

The Hidden Aspects of Signification. Semiotics of Practices and Sensory Science^[*]

SARA SPINELLI

Università degli Studi di Bologna/Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane, Firenze

Abstract

Studying practices implies to cope with hidden aspects of signification. This is particularly true when an interaction does not take place at a verbal level. Considering food and wine tasting as a case study, this paper aims at discussing the problems this peculiar object presents to a semiotic gaze. The richness of these meaningful practices and the need to make the tasters' experiences attestable and analysable requires different methodologies, such as interviews, videos and participant observation. How do these typically ethnographical tools integrate in the semiotic perspective? Moreover, may the sensory sciences' methodology help to develop a semiotic analytical model which allow to discover the hidden aspects of signification? Any attempt to build a semiotics of practices has to answer this question.

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What I would like to discuss in short in this paper is how it is possible to develop a semiotic approach in studying practices. If a semiotics of practices is possible, which methodological problems it brings with it? Studying practices implies to cope with hidden aspects of signification. This is particularly true in the case of interactions that do not necessarily take place at a verbal level, as in my case. In fact, considering food (oil and ham) and wine tasting as a case study, this speech aims at discussing the problems that this peculiar object — tasting practices — presents to a semiotic gaze.

Practices, and especially tasting practices, present themselves as black boxes very difficult to open up: they are not necessarily verbalised and they do not offer some particular richness to the observer: there is not «action», «behaviour», or «moving» as in the Floch (1986) study of the underground's users, for example. On the other hand, even if the perceptive experience seems to be a solipsistic experience of the subject, the study of tasting experience has a great importance for a semiotics of culture, mediating between the study of individual differences and the social dimension of perception, as François Rastier (2002) pointed out.

Surely, in perception and in these practices there is signification, that is to say «articulate sense», but it is hidden. The question is *how* it is possible to uncover it.

I think that it is possible to do this only through a multiplication of points of views on the objects which let us see and know what is, at a first sight, hidden. Multiplying points of views by means of different methodologies permit to obtain a multiplicity of description of the object that have to be confronted and compared: the gap will be bridged through the overlapping of points of view.

In the following paragraphs, after the discussion of the main methodological problems in practices analysis, a case study is presented in order to exemplify and debate an effective use of semiotic approach in practices analysis.

1. METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN PRACTICES ANALYSIS

For semiotics, extending the interest on practices, culture or on what is not a text, in a «traditional» sense, is a problem. Referring back to the present debate in semiotics about the possibility of the analysis of culture, social phenomenons and practices (see Landowski 2005 and Fontanille 2008, or Marrone 2008 and Basso 2006), I just sum up three main methodological items for a semiotic approach, that are:

Shutting in the object of analysis (object's identity, attestation and documentary evidence);

Analysing the object (model of analysis);

Validating results (scientific nature of the analysis).

In order to solve these problems I think that semiotics has necessarily to dialogue with other disciplines that have more experience in practice studying, as anthropology, ethnography and, in my particular case, sensory science, a disciplinary field that studies sensory experience.

Briefly, I will try to point out the main items of each point:

1.1. *Shutting in the object of analysis*

Practices have not the same characteristics of texts, in particular because they are not «tout de signification»^[1] (namely «significant totalities»). Practices differ from texts because they are open, in the sense they are «in progress», «discours en acte». Moving the point of view, practices are susceptible to offer other ulterior levels. Not only I can see the object from different point of view; but also the object is different, and change depending on the gaze. As Elisabeth Anscombe points out in *Intention* (1958: § 23): «What is the description of [this] action? The question admit of as many answers as the multiple layers of «in view of»: all these descriptions are equally valid».

In the case of practices the problem of the attestation and of documentary evidence is very pressing, because a practice is not something «just prepared». The problem of the object's construction has been discussed very deeply in disciplinary fields as ethnography and sensory science; ethnography has always discussed the problem of the construction of the object and the following dangers, and, as Augé & Colleyn (2004) point out, ethnographer will try to multiply the points of view on the object, without claiming to cover the totality of the object: practices seem to be objects of analysis by definition inexhaustible. In sensory science, on the other hand, the object is constructed depending on the interests of the research; this is a very different (and interesting) point from semiotics, I think.

