Semiotics* (2001a). However, there are two features of Sebeok's investigations which need to be noted before proceeding to his concise statements on the co-ordinates of selfhood.

The first is his exploration of sign processes which are apparent only to the trained intellect, particularly the processes in symptomatology. In numerous places in his work Sebeok demonstrates the centrality of medicine and medical practices to the history of understanding signs. In a manner which concurs with the arguments of the historian Carlo Ginzburg (1980), Sebeok puts medicine at the centre of a shift in human understanding. For both, not only does medicine involve the reading and interpretation of signs which constitute semiotics, it also deals with kinds of signs which, implicitly at least, are fundamental to human biological *and* cultural functions. Primarily, medical symptoms are 'nonverbal cues' — they can be read without necessarily being discernible to the subject who harbours them. As such, these signs share much in common with the nonverbal cues which might pass between a human and 'intelligent' animals in such cases as that of 'Clever Hans' (Sebeok and Rosenthal 1981). Additionally, though, and in an apparently synechistic fashion, there can be a continuity between physical symptoms and supposedly larger, complex and systematic mental experiences such as subjectivity.

The second feature characterising Sebeok's investigations is his implementation of the work of the Estonian biologist, Jakob von Uexküll, especially the concept of *umwelt* (Uexküll 1940, 1934, 1936, 1937). *Umwelt* is the 'subjective universe' of the organism; it is the means by which 'reality' is fashioned in the sign system of an organism. For Sebeok, the closest English version of *Umwelt* is the word 'model' (Sebeok 2001b: 21–2):

All organisms communicate by use of models (*umwelts*, or self-worlds, each according to its species-specific sense organs), from the simplest representations of maneuvers of approach and withdrawal to the most sophisticated cosmic theories of Newton and Einstein.

Umwelt, then, is the means mentioned at the outset, by which organisms “capture ‘external reality’” in response to semioses. It is worth emphasizing this point and noting, too, Sebeok’s indication that even science must employ models (cf. Sebeok 1994: 4-5; Danesi and Sebeok 2000; Deely 2003). The main observation to be made here, though, is that the human *umwelt* is intricate and varied. Whereas all living species can incorporate a species-specific model of their universe (a nonverbal *umwelt*), only the genus *Homo* possesses a secondary modelling system equivalent to a natural language. Moreover only *Homo sapiens* has also been able to recode communication in the verbal channel (Sebeok 2001a: 71-3). The intricacy and the breadth of *Homo sapiens’ umwelt* has meant that humans have had a great deal of resources for communicating with each other within their subjective universe. But, conversely, the diversity of these resources, as well as their powers of combining signs in specific ways, have spawned increasingly complicated formations in the arenas where those resources are to be deployed.

The formations referred to here, of course, are the tertiary modelling formations, previously dubbed ‘secondary’ by the Tartu-Moscow School, but generally known as ‘culture’ (see Sebeok 1991: 49-58). Yet, even before the development of such modelling (culture) the human was caught up in sign processes. If basic biological transactions such as protein synthesis, metabolism, hormone activity and transmission of nervous impulses are to be considered as communications or, even more difficult to deny, semioses, then the human was always, indisputably, a receptacle or living matrix of signs. Sebeok (2001b: 15; cf. 1986) asks us to consider the human body

which consists of some 25 trillion cells, or about 2000 times the number of living earthlings, and consider further that these cells have direct or indirect connections with one another through messages delivered by signs in diverse modalities. The sheer density of such transactions is staggering. Only a minuscule fraction is known to us, let alone understood. Interior messages include information about the significance of one somatic scheme for all of the others, for each over-all control grid (such as the immune system), and for the entire integrative regulatory circuitry, especially the brain.

The communications to be found in the human body are merely extensions of the kinds of communication carried out by the earliest, and most enduring, organisms on the planet - bacteria. It is worth pausing to consider this before proceeding to Sebeok’s observations on the self and their relevance to understanding the subject in modernity.

For Sebeok, not only is selfhood inaugurated at a very lowly level of biological development, it also involves a very particular kind of sign. He begins his stimulating but laconic essay on ‘The semiotic self’ by pointing out the economy of Freud’s definition of anxiety. For Freud and Sebeok, anxiety is a sign and, more specifically, a resolutely indexical one. It is integral to the workings of the immune system of an organism which maintains a distinction between ‘self’ and ‘non-self’. According to Sebeok, the immune system harbours a kind of ‘memory’ based on biological discrimination, but also operates another kind of memory, anxiety, whose domain is patterns of behaviour. Anxiety is activated when the

self is menaced and this can be triggered by signs that might “take a quasi-biological shape, such as the olfactory trace of a leopard predator for a baboon prey, or be of semantic character, such as some verbal assault whereby a stranger presses in upon the territories of the Self” (1991: 39). Indeed, at the level of higher organisms, one precipitator of anxiety mentioned by Sebeok is the constraining factor by which physical symptoms are resistant to verbalisation and narrativisation in doctor-patient interactions (2001a: 123). The brute physicality or indexicality of symptoms demands interpretation, an activity which Sebeok also sees as central to the maintenance of self, inevitably in relation to an other (2001b: 126):

Any self can and must interpret the observed behavior of another organism solely as a response to *its* interpretations of *its* universe, ‘behavior’ meaning the propensity that enables it to link up its Umwelt with those of living systems within its niche.

The act of interpretation, he adds (2001b: 126), is an act of “assignment”, that is, the elevation of an interpreted phenomenon to ‘signhood’. It is also self-maintaining or ‘autopoietic’.

