

## **From semiogenesis to expression. Phenomenological and morphodynamic approaches.**

### **Introduction**

Antonino Bondi<sup>1</sup>

#### **Abstract**

*In this issue of Signifiances (Signifying) we will focus on a theoretical and dynamic point of view on the linguistic and semiotic dimensions at work in the constitution of individual and collective experience. The aim is to investigate the hypothesis of constitutive compatibility between two fundamental characteristics of meaning, namely its perceptibility and its sociality. These characteristics will be re-seized from the perspective of semiotic anthropology with a phenomenological, expressivist, and morphodynamic vocation. It is a perspective that is interested, at first sight, in the formation of the planes of expression which mediate the inscription and engagement of the subjects within social life. Thus, the various contributions will discuss a theoretical framework that encompasses what is called semiogenetic, which makes it possible to clarify the specific semiotic and semiolinguistic forms and issues that are imposed on the actors and constantly redirect their attention.*

**Keywords :** semiogenesis ; semiotic anthropology ; expression ; phenomenology of speech ; perceptibility of semiotic forms.

#### **Résumé**

*Dans ce numéro de Signifiances (Signifying), on se focalisera d'un point de vue théorique et dynamique sur les dimensions langagières et sémiotiques à l'œuvre dans la constitution de l'expérience individuelle et collective. Le but est d'analyser dans le détail l'hypothèse d'une compatibilité constitutive entre deux caractéristiques fondamentales du sens, à savoir sa perceptibilité et sa socialité. Ces caractères seront ressaisis dans la perspective d'une anthropologie sémiotique à vocation phénoménologique, expressiviste et morphodynamique. Il s'agit d'une perspective qui est intéressée de prime abord à la formation des plans d'expression qui médiatisent l'inscription et l'engagement des sujets au sein de la vie sociale. Ainsi, les différentes contributions discuteront un cadre théorique englobant que l'on appelle sémiogénétique, qui permet d'explicitier les formes et les enjeux sémiotiques et sémiolinguistiques spécifiques qui s'imposent aux acteurs et redirigent en permanence leur attention.*

**Mots-clés :** sémiogénèse ; anthropologie sémiotique ; expression ; phénoménologie de la parole ; perceptibilité des formes.

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<sup>1</sup> DISUM (Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche) — University of Catania, Italy. E-mail : [antoninobondi80@gmail.com](mailto:antoninobondi80@gmail.com).

*Le langage nous mène aux choses mêmes dans l'exacte mesure où, avant d'avoir une signification, il est signification. Si l'on ne lui concède que sa fonction seconde, c'est qu'on suppose donnée la première, qu'on le suspend à une conscience de vérité dont il est en réalité le porteur et enfin qu'on met le langage avant le langage.*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

In recent years, within the realm of semiolinguistic theories, we have witnessed a renewal of the concept of form, taken up in theoretical frameworks of a more dynamic nature, which have focused their attention on what has been called the *semio-genetic theme*. The form has been questioned through an investigation into the appearance of what stands as a sign for us, as well as the ways of perceiving and interacting with this same appearance. It has been shown that the emergence of semiotic forms in the human ecological and ethological landscape can only take place through a correlated field of the apparition; indeed, this emergence implies ipso facto processes of practical grasping of objects of meaning, their circulation, sharing, and manipulation of the values inherent in them. Consequently, the description of forms consists of making explicit the deployment of a dynamic, complex, and the stratified relationship between several active poles of co-constitution, reciprocal interaction, differentiation, and permanent metamorphosis.<sup>2</sup>

However, the notion of form has always been at the heart of the semio-linguistic disciplines and, more generally, of the history of ideas; one only has to turn to Aristotle's philosophy to find elements that refer to the semiotic implications of form, its conceptual polysemy and its dual status as both object and model<sup>3</sup>. In more particularly linguistic and semiotic disciplines, two major interpretative movements marked the form concept's history: the Saussurian linguistic tradition (and European structural semiotics), and the Peircean semiotics. In both cases, the form links to the manifestation, interpretation, and social circulation of signs. As will be detailed later, the semio-genetic theme raised in particular thanks to the presence of a paradigm and a scientific (but also epistemological, even philosophical!) imaginary that have distinguished themselves from the traditional frameworks in linguistics and semiotics.