Actually, the richness of these meaningful practices (tasting practices) and the necessity to attest and to make the tasters' experiences analysable requires different methodologies, such as interviews, videos and participant observation; but how do these typically ethnographical tools integrate in the semiotic perspective? Moreover, may the sensory sciences' methodology help to develop a semiotic analytical model which allow to discover the hidden aspects of signification?

1.2. *Analysing the object*

The multiplication of points of view permit to cover different aspects of the object. It can be said that all this points of view on the objects are really texts, so what we study are texts, definitely. In this way, it can be argued that the study of practice coincide with the study of texts.

However, I think that the way in which we have to analyse these texts is very different from a traditional semiotic analysis. The analysis of practice has to pass from texts, but you have to «see throughout» them, in order to account for the richness of the practice. These are in fact «services text», not aesthetic texts; the analytical approach is more of «use» than of «interpretation» (here I refer to the Umberto Eco's differentiation between use and interpretation, see Eco 1990). The analysis often is not perfectly faithful to *intentio operis*, having to restore what people feel and what people want to say^[2]. I think that in this case we can talk about what Ricoeur (1990) calls «forward-looking motive», that is not something internal, accessible only to the subject. On the contrary, it is something that explain the action in view of a perspective of an ulterior result.

[1] Text is defined un «tout de signification» in Greimas & Courtés (1979), entry «Teste».

[2] This resounds with Geertz (1973), who underlined the importance of the «thick description» respect to the correctness of application of methodological instruments in a procedural way.

1.3. *Validating results*

The study of a practice implies necessarily a multiplication of points of view on the object. In fact, practices must be documented by using different gazes that locally can overlap each other. Data are picked up throughout different methodologies, in order to confront them; in this way it is possible to talk about a scientific value to the analysis.

The real problem, in my opinion, is to make commensurable these different points of views and methodologies (that in semiotics can be considered as spurious and illegitimate, I am aware of this risk).

2. CASE STUDIES

2.1 Introduction to cases studies and preliminary items

I come out from these problems thanks to the collaboration with sensory science, in which the using of different approach studying tasting experience is very common and largely discussed. I spent almost an year collaborating with the sensory science team of the University of Florence, directed by prof. Erminio Monteleone, with which I've collected data and constructed my object of analysis.

I've worked on tasting practices of three products (wine, oil and ham), especially with consumers (see in Table 1).

It is not possible to explain the whole work here; the table has only a summarizing function, in order to show the variety of methodologies used in collecting data and the multiplication of point of views on the sensory experiences.

The case of the oil is particularly interesting to discuss some methodological problems and I'm going to sum it up briefly.

TAB. 1. CASE STUDIES. A SUMMARY

Practices	Pertinence level	Product	Subjects	Methodology for collecting data
Olfactive experience	Recognizability of the odours	Wine	Consumers, trained panel, experts (80)	Napping
Tasting experience	Expectations Discrimination and evaluation	Cured ham	Consumers (90)	Generic questionnaire; Repertory Grid Method questionnaire; Expectations text; Evaluation on specific sensory properties
Tasting experience	Discrimination and uses	Extra virgin olive oil	Chef (3)	Repertory Grid Method; Video; Interviews; Sensory evaluation

2.2 An example: The study of olive oil

2.2.1 *The study of an experience through a practice*

The case is interesting for two reasons:

➤ firstly, it consent to study the perceptive experience of a product not easy to describe as the oil, gaining information on sensory identity of the product. Concerning this, it is important to underline the difference, in sensory sciences, between the sensory profile of the product, that is objective, and its sensorial performance, which is subjective, dependent from a subject^[3]: this opposition can correspond, in semiotic terms, to that between a «model reading» (sensory profile) and a «empirical reading»^[4] (sensory performance).

➤ secondly, in this case we can study the sensorial experience of a product (oil), not only by asking to subjects, but throughout their culinary use of the product.

2.2.2 *The construction of the object*

This study aims to go into tasting experience of oil thoroughly, analysing the relationship between sensory properties and culinary use of the oils.