In his essays, Sebeok focuses on anxiety, love and the self-apprehension of body size in the maintenance of the self. Yet anxiety’s role in the immunological system appears to be pivotal. It is worth replaying Sebeok’s summarized propositions (1991: 40), here:

1. There are at least two apprehensions of the Self:
 - a. *immunologic*, or biochemical, with semiotic overtones;
 - b. *semiotic*, or social, with biological anchoring.
2. The arena of the immune reaction is contained within the skin; the arena for signal anxiety is normally between the perimeter of the Hediger ‘bubble’ and the skin of the organism, the former containing the latter.
3. Invasion of (a) is initially signalled by the immune response, of (b) by anxiety, with the latter serving as an early warning system for the former.
4. In evolution, (a) is very old, whereas (b) is relatively recent. There is a corresponding advance from a purely metonymic nexus to one perceived as causal efficacy.
5. Communicational errors occur in both processes, and may have devastating effects on the Self.

Sebeok’s separation of the apprehensions of the self — *immunological* and *semiotic* — is obviously the fulcrum of the present paper. The immunological self operates in a ‘semiotic’ fashion; the semiotic self operates in the most complex and potentially unanticipated ways predicated on a biological impetus. The latter is traversed, in particular, by anxiety and, in fact, it is here that the idea that ‘structure facilitates’ should be recapitulated for this paper.

The indexical sign of anxiety which triggers awareness of an ‘other’, thus imputing some sense of self, is a simple mechanism; but it has a huge number of ramifications. It suggests that dialogue as an impossibility of closure, imposed by the other, and suffusing so many labyrinthine social and cultural interactions, has at its foundation the response of one organism to another. The biosphere described in Sebeok’s work thus seems to be fundamentally constituted by dialogue of the kind described by Petrilli and Ponzio. Certainly, it would seem that their work (for example 1998, 2001, in press; Sebeok, Petrilli and Ponzio 2001) locates the dawn of dialogism in this sign process identified by Sebeok. One major

consequence arising from this mapping of alterity concerns the apprehension of reality for the subject; John Deely writes (1994: 15):

Otherness, then, in the sense of a physically opposed other, an alternate subjectivity, not thematically seized upon as such, to be sure, but given as such nonetheless in the actual encounter, appears as an *element* of experience: that element which is irreducible to experience of it. Otherness, more precisely, *at this level*, is that element in the experience as a whole which demonstrates that experience as a whole is not reducible to the existence of things, and the existence of things is not reducible to our experience of them.

What Deely is indicating constitutes a huge philosophical area subtending the theory of subjectivity sketched in the present paper. It implicates the semiotic distinction between ‘things’, ‘objects’ and ‘signs’ and *umwelt* which must be noted, but cannot be pursued as part of the present argument (for more, see Deely 1994: 11–22; 2001, 2003). Even so, what can be acknowledged is that such questions about the nature of reality for the subject lurk at the background of the social semiotic tradition discussed above.

Dialogically speaking — and there is no other way to conduct that activity — humans have no option but to communicate with others. And they can really know relatively little about these others, in the same way that they have only a limited apprehension of reality in general. Yet humans, constituted as subjects in this way, do have a choice: it stems from the human *umwelt*, the most sophisticated of its kind in the known biosphere, comprising language, characterized by syntax and a host of nonverbal modes. Furthermore, the interindividual terrain on which human communication takes place is riven by uncertainty and a range of openings — as well as foreclosures — for subjects. As Halliday, Kress et al demonstrate, the semantic is complicated and is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a fully representative realm; it is structured by established customs, but also deeply fissured by conflicts between semantic levels and practices and the social world at large. Human subjects are suspended in dialogue by other subjects and are forced to actively mean, but the ways that they *choose* to mean in an uncertain world can only be circumscribed within limits. In social formations supposedly dominated and organized by verbal expression — but, perhaps more accurately, sustained by multimodality — subjects make concerted efforts to contact others by any means necessary, including the whole repertoire of verbal and nonverbal devices at their disposal. Even when subjects are allegedly ‘inculcated’ into the formal modes of communication such as verbal and visual literacy, it is clear that the process enacted is not so much ‘inculcation’ as protracted negotiation (see, especially, Kress 1996, 1999). Sometimes, negotiation begins anew as sub-cultures re-draw the lines of acceptable communication. And, as has been noted, the motivation which fuels the agency of meaning-making is often overlooked or cloaked in opacity in the world of adults’ verbal discourse.

Like the various nature/nurture debates that have taken place throughout the years, the dialectic of inside/outside has troubled theorists of subjectivity. The two problems associated with such debates have been the means to achieve a balance and the extent to which the actions of an agent — variously formulated at different times as ‘free will’, ‘individualism’ or ‘destiny’, ‘fate’, and so forth — might play a major role. Throughout Sebeok’s work such dichotomies are given short shrift; ‘nature/culture’ amounts to a pointless detour, given that, for him, the second part of the dyad is “that minuscule segment of nature some anthropologists grandly compartmentalize as culture” (1986: 60). If it was not evident from his comments on the semiotic self, culture is a part of nature. Yet that does not mean that culture’s

multiplicity and power is reduced: for the semiotic self, biology is an anchor. The acceptance of the biological grounding of the self in signs does not preclude all the meaningful multiplicity that culture has to offer; it especially does not negate the agency required to negotiate, through the *umwelt*, the semioses that propel organisms to capture ‘external reality’. But it does mean that the subject’s constitution in dialogue and semiosis is inescapable.

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