The Saussurian approach explicitly conceived the linguistic sign —part of a socialized system of meaning— as a form, namely the union or rather the association of sensible and intelligible components. In such a systemic conception of form, with remarkable explanatory power concerning the intelligibility of phenomena. However, the semiotic and normative depth and span of a form-sign remain hard to capture during the process of objectification proper to this linguistic theorization<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, the differential and negative conception of the sign inherited from Saussure does not make it possible to account for the positive and genetic elements that are nevertheless at stake in the constitution of meaning, as in the formation of signs. For the second tradition, that is Charles Sanders Peirce's interpretative semiotics, a sign is a cognitive mediating entity, part of an open and virtually unlimited process of interpretation, which takes place in the fabric of the experiences of subjects and communities. From this viewpoint —and particularly in recent bio-semiotic approaches<sup>5</sup>— semiotic forms emerge, but without this emergence having found a real unambiguous explanation.

Then, the development of a dynamic re-reading of the fundamental concepts of structural analysis was a step forward in the enrichment of the notion of form. It has been problematized again in Gestalt theory, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in Cassirer's philosophy

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2 Cf. Cadiot, Visetti (2001) ; Visetti, Cadiot (2006) ; Rosenthal, Visetti (2008) ; (2010) ; Bondi (2012) ; (2016).

3 Cfr. Eco (1968), pp. 253-258.

4 Cf. Bondi (2016) ; Piotrowski (2017).

5 Cf. Deacon (2011).

of symbolic forms, as well as in Thom's catastrophe theory. This morphological, dynamic, and expressive turning point has led to the development of various theories postulating a continuity principle between semiolinguistic production regimes and general perceptual and praxeological regimes. The search for models of this type renews the old ambition of the structural model to establish a transversal theoretical and descriptive framework, suitable for all kinds of training regimes studied by the various human sciences. Indeed, since the relative eclipse of the structuralist moment in the human and social sciences, structural issues have been profoundly rethought in a dynamicist framework. In particular, several linguistic theories (cognitive grammars, enunciative theories, enactive linguistics, etc.) have developed from postulates that can be said to be *perceptivist*. Language is then conceived as a medium and an object of perception within a more encompassing field. This is a considerable advance. However, in these theories, we do not have considered speech as a true expressive flow, profiling and modulating signs and subjects jointly.

On the other hand, a semiogenetic model proposes to invert the epistemological account by adopting a phenomenologically inspired positioning and method, by doubling the primacy of perception with that one of speech. Consequently, within the problematic space opened up by this double phenomenological principle —speech as perception and perception as imminent speech— we are led to enhance certain classical concepts of the textual traditions in linguistics, semiotics, and rhetoric. For example, the action and actor concept revision play an important part in an expressive and agonistic device. The question of motives and commitments (crossing forces and values) is not separated from that of the issues and norms proper to semiotization, nor from that of social networks and institutions that jointly organize the registration of subjects. In this context, we want to emphasize that one can explain variation only by moving away from the classic categorization problem. For example, in the case of language, it is a social praxis which, instead of tracing the contours of clear-cut categories (which would function as a crystalline basis for determining procedures), establishes certain polarities around values that are still to reconstruct, whose lines of tendency or demarcation are unknown in advance. Moreover, conceiving variation as something other than a simple perturbation renews the question of the internal transformation of social and cultural norms.

Indeed, the semiogenetic model does not reduce the variation to a simple contingency that would disturb the outside social systems like physical systems at equilibrium. On the contrary, variation is to be interpreted as a reconfiguration of the norm through work on symbols<sup>6</sup> (capture, recovery, circulation, spoliation, misappropriation, hoarding, inheritance) and constitutes the very stake of sociality. Norms are not indexed on a presumably stable external objectivity, but they can evolve over time without losing their prescriptive aspect: what is in a way prescribed is to deal with indeterminacy without breaking with certain frameworks of observance. From the moment when variability and prescription no longer oppose each other but condition each other, the historicity of norms becomes clear. The idea of reclaiming, as elaborated in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, becomes clearer in a strictly semiotic framework: reclaiming is not replicating an already actuated form, but questioning the past and the resource by seeking and renewing motivational dynamics<sup>7</sup>. This is how the prescription is renewed and sometimes challenged, through the responses given to calls, both close and fundamental. Such a notion of recuperation highlights the soliciting power of the institutional call, as well as the freedom of the subject, which is always relaunched in the impossibility for

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6 Cf. Lassègue (2016).

