Abstract

Question is: whence comes “social” semiotics and does there exist “non-social” semiotics? This situation reminds of that with philosophy itself. Another question is: in case we define “social” semiotics in a “tight” sense of the term as something belonging to the realm of pragmatics, which seems reasonable, - we must account for the mechanism of switching from one of the three most relevant aspects or parts of semiotics to the others. Given that syntactics is not very much “social” – and even positivistic philosophy proved that, turning to semantics, – we might well concentrate upon code-switch between precise and strict syntactic/semantic research typical of analytical philosophy – and impressive, artful and often irrational research typical of post-modern literature. Philosophy lets us see the difference: it is that between “poor” essence and “rich” content. But the instruments of swaying from one to the other lie in theory and practice of communication. Semiotics becomes social when it gains social meaning. I argue that we can make use of American author D. Tannen’s ideas and experience to explain that. Social meaning is not plain information we want to exchange; it does not reside in the dictionaries; it dwells in a “double bind” of communication. Adjusting involvement and independence, closeness and distance is the main social need of communication. It is converted in the form of “metamessage” that uses four main conversational devices: expressing reaction, asking questions, complaining, and apologizing. Combination of these devices is the mechanism of turning from sign-to-sign relations (syntactic) + sign-to-meaning relations (semantics) to the truly social world of pragmatics.

Introduction

First of all, whence comes “social” semiotics? Is it not altogether social, same as philosophy? Are systems of signs produced by man or ensembles of things interpreted as signs—not social? What is non-social in this field?
Second of all: be the first set of questions answered (usually by distinguishing the broad and the strict, or
tight, sense of the term “social”), – what is the mechanism of turning the not-exactly-social semiotics into fully
and unquestionably social?
And the third type of inquiry: is social semiotics accomplished and thus useful?

Expectations
For at least a century semiotics has been pretending to be more than just a new academic discipline in the
long row of other sciences existing, but a universal science and a universal method equal to philosophy itself
since it finds its objects in nature as well as in culture and human mind interpreting all the world as a system or
systems of signs always meaning something (this is, I recon, what Umberto Eco once called to be “arrogant
imperialism on the part of semioticians”).
But long before semiology was assumed a universal power, great English philosopher John Locke (1985)
considered “Semeiotike” to be one of the three branches of science in general, alongside with “physica” and
“practica”. He wrote
this seems to me the first and most general, as well as natural division of the objects of our understanding.
For a man can employ his thoughts about nothing, but either, the contemplation of things themselves, for
the discovery of truth; or about the things in his own power, which are his own actions, for the attainment
of his own ends; or the signs the mind makes use of both in the one and the other, and the right ordering of
them, for its clearer information. All which three, viz, things, as they are in themselves knowable; actions
as they depend on us, in order to happiness; and the right use of signs in order to knowledge, being
totocelo different, they seemed to me to be the three great provinces of the intellectual world, wholly
separate and distinct one from another. (Локк, Джон. Опыт человековедческом разумения, 1985, pp. 200-
201)
This triple division may not be called purely Locke’s discovery, for it was also discussed by Epicures:
philosophy as physics, ethics and “kanon” – logic; and before that by Aristotle himself; but Locke thought of
semiotics as of future logic thus underlining its intellectual might.
Being a true follower of great British materialist doctrine, I’d like to remind that accomplishing semiotics
was John Locke’s aspiration and expectation, and even his behest. He thought it to be a future universal
methodology. This is how the “Essay” ends:
The third branch may be called Semeiotike, or the doctrine of signs; the most usual whereof being words,
it is aptly enough termed also Logike, logic: the business whereof is to consider the nature of signs, the
mind makes use of for the understanding of things, or conveying its knowledge to others… And because
the scheme of ideas that makes one man’s thoughts cannot be laid open to the immediate view of another,
nor laid up anywhere but in the memory… therefore to communicate our thoughts to one another, as well
as record them for our own use, signs of our ideas are also necessary… The consideration, then, of ideas
and words as the great instruments of knowledge, makes no despicable part of their contemplation who
would take a view of human knowledge in the whole extent of it. And perhaps if they were distinctly
weighed, and duly considered, they would afford us another sort of logic and critic, than what we have
been hitherto acquainted with. (p.200)

Russian experience
In May, 2012 an international conference on analytical philosophy was held in St Petersburg,—it was for
the first time for Russia,—and one of the participants, A.J. Nesterov (Нестеров А.Ю., 2012), argued that
semiotics, being a general theory of signs, proposed a conception of universal language (as a synthesis of
Frege’s, Wiener Circle’s and Polish logicians’ ideas) and of unified science reminding about O. Neirat’s
encyclopedia project. As a universal philosophical project, semiotics didn’t gain acknowledgement, but it
did contribute to putting and investigating some problems of general philosophy, – 1) semantics, 2) logical
forms, and 3) invention (p. 173).
This triplet can well be regarded a good result, or stage, for developing semiotics in general.
It was the first event of such scope in Russia, dealing with the topic, so we may well consider its results new. And one of the conclusions concerning semiotics and its pretentions ran as follows: Semiotics failed, yet, in solving universal problems or in serving universal values.