Three italian oils (A, B, and C) were selected to represent very different sensory styles, where the term «style» indicate the sensory profile that identifies an oil (or a group of oils) as different from others. Oil A is characterized by a very low intensity of both bitterness and pungency and by an apple odour and flavour by mouth. Oil B is characterized by a tomato leaf odour and flavour by mouth and a moderate intensity of bitterness and pungency. Finally oil C is characterized by high intensities of the attributes bitterness, pungency, viscosity and by the odour descriptors artichoke, grassy and green olive.

The oils were presented to 3 chefs during individual interviews. Each chef was presented the oils in 3 pairs and asked to describe the differences within each pair. After describing the perceived differences, chefs were asked to indicate the best culinary use of each oil in terms of dishes that would fit with the specific sensory properties of oils.

In a third session, after one week, chefs were asked to prepare, for each oil, a proposed dish. Afterwards dishes were studied in terms of:

1. recipe;
2. preparation (time, temperature);
3. temperature of presentation;
4. main sensory characteristics by using a panel of experienced subjects in evaluating sensory properties of food;

Chefs were further interviewed on the reasons of their choices and the results of their interviews were confronted with the dishes' description of the panel. Interviews and practices of dishes preparation were analysed by using a semiotic approach.

[3] For this reflection, see Monteleone & Bertuccioli (2004).

[4] For the distinction between «model reading» and «empirical reading», see Eco (1990).

2.2.3 The multiplication of point of view

Practices can be studied only through a multiplication of points of view on the object. As you can see in table 2 which sum up the organisation of the study, in this case the tasting experience of oil is studied through:

- *Sensory profile*. Descriptive sensory analysis of the product by using a trained panel (sensory profile correspond to «model reading» of Eco);
- *Interviews on sensory performance by using Repertory Grid Method*: Chef interviews on sensory properties of the selected oils and on the culinary use of the products;
- *Direct observation and videos* of dish preparation and tasting.

TAB. 2. THE EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL STUDY

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
Aim of the session	Describing sensory differences between oils presented in pairs	Describing the culinary use of each oil	- Describing the reasons for selecting a dish to use a specific oil. - Describing the characteristics;
Oils presentation	A vs B B vs C A vs C	monadic presentation A; B; C	Dishes prepared with different oils
Questions	In which way A does differ from B? In which way B does differ from C? In which way A does differ from C?	Which dish or recipe would fit with the sensory properties of oil A; B; C; ?	Why did you use oil A (or B or C) to prepare this dish?

I want to spend some words on the interviews. Interviews are leaded with the Repertory Grid Methodology (RGM); this method, that comes from psychology (Kelly 1955), is very used in sensory science to study consumer behaviour. With a specific structuralist soul, this method is based on the recursive presentation of two question, about a triad of products that consumers are requested to order respect on the preference. In our protocol, question is became «In which way oil A is different from oil B?».

This type of interview consent to obtain a lot of information on consumer perception of products because consumers are asked to explain diffusely what they think and what they feel. In this type of interview the influence on the answers is very limited, because question is very minimal and aims to underline differences between products. On the other hand, these type of interview permit to obtain a very large number of information on experience, as tasting experience, that seems to be internal and not accessible.

3. CONCLUSION

A semiotic approach in studying practices presents different methodological problems that need to be discussed in deep. Even if tasting experiences seem particularly difficult to «open up», from another point of view, they are also experience that present an interesting richness (that correspond to what I've called «hidden aspects of signification»).

The study of taste is the study of tasting experiences, that is to say of practices. Studying practices need a multiplication of point of view on the object, observed through different methodology of data collecting.

On the other hand, the results of such analysis concern different level of pertinence, giving account of:

➤ *the perceived identity of the product*, namely the way in which a product is perceived from subjects (it is interesting to confront sensory profile with the sensory performance of the product);

➤ *the sensory experience of subjects*, that can be studied in a typological analysis (studying the styles of life or «formes de vie») or in a specific and detailed analysis of each practice, permitting to pass from an individual dimension to the social dimension of taste.

For semiotics, studying tasting experience means to face up to the problem of practices analysis and to all the methodological items derived, briefly pointed out in this paper.

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