7 Cf. Bondi (2019).

anyone "to have the last word". Thus, we can better understand how sociality is established in the eyes of all and in our inner speech<sup>8</sup>.

From this point of view, the variation of signs and subjects does not, therefore, proceed from a pre-constituted abstract space (whether it is a matter of signs or categories). It establishes in the expressive and practical phenomenon of reprise, which is the bearer of a constitutive alterability, a conscious or unconscious vector of conformity and shift, always leading to evaluation processes (mimesis and differentiation, expressiveness and normativity)<sup>9</sup>. The only possible epistemology raises from this radically genetic perspective (micro- as well as macro-genetic): not signs and subjects, but semiogenesis and subjectivation. From this point of view, we can produce descriptions focused on intersubjectivities in action and on ones that are more impersonal and directly related to public hermeneutics. In this restitution mode, practice blends with myth, the small myths of ordinary life, the intersubjective epics, naturally intersect with the founding mythologies, the established ideologies. We have also to understand the immanence of semiotic games this way, not as the result of the structures and transformation of a univocal plane, but as the particular arrangement that makes any symbolic form (in Cassirer's sense) resonate internally with others from which it is nevertheless different. The mutual relations between forms and the references of values to each other, define what we could call a symbolic economy, conditioning the diffusion and metamorphosis of the form itself.

The activity of language and its forms under the prism of the semiotic archipelago and semiotic anthropology constitute the theme privileged by this issue of *Signifiances (Signifying)*: the minimal objective is to succeed in thinking language and semiosis in the mode of perception (of sound as well as of meaning), engaging a specific work of form construction. The idea behind this approach is that, during a linguistic interaction, we perceive what is said before eventually conceptualizing and logically articulating it. We, therefore, start from the following question: what happens when we perceive a statement? What strata of memory, imagination, imagination, sensibility do we mobilize as speaking subjects? In what forms and according to what phases are these strata deployed? The hope is thus to have a theoretical and descriptive matrix suitable for the restitution of both individual experience and the public dimension of speech. We understand the importance of starting from an adequate theory of perception seen as perceptive praxis, to hope to arrive at a comparable arrangement, which would be that of a "language perception", a practice involving acoustic, semantic, pragmatic and syntactic dimensions, that is to say also normative and imaginary dimensions.

The issue, therefore, aims to map the current state of certain propositions in linguistics and semiotics on forms constitution dynamics, and other concepts related to this perspective. We do not want to present the semiogenetic approach itself but challenge some theoretical problems from authors' different horizons. In particular, the contributions open up avenues for reflection on the articulations between poles that, within the framework of semiotic anthropology, are deeply intertwined: a) the different degrees and regimes of formality of linguistic and semiotic objects (heterogeneity, materiality, multimodality, assemblages); b) the modalities of the constitution of a semiotic consciousness, namely the regimes of appropriation and inscription of forms in cultural landscapes, as well as certain regimes of transmission constituting the socio-semiotic horizon of the value of forms; c) normativity and ritualization crossing all speech; d) the role of corporality (or inter-corporality) and of the psyche, to rethink linguistic and semiotic interactions in a phenomenological and ecological posture.

Thanks to the various contributions present —of an epistemological and theoretical nature or focusing on case studies— the aim of the issue is as follows: to reflect on the linguistic,

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Rosenthal (2019).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bondi (2016) ; De Luca, Bondi (2016).

semiotic, and philosophical models and theories that have made the various phenomenological heritages interact with the dynamic theories of semiosis. Language and semiosis (human, animal, and non-human) have thus been conceived as a complex skill, i.e., a joint activity by which the participants/interlocutors harmonize with each other and at the same time co-construct shared cognitive (and ecological) niches. Within this framework, the various contributions have explored heterogeneous themes and research objects, with the aim of making two fundamental characteristics of meaning, namely its perceptibility and sociality, compatible.

Thus, although the articles in this issue of *Signifiances (Signifying)* come from diverse backgrounds, they contribute to semiotic anthropology<sup>10</sup> challenges. In particular, we mention the shaping of mediated expression plans by which subjects engage in social life. Indeed, the so-called semiotic anthropology necessarily considers the determining part that the cultural dimension plays in the process of cognition. It posits that the sociality of meaning must be related from the outset to symbolic forms and activities that constantly redirect interactions and condition the formation of values and utilities. Meaning as a sociality is thus not separated from a search for expression, concomitant with the shaping of various semiotic mediations, and founding the possibility of repetition and an evaluation of experience (conformity, deviation). Thus, any cognitive device is inseparable from the body itself as expressive, and language, and social history. We seek to overcome the opposition between internalists and externalists, well known in cognitive sciences. A semiotic, or better yet, a semiogenetic perspective can do that; these contradictions fade by the "sign" as the interweaving of sensible and intelligible, of inside and outside, of individual and collective sides<sup>11</sup>.