We have to bear in mind that semiotics appeared in Russia, unlike it had been in Europe (de Saussure) or the USA (Ch. S. Peirce), not earlier than 50-60 years ago, and it developed on the steadfast dialectical-materialistic philosophical basis, same as linguistics and psychology or any other cognitive science, deeply ignoring the “back-cloth” of contemporary European postmodernism. (The only exclusion was Tartu school of J.M. Lotman).

To be objective, analytical philosophy of the anglo-saxon “west”, taking up the same historical period of development, ignored the post-modern philosophical literature as well (though out of different premises), and it still does.

Why speak of analytical philosophy here?
Because some of our Russian authorities in semiotics used to do that lately. The first Russian author of the first Russian book entitled “Semiotics” (Semiotika, 1971) was J.S. Stepanov (the very first one by L.O. Reznikov, under the title «Гносеологические вопросы семиотики» [“Gnoseological Questions of Semiotics”], was published in Leningrad, 1964). In 80-ies and in early 2000-ies Stepanov was editor of the Semiotics Anthology (1983; 2001). In the Introduction entitled “In the Realm of Semiotics” he wrote: “Hence semiotics finds its objects everywhere, the attempts were made to classify them. But they didn’t succeed: signs equally common for… language, architecture, animals’ communication, etc., were not observed”. But, he added, there still is ground for unifying them, and it is in organizational principles. The basic cell for unification in language is proposition [Russian: выказывание, “saying”], mainly sentence.

There exist great many sayings-sentences, and they are mere empirical material. Decisive step was to distinguish constants and varia in a sentence, which turned the latter into a so-called propositional function. Substitution of a variable by a constant turns a propositional function into a real saying-sentence, which can be true (“Volga falls into Caspian Sea”) or false (“Dnepr falls into Caspian Sea”)...

This is why we talk about analytical philosophy in connection with semiotics. The semiotic analysis of a non-everyday text (myth, folklore and the like) is seeking for propositional functions of different grades. Paradigmatic analysis aims at grouping terms into classes under some general name; syntagmatic analysis is searching for predicates attributed to a personage.

But what is strictly “social” in semiotics, in a “tight” sense of the word, is beyond such analysis (though analytical philosophy is all about semiotic objects) – and it is pragmatics.

More triplets
To put it both clear and (clearly) problematic: we know that there exist three branches of semiotics, namely, linguosemiotics, semiotics of cultural forms, and technical semiotics (computers and the like). Another division: there are also three main structural parts of semiotics. In the XIXth cent. F. de Saussure had already divided the newly-born discipline into syntactics, semantics and pragmatics. We may add that it’s not only logical but historical division: as J.S. Stepanov viewed it, in the beginning semiotic research dwindled around formal things: syntax, and composition – i.e., “morphology” of texts. Later on this first part of semiotics, syntactics, bifurcated into pure description of formal transformations of propositions (sentences), which is called generative syntax, and into analysis of relationship between primary terms (and predicates) – and extra-linguistic reality. And this was the birth of semantics as the second part of the discipline under study.

Still later the semiotic research switched down to pragmatics, and rather easily, forming the third structural part of semantics with its own problematic field: “talking and writing agent, his different Ego-s, speaker-listener and sender-addressee relationship, word effectiveness, convincing, etc.” (Stepanov, 2001, p. 8). The field of semiotic research became extra-broadened and thus indefinite… Materialistically thinking Russian scholars tried to get hold of the puzzle terminologically, by calling denotation of (physical) objects – designation, and signification of concepts or any other objects of ideal world of consciousness – expressing. The game helped somewhat but it didn’t solve the main problem of significiation: the problem of meaning.
There exist great many definitions of what meaning is. Our point of view is as follows. The meanings the signs convey are ideal images presenting their objective referents to the mind, and they are principally complicated. They are combined of at least three elements (each of them is compound, too): the one that can be called cognitive (“conceptual”…); that which is often called expression or emotional (“modal” seems a preferable term), and that which I propose to call “cryptocomponent”. The first component is the hard core of thought (notion, concept, judgment, idea…), and, following M. Polany’s trend in lexicon, it can also be called “focus knowledge”. In other terms, it’s the message itself, the information we want to keep and remember or share with others. The “belt” around the hard core is woven from subtle silk of emotions, estimations, volitions, intonation, special language devices as stylistics and the like. This is where the “metamessage” comes in. American author Deborah Tannen, famous for her communication theory and practice, gives us the chance to understand it. (Tannen D. That’s not what I meant! 1987). She stresses the fact that using all sorts of signs we do not only aim at transferring information; we aim at something much more valuable for sociality: making (and breaking) human relationships.

