John Searle's Theory of Sign

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Abstract: The article attempts to link John Searle's philosophy and the area that is traditionally called semiotics, to bridge these domains and to demonstrate that they do relate to a shared bunch of problems. A brief discussion about the basic semiotic terms suggests that Searle's philosophy offers an explanatory framework to key semiotic questions, namely the differentiation of non-signs and signs, the place of intentionality in semiotic description, and the nature of sign correlations. As a consequence, Searle's theory can be called communication-oriented semiotics, which in the light of classical concepts developed by Peirce and de Saussure can be seen as a non-trivial contribution to the semiotic research.

Keywords: arbitrariness, intentionality, Peirce Charles S., representation, de Saussure Ferdinand, Searle John, semiotics, sign function.

There is a strange chasm between what is traditionally called semiotics and the work of John Searle. Very little, for instance, has been written on John Searle's theory in semiotic encyclopedic dictionaries (such as Sebeok 1986 or Cobley 2010), with the entries mostly restricted to relatively simple definitions of the speech act. Likewise, we can find hardly any mentions of semiotics, semiosis or the term sign in Searle's books. There are some clues (such as the term symbol or symbolize) that suggested that we could read, at least as an experiment, Searle's philosophy as an analog to semiotics.

The aim of this article, therefore, is simple, namely to bridge these domains and to demonstrate that they do relate to a shared bunch of problems and questions.

To start with, there are some reasonable objections as to why building or strengthening connections between Searle and semiotics be a needless effort that had better stop immediately. These objections, from

my point of view, are mainly terminological. In his article "Chomsky's Revolution in Linguistics", Searle (1972) discusses Chomsky's generative grammar as a milestone in the study of language and concludes that this milestone should be understood as a study of syntactical nature of language, which refuses to incorporate speech act theory, i.e. it does not offer any appropriate theory of semantic competence.

Similarly, we could define semiotics as a formal science (or doctrine) studying various relations between objects called signs with an emphasis on systematic and abstract nature of these objects and relations without much interest in the real-world or everyday communication taking place between real people. If this is to be the definition of semiotics, then such comparative effort is truly pointless. Unsurprisingly enough, there are nevertheless various points of view as to the precise manner and criteria under which semiotics is to be defined; therefore, should a particular definition prove inconvenient, we can always find another one, better suited to our needs. I will suggest one such definition shortly.

In general, the semiotic project can be characterized as an assemblage of topics introduced in its modern form by Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure and further developed by a plethora of their followers. Although there is hardly a reason or space to summarize any of the theories by these intellectual luminaries here, it is still somehow possible to derive the basic semiotic concerns from their work.

My aim is to reduce (and there will be no surprise there) the whole of the semiotic inquiry to a single concept, the sign, more specifically several selected theses elaborated on by de Saussure and Peirce. By adopting this scope, we can say that signs are (1) systematically arranged, (2) arbitrary and (3) social. Thus, if it is possible to speak about Searle's semiotic theory at all, it will be necessary to find some sort of correspondence between the aforementioned semiotic theses and some of Searle's terms. The most fundamental of these takes the form of "X counts as Y in context C" (see Searle 1969, 51-52 and 1995, 44) and can without hesitation be seen as a model of sign. Now, allow me to elaborate.

1 Functions

If we are to recognize certain things as signs, we simply have to have the ability to recognize them as signs. This mechanism can be

called the pragmatic rule, and was proposed by Charles Morris (see Morris 1938, 35). It can also be formulated using Searle's terms: signs are observer-relative (see Searle 1995, 12-13) and self-referential (see Searle 2010, 138), that is, no one can "fool all the people all the time" (see Searle 1995, 32) when it comes to such sign recognition. The pragmatic rule suggests that if we recognize something as belonging to a certain type we are dealing with a sign. This view however is not, semiotically speaking, precise, because recognizing things (trees, chairs, and even cocktail parties) as tokens of certain types does not necessarily imply that we understand them as signs.