The semiogenetic conception outlined here bases on a globally expressive and practical vision of human existence: what is perceived is always an expression of a practical disposition and evaluation that makes sense. In this overlapping of bodies, dispositions internalized and sedimented habits we find in a broadened notion of habitus including both the behaviors and the imaginary institution of the social. Semiotic anthropology envisages finding, for any social phenomenon reseeded as an expressive flow and crossed experience, a certain dynamic of advent and transformation of signs, bodies, and subjects. At the center of our concern are the semiotic modalities of the encounter between subjects and institutions: an encounter that ties the plot of meaning. The individual part in these encounters is understood first of all as semiotic perception, joint attention, participation in an intersubjectivity comprising a repertoire of ritualized interactions as well as the sharing of an imaginary. The semiotic game - resource as well as production - is then played out in both fictional and practical registers, while meaning is determined in internal as well as external relationships to the various semiotic regimes. This is how semiotic anthropology conceives the social or socio-semiotic character of cognition. Through the study of the variation of norms and their mode of hold, we are able to escape two dead ends: the one that makes the individual the sole measure of his goals and actions; the one that, conversely, represents social reality in the form of an autonomous symbolic overhanging order. In the anthropological framework promoted here, the cross-individuation of "sign-forms" and "subjects" is a fundamental category of social life.

The issue opens with **David Piotrowski's** article that focuses on the enigmatic status of semiogenesis, defined as a phase of meaning in formation. Indeed, when we speak of semiogenesis, we refer to a moment in the meaning construction when a purely expressive fact pushes towards semiotic polarization, that is, towards its constitution as a unit composed of expression and content. That is a complex phase that includes all the expressive fact shaping processes, but also all differentiation acts that progressively refine the emergence of meaning

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10 Cf. Lassègue, Rosenthal, Visetti (2009) ; Bondi, De Luca (2020).

11 Cf. Bondi (2015).

in its singularity. Piotrowski proposes a reconstruction of the architecture of semiogenesis in the wake of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. In particular, semiogenesis can be read as a phase transition in which the "sign" could play the role of an intermediate state endowed with relative stability, compared to unstable states such as the "first word" in Merleau-Ponty. Piotrowski's analysis allows us to understand that the suggestive idea of the first speech in Merleau-Ponty's work should not be taken back to the idea of creation *ex nihilo* - which would be like a formalistic model of the projection of a form on raw material - but, on the contrary, that "the semiotic event is realized when an expressive material, considered from the point of view of its textures and internal tensions, is enhanced as if energized, by certain principles of form and is then propelled into the sphere of semiotics".

In his text, **Paul John Thibault** returns to a central notion of enactive linguistics and contemporary biosemiotics, namely the concept of languaging. Since Maturana and Varela, languaging is normally defined as a complex network of social systems of coordination and cooperation. In his contribution, Thibault highlights its more "ecological" aspects: while it is true that languaging is a coordinated linguistic praxis, it allows individuals to search for and articulate a series of functional correspondences between them and certain aspects of their perceptual and cultural experience of the environment. One aspect is examined in detail by the author, namely the "metabolic" relationship between the "finalizations" of the activity of languaging, i.e. the utterances produced by the speakers, and the social situations with which the utterances are articulated. Indeed, according to Thibault, utterances have a dual status, which is important for dynamic and social semiotics: on the one hand, utterances themselves are assemblages in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari; on the other hand, they are co-articulated with socio-affective-cognitive assemblages, at different scales, particularly at the microgenetic scale. Thus, the internal processes of microgenetic construction, which have their origin in the pre-linguistic infrastructure, are schematized corporally, driven and shaped by parameters of a global order, for example a lexicographical model. The intrinsic functional constraints of language activity are the workings of a complex system that uses context-dependent resources to produce social and cognitive outcomes.