The last but not least element of meaning is always at the backcloth: a “hiding”, crypto-knowledge, as cultural tradition, native tongue laws and rules, retained outlook of the past, family habits, all practically necessary knowledge that had been learned, not studied. And this is the realm of social semiotics.

Structure changing scenarios

The broadly accepted triple division of semiotics is not, generally speaking, the last step on the way of forming, developing and accomplishing this science. There exists an idea consonant with the principles of dialectical materialism: we have to think of constructing the forth part, which will be as necessary as sufficient: and it will, hopefully, turn semiotics into an accomplished project… Indeed, if syntactics is dealing with binds among the signs itself in a system, and semantics is studying the relationship between the signs and their meanings, while pragmatics is establishing the systems of signs in the human world, then what is in charge of the relationship between signs – and the real things of the objective world, what makes this direct reference possible? In the 60-ies of the XXth cent., the German philosopher Georg Klaus (1967) expressed this idea in his book “Die Macht des Wortes” and proposed to construct such branch of semiotics and to call this would-be new sub-discipline “sigmatics”. There exists, too, the contrary idea which might be called deflational: in short, we’d better reduce the number of the compounding sub-disciplines of semiology. Then there will be only two basic parts of semiotics left. The history of transformation of (positivistic) logical syntax into logical semantics shows that this division was rather artificial for them. J.S. Stepanov: “Essentially, semiotics was never interested in “pure” syntactics as formalsyntax (this is a rubric of mathematics). Semiotics went in for syntax always in this or that connection with semantics. First works in this field were scenting of logical positivism”. (2001, pp. 8-9). Nowadays it’s the odor of analytical philosophy which is far from being social science – same as modern epistemology. If we are interested in “sociality”, we’d better examine the relationship of the world of signs – and the human world. And here we have to stop since we do not have the proper instrument for such a code-switch (from semantics) to pragmatics.

Controversy of semantics and pragmatics

The problem is that semantics, the most theoretical and abstract part of semiotics, is obviously different from the third part of it, pragmatics, –which is vivid and palpable; its content is rich and interesting, but it lacks the high level of theorizing and its dictionary and even logic of argumentation differs greatly from that of semantics. They are as different, though united, as heaven with its unchangeable regular movement of crystal stars and earth with its bounty and chaotic irregularities. The gap between semantics and pragmatics is not bridged, and the difference of them is analogous to the binary of (medieval) realism – and nominalism. The former is strict and even rigid, it is all derived from the category of essence with its purity and ascetics. The latter is changing and even uncertain (not in William of Ockam works, of course); its main feature is nominalist compiling of “cases” to form a prolific content. “The principle of utmost satisfaction” of semantics may be symbolized by the greatest philosophical maxim: “tat twamasi” (“all that is you”; all things are one, or, unique is
universal). “The principle of utmost satisfaction” for pragmatics reminds William of Baskerville’s (William of Ockam) discourse from U. Eco’s “Il Nome della rosa” (1980, Engl; 1989, Rus.). Rendered in a free manner, it could sound approximately this way: there is not much delight in realizing that all things are one thing; it may be even boring; what really matters, is that the Lord in His Grace and Kindness has created this “One Thing” in SO amazingly different forms and shapes!

And here I should point at one more binary-analogy: that of cognition and communication. Semantics tends to serve “pure” cognition; pragmatics is devoted to and is all about communication.

We have to admit that communicative function is more often than not considered to be the primary function for the systems of signs in general.

For human language, as the central sign system sui generis, this function, indeed, is the main one – though not ontologically (in this aspect language has to regarded as the form of life: con-ver-sation means “living together”), but logically, due to its position in between the “languages of nature”, such as weather forecasting tokens or genetic code, and “languages of culture”, such as computer programming, sculpture forms or music notation. That is why linguosemiotics is the starting point for any other semiotics and within its frame communication is studied as the basic language function and characteristics, “language-for-others”, binding people into the society.