What we face here are difficulties of various possible origins (individual, biological, cultural, etc.) and could be labeled epistemic. An illustration of these difficulties but also of the pragmatic rule is Ryle's (2009) example of two boys rapidly contracting their respective right eyelid. One of the boys is merely experiencing a tic, whereas the other one is winking at his friend with some conspiratorial intent. At first sight, the outcomes are identical, both tokens of the same type (contracting eyelid), but the difference lies in that while the first case is a matter of neurological causality, the second one is based on semiotic cooperation. The wink is a sign (X counts as Y in C) but the twitch is not (it is solely X). Thus the first semiotic finding is that signs are never intrinsic to our physical world (see Searle 2010, 14). Semiotics should be seen more exactly as social semiotics even though we can find some evidence for a somewhat similar mechanism in a medical check-up of the twitching boy concluding that his contracting eyelid is a symptom of some neural issue.

I think that we can get rid of such problems by introducing a definition of semiotics which can be stated as follows: semiotics is a study of every possible thing that can be used for lying (see Eco 1979, 6-7). We cannot lie using merely X, whereas we can lie or cheat (but also say the truth) with an "X as Y in C" device. Thus the nature of (sign) function cannot be reduced to causality of the physical world, that is, it exists in the triadic form XYZ unlike the brute, physical facts which are governed by physical laws (see Searle 2010, 10).

Without recognized sign functions we see only inevitable causal motions of a man crossing a line with a ball, whereas the sign function provides us with a notion of scoring and winning.

Albeit there is a significant confusion with regard to it, an X term in and of itself is not a sign but merely a physical signal which can "stand

for something else", yet this "something else" is not a Y term but rather another X term. The relations between brute facts are understood as horizontal, the sign relation, by contrast, as vertical. Every brute fact can be the X term of a sign function; nevertheless not all of them are in fact used this way. This is what Barthes (1968, 41) refers to as utilitarian and functional signs; simply put, it means that every X term of a sign function can be studied as a brute fact. The sounds we produce and call language, for instance, can be subjected to the exact same analysis as is applicable to any other acoustic signal.

The distinction between brute and institutional facts corresponds to the distinction between the physical and the semiotic and somehow reminds us of the traditional attributes given to the expression and content level of the sign, the former being sensible, the latter intelligible (see e.g. Jakobson 1949). The problem semiotics has with physical reality is that objects need not only function as perceptible bearers of sign function but are also something to which the sign refers. That is why semiotic discussion on the nature of the sign and how to clearly separate it from a non-sign very often ends up in a complete rejection of physical reality, reference, or, more generally, realism (see for example Devitt – Sterelny 1999, 265-270); while the definition of sign also refuses any kind of reference to brute facts or physical reality.

I am nevertheless of the opinion that there is no need for such rejection if we see reality as that which Peirce (see CP 4.536) refers to as the Dynamical Object, that is, as a fact that motivates sign function without necessity (or even chance) for being a part of it. An object can motivate us to give it a name a tree, for instance, but this does not automatically imply that such object is itself a sign, nor does it mean that such object completely lacks any relation to this sign-name. On the other hand, as Eco (1999, 65) points out, the Dynamical Object can serve as an expression term (or concrete token) of a sign function, so that we can perceive this object as the X term that stands for, for instance, an instance of the beauty of nature or, on the contrary, the expansion of human civilization. We can lie (or be mistaken) about Dynamical Objects, but we can use Dynamical Objects to lie only when they are treated as a sign token.

Physical reality consists of potentially infinite number of Dynamical Objects serving as an a priori for every possible sign function under a sole condition: that such an object becomes part of a sign function if and only if it is recognized as such (see Searle 1983, 163).

2 Representation and intentionality

Whereas the twitching boy has turned out to be the concern of neurology (or natural science), and that is where we shall leave him, his winking friend is of some further interest, namely his conspiratorial intent, which should attract our semiotic curiosity. The twitching boy twitches and cannot do otherwise, that is, he cannot lie with his eyelids. The winker, on the contrary, intends to inform his ally of, for instance, the right time to perform an arranged action (and he can lie about that, i.e. deliberately wink at the wrong time).

Throughout the whole of Searle's work there is a consistent claim that nothing can be perceived as a sign and at the same time unrelated to intentionality. In this point Searle's sign model departs from that proposed by de Saussure. De Saussure's complex of signifiant and signifié is on one hand defined in psychological terms but simultaneously rejects intentionality or "psychological truth" of communicative or speech acts. If we understand (see Searle 2002, 77) intentionality as a certain feature of our mental states that represents something other than itself, intentional object, or, as Peirce (see CP 4.536) would say, Immediate Object, than we also get to the heart of the nature of sign definition. The XYC relation is inconceivable without the notion of representation and the most striking of representative institutions is language.