For her part, **Valeria De Luca** proposes a reflection on the role played by the concept of materiality and the theory of niche construction (niche construction), which allow us to rethink the constitution of semiotic forms, as well as their power of agency. In particular, according to the author, the niche construction model makes it possible to think together about "the materiality of meaning phenomena, the emergence and stabilization of human semioses, and relations between humans and non-humans on qualitatively and temporally different scales". Thus, by critically discussing the notion of hyperobject, as well as the theory of material commitments of the archaeologist Lambros Malafouris, De Luca proposes to think of language as a "hyperobject", namely a significant portion of the world, which is not locatable "spatially" or "temporally". On the contrary, in this eco-semiotic perspective, the characteristic of language would be to interfere "without being reduced to it, in this meshing and coexistence of the arts, natural elements and infinitely large or infinitesimal events".

**Jacques Fontanille** questions the conceptual and epistemological history of the notion of form through the prism of the concept of imperfection. Going back over different conceptions of form, from Aristotle to Greimas, Fontanille points out that there is a kind of essential, not vicious, short-circuit between the productivity proper to the emergence of forms and its constitutive instability. More particularly, for the forms to be grasped and produce events for someone, that is, for a subjectal center, it is necessary that they be perceived, felt as imperfect, incomplete, unstable beings, generators of modalities of attention, of desire, of modalization. Fontanille shows that this dual character at work in the dynamics of the constitution of forms is present in radically different conceptions of form, such as the one inspired by Hjelmslev's

semiotic analysis in Greimas, and the one found in biosemiotics inspired by the work of Jakob von Uëxkull.

**Marion Colas-Blaise's** article is intended to be a close dialogue between phenomenology, anthropology of Ingoldian descent and contemporary semiotics. By discussing in particular the theory of establishment and enunciation, Colas-Blaise questions the question of the future of forms, working on the modalities of simultaneous capture of aspects of deployment and unfolding, as well as those of co-presence. In the text, the preparatory drawings by artist Tony Cragg elaborate on this subject, as they highlight a presentational and non-representational logic of the expressive, aesthetic and semiotic material. The idea that Colas-Blaise proposes is that of enunciation as a dynamic of proliferation of voices and instances, in tension between instituent re-expression and the invention of new possibilities.

The text proposed by **Franck Lebas** is a case study around the morpheme [spr], analyzed under the prism of an analysis of the spiral pattern. According to Lebas, this analysis of applied linguistics allows us to delve into the unstable cultural, imaginative, embodied dimensions that revolve within the spiral pattern, and that link the dimensions of play, work and sport. At a deeper level, the analysis shows the epistemological validity - confirmed by descriptive activity - of phenomenological approaches in linguistics, which consider language activity to be perception and perceptive activity to be semiotic from the outset.

As for **Robert Nicolai's** article, it is a critical perspective, or a resonance between the phenomenological approaches of semiotic anthropology and the phenomenological approach developed in the framework of his linguistic anthropology, called semiotic dynamics. The article presents some of the key concepts of Nicolai's linguistic anthropology: the experiential subject, the cleavage, historicity, the We and the perspective of the Moebius ring, etc. From this presentation, the author proposes a close confrontation between the two perspectives, showing that, if they do not overlap completely, they at least present important elements of convergences, especially concerning the relations between language, experience and cognition.

**Per Aage Brandt** wonders about the role of the sciences of meaning in the context of the ecological crisis. Embracing Danish cognitive semiotics as a synthesis of Californian cognitive linguistics and René Thom's morphodynamic models, Brandt shows the reader that an "ecological" perspective of semiosis can only challenge an unacceptable division between the natural, psychic, social and cultural dimensions. On the contrary, it must be shown that "instead of opposing the psyche and the world, i.e., the everyday world, we will finally attempt to show how a psycho-semiotic study must be directly associated with an ecosemiotic study, because the mind is itself shaped by the semiotic world with which it has evolved over 50,000 years of modernity".

In the last text of the issue, **Félix Danos** presents a study of anthropo-pragmatic and ethno-semiotic. It is an ethnographic work carried out in the southeast of the Allier department (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region). In his article, Danos proposes to test the heuristic validity of certain concepts of North American semiotic anthropology, based on his field study. The article proposes analyses of interactions with the inhabitants of the department through the reconstruction of a staging of other people's discourse. The challenge is to show "the importance of taking into account the processes that give form and meaning to space and time, called chronotopic formulations, to understand the hierarchy of ways of speaking in reflexive discourses on language".

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