

Semiotics and the assumption of rationality: the evolutionary turn

Abstract

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In spite of strong resistance in some countries which are dominated by conservative religious ideologies, Darwinism is currently transforming the epistemological landscape of the twenty-first century. No discipline can avoid its impact since dramatic advances in the understanding of genetics has provided evolutionary theory with the operational dimension it was lacking in the beginning. Attempts to confine its relevance to zoology or, more generally, to biology cannot resist its explanatory dynamic that covers the whole range of the domains of knowledge that have been elaborated by humans.

I would like to raise the problem of the impact of modern evolutionism on semiotics and how it will transform our theory and the associated disciplines. But glance at the past of semiotics is in order.

In fact there had been a first wave of applications of Darwin's theory of evolution to the social and psychological disciplines well before the genetic code was cracked. Psychologist James Baldwin, who himself had significantly contributed to the theory, published pioneering works in evolutionary psychology

We can list

Spencer

Ernst Haeckel

August Schleicher

The Swedish school of evolutionary archaeology

The dominant linguistics in Paris was Darwinian linguistics.

It is against this (metaphorical) biological approach to languages that the Neogrammarians developed their new science

Saussure formed his epistemological position under the influence of the this new linguistics (he found Schleicher's ideas laughable) and under the influence of Dwight Whitney who claimed that language was an institution.

However, Saussure was not fully satisfied with any of these contemporary approaches.

Carl Brugmann wanted phonetic laws that would be without exceptions

Saussure refused the idea of languages as organisms (see his lectures of 1891 at the U. of Geneva) – Boguslavski – as well as the idea of language as a contract because it is totally different from all other institutions. Hence Saussure's dilemma: "I know they are wrong but I cannot formulate a theory of general linguistics"

Language is irrational, unpredictable changes therefore it is not governed by laws like physics

It does not fit in the rational constructs of the mind (it is like a parasitical organism)

It is not an institution because it is unconscious: society selects the direction it takes without knowing it.

However, it is organized as temporary systems (self-organized).

In fact Saussure dilemma is that he perceived Darwin through Schleicher and his Paris followers. But the evidence from which he elaborated his unfinished theory was leading him to a truly evolutionary theory of language.

The evidence:

We cannot know how language started but we know that we are equipped with the capacity to speak and we know that we received our language from society

We know that language constantly changes (like all the other semiological systems such as writing)

We know that only some of the changes are conserved for a while and transform the system of values through which we can communicate

We have no control on the dynamic of language and no awareness of the changes

The picture which emerges is an evolutionary theory of language through selection by the (social) environment among random variations that occur in communication (translation)

Now, it is important to realize that there is not a domain of concepts that would be independent from a language. (hence Saussure silent criticism of Michel Bréal who kept the notion of language as “expression” of ideas as did Charles Bally’s notion of style. No ideas without words but complex relations between acoustic images and concepts, hence the reliance of sophisticated mathematics (quaternions). Each words and ideas having one to many relations.

The last course. Georges Gautier’s visit. The fabrication of the course.

The key point is the repeated evidence that language is irrational (therefore all semiological systems....). How to confront the dilemma and get out of this apory.

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The way in which semiotics has developed shows that it has selected a few notions that were conveyed in the Course, in particular the idea of *langue* as a static system or a structure.

The notion of system implies rationality and the belief that coherent and consistent laws can be uncovered by applying a method

The structures of structuralism are properties and productions of the rational mind (Kant, Husserl?)

The semiotic movement is dominated by the search for a rational order as a principle of explanation

Rationality is assumed to organize in DEPTH thoughts according to simpler and more general laws than what reveal an often chaotic surface.

Enters Peirce.

A dynamic architecture. A system of categories that are assumed to be exhaustive.

The examples of signs are trivial (carried from the antiquity)

New methods of inquiry:
Signs as algorithms
Signs as decisions
As micro-processes? As adaptive shortcuts?
Opto-genetics (Wired)
Meaning as emotion. Dopaminergic system.

Why pursue the semiotic agenda? The third culture. Broader picture than the disciplines can afford. The solution to problems cannot be achieved by single disciplines. Semi-formalizations. Semiotics as a propedeutics. New concepts, new methods, new curricula.

The frontiers that semiotics can explore because of its pluridisciplinary cultures

- Control of behavior by symbols
- Addiction to narratives and forms of narrative
- Neurochemical aspects of meaning (depression)
- Cultural evolution and revolution
- Modes of instruction (curricula)

As Darwinism is coming of age and impacts many scientific disciplines and beyond. Semiotics and linguistics have been slow in coming to grips with the implications of evolutionism for their heuristics and epistemologies. The tentative claim of this presentation is that evolutionism leads to questioning the assumption of rationality on which semiotics (or semiology) is grounded. The purpose of this approach is to examine the consequences it may have for a paradigm which ultimately derives its legitimacy from philosophy rather than science, and to suggest ways of overcoming the deep epistemological crisis the evolutionary turn is bound to create.

The presentation will start with a discussion of the case of Saussure whose main ideas were formulated in reaction against the first wave of Darwinism that rippled through the nineteenth century's epistemologies (e.g., Haeckle, Schleicher, Baldwin), and will endeavor to show that the inability of Saussure to produce a satisfactory theory of language was caused by what he considered to be the fundamental irrationality of language (and by implication of all semiological objects). This will lead us to consider the ways in which contemporary semiotics has been elaborated during the twentieth century on the rational basis of systems of categories that were derived from the traditional discourse of philosophy. The presentation will conclude with a semiotic research agenda for the twenty-first century, an agenda that will require the development of an operational interface between the problems raised by semiotics and the methods of inquiries offered by the contemporary biological and formal sciences. This semiotics will necessarily bring into focus both the evolutionary and developmental points of view, a conciliation that remains a thorny issue in contemporary thinking and will constitute a stimulating challenge for semiotics itself.