The basic – but not the crowning.

What about cognition, then – the “language-for-oneself”?

The most complicated turns to be the most easily analyzed, because it is best manifested, com-plied, com-plex, com-pound, de-veloped and per-fect. Genetically prior form is always a syncretism; the embryonic state is always hard to study for it is a-morphal, having no clear structure; as marxismonce put it, human anatomy is a key to apes’ anatomy. Genetically prior, communication is less clear for analysis... though we know the schemes of information transporting(sender – code – message – recipient), we always feel communication is a field, not a set of particles, and at least half of what it is pours out and away from the net. Cognitive situation is the most complicated and abstract in both senses of the word, and it is the crown of the semiotic tree. We are used to call it a gnoseological Robinsonade... let it be. Theory of cognition should begin with context-free and end with context-bound discourse. So let it be with semiotics: from semantics – to pragmatics.

The figure below is meant to illustrate the difference and coincidence of cognition and communication.

In mathematic terms, we can view cognitive situation as a cycloid, and a communicative situation as its evolute. The evolute\[L_1\] of the cycloid \[L\] is a cycloid, congruent with the original one but shifted for half length of the base and dropped under it at a distance equal to the height. This means that cognitive zero when a human agent gets nothing really informative out of the conversation (objectively new information is absent) coincides with the highest communicative value on the “y” axes (the subjects are included at most in exchange of the information available).Objectively the newness is absent, too (with one exception: Socratic intellectual dialogue), but subjectively there is newness of small-talk kind, where the inter-subjectivity stands for objectivity. (Here is where the meta-message comes in).

And, on the contrary, the highest mind tension bringing a discovery, a something absolutely new, is far above communication. Russian prominent philosopher of the XX cent. A.F. Losev once called it “conscious ecstasy”.

Such mental ecstasy – obtaining something really and truly objectively new in the zenith of thinking – is mute: it is a “Himmelmann” out of communication. No message is sent or gain; no conversation possible; it’s between me – and the Universe... (On the other pole, communication zero in nadir of \[L_1\] is just zero. No communication – no person – no society).
More binaries

To designate and thus shape the nebula of new discovery, there are two ways.

To start a dialogue, at least with oneself, the researcher or observer first makes use of the already existing signs. Umberto Eco in his “Theory of signs” depicts the vision of pink elephants on the moon under its entry to the Capricorn. The startled observer may feel his outlook go topsy-turvy, but nothing striking will happen to his lexicon: “moon”, “elephant”, “dome”, “pink”, “Capricorn”… all necessary linguistic signs are long familiar to him.

The opposite reaction was demonstrated by N. Viner in his book “I am a mathematician”. What differs a truly talented geometer from his less happy colleagues is the ability to operate with temporary signs understood only by one person, and that’s himself. Later on he will be speaking a mutually understood language explaining his discovery; but not at the point of “conscious ecstasy”. He is, we might say, a true gnoseological Robinson in this position, alone face to face with the nature open – is it not, in other words, a Heideggerian Truth – “Lichtung im Wald”, Waldlichtung, the grace of Being capable of “entgegenstehenlassen” towards “Dasein”, and, better to say, towards a “Dabewußtsein” – a Man?

This or that way, but we have to find the name for our finding. Mental ecstasy is not a continuous situation; a signification lift will take us back to our kin.

(Note that the signification lift is a two-way traffic: when we seek and find a name for our sensation, or perception, we turn it into a notion, and further on into a concept by using a word).

So, we see there are two ways of upgrading semiotics to make it a useful instrument in methodology, if not the complete theory. We may examine the direct reference of signs to the real physical world, and thus build sigmatics which will be of great help to the materialistic theory of knowledge; or we may put an accent on the study of peculiarities of relationship between semantics and pragmatics to bridge them. Suffice it to say that W. v. O. Quine (1981) have long pointed out, though speaking about mind/body problem, that if the parts have to interact, then there ought to be a mechanism of this interaction, and our task is to find it out.

First scenario perspective

Suppose we take the first variant, which seems very dear to materialistic philosophy and its gnosiology, or theory of cognition. (I don’t want to call it “theory of knowledge”, because it is not about knowledge only, in the sense of abstract thinking, but about perception, and practice as well). Designation understood as the direct reference in materialist semantics could bring support to the so-called correspondent theory of truth, though thought of as quite outdated in contemporary epistemology and philosophy of science. But not by everyone (not by the author of this contribution). Stepanov, in his turn, defined semantics as “the relation of /text/-elements to the outer world, or signification of the world; its categorization; obtaining the static picture of the world” (2001, p. 8). No western semiotician would accept it, I presume, and not only because, from the point of view of Russians, they all were idealists (for they were not). But there are at least two problems not solved within the frame of first variant (a plan of constructing the fourth branch of semiotics). The first “rub” is the following.