I have said that every brute fact can serve as the X term in a sign function. There is however an intuition suggesting that some physical objects are more suitable to function in this particular position than others. This intuition has already shown up in the first sense of Dynamical Object, that of giving a name to an object. As Searle (1995, 60) claims, social reality is founded by the existence of language as a sign system. The necessary question is then, why? Within agentive functions there are these special cases Searle (1995, 21) called "representative" and as the most obvious example of such cases he gives language, the nature of which nature is to assign functions to sounds and marks. The central position of language and linguistic signs follows exactly from these formulations.

Representation is a synonym for intentionality and its manifestation is most obvious in language. Mostly, we do not use language without some intention and if we do, it should be of concern of specialized natural scientist. Likewise, the expression of linguistic sign shows some

peculiarity. First of all, the repertoire of linguistic expressions is limited (every language, for instance, has a closed phonological system). As language users we are truly homo economicus; we want to achieve as much as possible (preferably everything) with minimal exertion. In the process of searching for the best solution it naturally has to occur to the seeker that the most convenient of all the physical means in the world must be such as every human being can access readily at all times, that is, something that can be produced with the help of our own bodies.

Apart from this need for accessibility, there is yet another effort that seeks to identify a set of elements as limited as possible. It has something to do with the nature of our long-term memory (see Jackendoff 2003, 152) because it is much easier to remember a few phonemes and a few thousands of words than billions of sentences. The linguistic expression is a specially formed X term that satisfies both of these economies. When I say specially formed, I suggest that the X term of sign function need not to be taken from physical reality untouched. In many cases (maybe all of them) assigning a function is accompanied with some sort of intentional creativity on the side of X term. Semiotics often concerns itself with the economical nature of the expression plane while striving to find a similar principle on the content plane. At the same time, however, it tries to forget the variety of actual manifestations; when focusing on the problem with solely economy in mind, it misses the point.

Semiotics often answers its questions by using the smallest functional units, focusing on the compositional nature of signs (which parts constitute a certain whole?) and does not raise questions as to what we can do with it. Semiotics has a strong tendency to propose formally elegant descriptions and models, in an attempt to reduce the whole complex of semiosis to syntactic and semantic rules. From this point of view, speech act is not a semiotic term at all, if we understand semiotics as a closed discipline concerned with closed and immanent systems (see Ricoeur 1968, 120). This helps to explain, for example, why Searle's (1979, 1-29) taxonomy of illocutionary acts employs several criteria from which none can be perfectly matched to a respective semiotic economical/functional compositionality. Since general semiotics involves both closed systems (words) and open system (sentences, texts), the question of representation arises regardless of whether our language is economical or not and to reduce the sign problem to its economy means to give up the notion of sign as a function.

However, just as with language, every sign function must be intentional yet the intention in order to fulfill the wanting (of, for instance, the winker) has to be of a specific kind. If we get back briefly to the Dynamical Object a priori we can generalize the thesis by saying that there must be something prior to assigning functions, that is, we cannot create a sign function from scratch but we have to have something (be it brute fact or an already established sign function) upon which we set up the new one (the Y term of one function can be the X term of another etc., see CP 1.339 and Searle 1995, 82-83). From this emerges the famous distinction between semiotics of signification and semiotics of communication (see Eco 1979) which is analogous to the thesis that "representing intentions are prior to communication intentions" (Searle 1983, 166).

If we agree with the relative autonomy of representation and communication we can subsequently assert that while representation can be individual, the communication is necessarily collective and social. In principle then, we can distinguish between those sign functions which were created with the intention of including only the creator (I-intentional signs) and those which were created with some sort of collective intention in mind (We-intentional signs). We can call both of them signs because they meet the semiotic requirements mentioned so far (XYC relation and intentionality).

It seems to me that this division could be plausible mainly in the restricted domains of certain human activities (such wherein we are interested in someone's creative, i.e. I-intentional sign-making act) but in the end we have to admit that the separation of representation and communication is rather virtual and it is so due to the language-centered nature of social reality or, to put it more generally, we-intentionality necessarily comprises signification as well as communication; there is no "we intend" without communication which presupposes signification. Great example of this mechanism would be a scrabble-like game where the player's goal was to create a sign function acceptable collectively (or at least by his opponent) from already existing things. But is this not the game we all play all the time?