Even the greatest authority in materialistic theory of knowledge (metaphysical, in Hegel’s sense), John Locke, often applied signs like words not directly to the things of objective world. For him, more often than not, signs designated ideas. It was also more or less Saussure’s view. And it is very typical for today’s semantics, both of positivistic (analytical) and of postmodern culture profile. Signs are seen as manifesting their meanings, not their objectively real referents.

The second problem seems to have no easy solution. To be precise, I think that observing, examining, studying, taking grasp of, etc., of the relationship between the universal set of signs and the universe designated, is the task of all sciences, humanities, literatures and philosophies taken together. Or – it is the task of one philosophical discipline, i.e. materialistic theory of cognition. But this indeed is another topic.

Second scenario perspective

Now we must examine the second variant.
As it was twice stressed already, semiotics becomes social in the strict sense of the word when it gains social meaning. This on/off switch is not quite understood by semioticians. I argue that in between semantics and pragmatics, or cognition and communication, there lies not merely a mathematic point, but a land… The instruments of swaying from one to the other lay both in theory and practice of communication, namely, within the cryptocomponent of meaning which can well be called metamessage. To explain it, the conception of Deborah Tannen looks extremely useful. Social meaning does not reside in the dictionary definitions of words, she underlines. It resides in a “double bind” of communication. What precisely is meant?

The main social need of communication is adjusting closeness and distance, the need to be connected to others and the need to be left alone. This is a double bind of simultaneous Involvement and Independence. This is not what we call a conflict – feeling torn between two alternatives, – or ambivalence – feeling two ways about one thing; we can’t step out of the circle, D. Tannen explains. This is where conversation turns from the form of life to a dialogue, we can add. How we speak – “how loud, how fast, with what intonation and emphasis – communicates… teasing, flirting, explaining, or chastising; whether we are feeling friendly, angry or quizzical; whether want to get closer or back off… how we say what we say communicates social meaning. …it does not reside in the dictionary definitions of words…”(1987, p. 16). D. Tannen argues that because of this double bind, communication will never be perfect; we can never reach “stasis”. We have to keep trying to balance freedom and safety, the familiar and the strange – continually making adjustments, and the way we make these adjustments in our talk is politeness. “Conversational style isn’t something extra, added on like frosting on a cake. It’s the very stuff of which the communication cake is made”.(1987, p. 33). And here come main conversational devices creating sociality; and these are expressive reaction, asking questions, complaining, and apologizing.

Of course we have to account for cultural differences in habitual use of intonation and other means of expressiveness. Expressing too much emotion may be evidence of hostility or hysteria. Laughter may be the customary and expected manner of showing – or masking emotions. One and the same pitch may be regarded either rudeness or politeness. Same signals “work like showing you’re listening, interested, establishing solidarity – or that you’re not”…(1987, p. 43)

The usual message of a question is a request for information. “But in casual conversation questions do just as much if not more of other types of work – for ex., covering for less acceptable speech actions like criticizing or giving orders”.(1987, p. 45).

Any conversational device can be used to show interest – or imposition, can serve independence or involvement, and can be seen to violate either.

We could add that complaining, same as other social devices, can be regarded both willingly expected and unwanted, seen as impertinence or trust, apologizing can end the quarrel or point at the opponent’s rudeness thus inspiring another circuit of war, etc., etc. But the fact is that “these four” control and manifest the deepest laws of communication, which is the corcordium of sociality and the most kindled content of pragmatics.

Conclusion

To complete semiotics as a science, a new sub-discipline or a part can be constructed, and this is “sigmatics”–a research of direct reference of the chain of signs to the chain of things, mainly things of the outer world. To complete semiotics as a social science, social meanings have to be studied which dwell in pragmatics, namely, in communication. To become more or less homogenic and truly social, semiotics must have the instruments of socializing the abstract spheres of signs’ life. Combination of four main conversational devices: expressing reaction, asking questions, complaining, and apologizing, –provides for the needed mechanism of turning from sign-to-sign relations (syntactics) and/or sign-to-meaning relations (semantics) to the truly social world of pragmatics. And this is proposed to be regarded a necessary and sufficient switch-code turning from “pure” cognition to communication and in communication itself to balance informative messages – and metamessages of involvement and independence, the double social bind and “the deepest drive we have”.
References