If Searle is right (and I think he is), every person can, individually, impose a function arbitrarily upon whichever object they desire. This is however not a sign. I can wink all day long while I-intending my winking as standing for whatever I wish, it can even represent different "meanings" in different contexts and, as a result of this, formally

satisfy the sign model definition. Still, it is not a sign. To use a more appropriate example, should an individual means of mine assigns the function "The President of the Czech Republic" to my father, it would completely lacks the collective dimension; it would not constitute an (institutional) fact.

The second semiotic condition (see Searle 2002, 102) is as follows: means can be individual but ends have to be collective. The X term becomes a part of sign function if and only if we do not extrapolate I-intentions to we-intentions (see Searle 2002, 93) and consider we-intentions as descriptive primitives of every sign function as its inseparable part.

3 Arbitrariness and constitutive rules

The winker wants to tell his ally that just now is the right time to perform certain action. But how does his ally know that he should interpret the wink like this? We have to admit that a sign, apart from being a representation, is also a constitutive rule.

In semiotics, there is a strong tendency to neglect this feature. Constitutive rules are, in a sense, opposed to de Saussure's notion of arbitrariness which states that there is no motivation that causes X to count as Y in C. This notion led to a natural critical reaction (and in some cases rejection of the whole notion of arbitrariness) because what we really want to know is not that X does not require certain Y (in both we- and I- sense) but rather why it is the case that we count X as Y in C.

Actually, it seems that arbitrariness tries to resolve the puzzling question of how the signs relate to the real world, e.g. when de Saussure states that there is no natural connection between expression and meaning. Searle (and some critics of arbitrariness), on the contrary, discusses this problem as a problem of rule-governed connection on the level of institutional facts. Such type of facts are conditioned by we-intentionality that brute facts lack, arbitrariness in de Saussure's sense, therefore, is not an analytic term, it is a fact itself that must be analyzed with special attention to the consequences for we-intentionality.

De Saussure (1959, 71) probably sees these consequences when he states that "[t]he signifier, though to all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it". De Saussure however (1959, 71) understands this relation as "a thing that is tolerated and not a rule to

which all freely consent". It would seem that any sign function we have is simply there and we have to accept it without any possibility to influence it (again, in we- and I- sense).

When de Saussure defines arbitrariness, it seems that what he has in mind is the sign function. What he speaks about, however, is the principle of horizontal articulation, i.e. the relations between Y terms or XY compounds. The horizontality completely sidelines the sign function and tries to proceed with the same methodology the natural sciences use on the level of brute facts. De Saussure, though, speaks about the sign employing psychological terms while the core of his semiological project lies in an attempt to establish basic logical rules of horizontal articulation. The semiological project, therefore, is not grounded by X counts as Y in C, but rather that Y1 differs from Y2, Y3 … YN (or XY1 differs from XY2, XY3 … XYN; it is not at all clear), and this principle of differentiation is at the same time the founding principle of sign.

De Saussure overshadowed the vertical sign function in favor of relations between individual separate sign constituents. The "counts as" is transformed to the "differs from" and even though this systematicity must no be neglected (see Searle 1995, 35-36) it should not be overestimated, either, especially when describing the constitutional sine qua non of sign functions.

The constitutive relationship was put forward by Peirce with his notion of interpretant (in the mediating sense described in CP 1.553). This Peirce's term expresses not only the representative nature of signs in its clearest form (see CP 1.555); it therefore also allows the constitutive rule to be explained using this term.[1] Interpretant is a general guarantee mechanism of sign function stability best seen in or when using language. Every institutional fact except for linguistic signs results from the so-called status function declarations (see Searle 1995, 34), i.e. a special type of speech act that creates signs by its successful perfor-

[1] Of course, the huge amount of commentary on Peirce's semiotics I say nothing of here is characterized by endless application of Peirce's terms to nearly everything which often results in complete indistinctiveness. But if we nod in deep understanding to Whitehead's "philosophy as a series of footnotes to Plato" we should also nod (at least methodologically) to Shalizi's (1998) "American thought is a series of footnotes to Peirce".

mance. The reason behind this is that every possible sign can possess interpretant(s) made up solely of linguistic signs.[2]

Some confusion could arise between signs the interpretants of which do have constitutive function and are formulated in language, and descriptions of physical objects which can also employ language but in this case there is no interpretant in the constitutive sense. "[S]cience is a linguistic representation of experience", as Jakobson (1971, 690) puts it, and, therefore, science is itself an institution. The problem is that literally every brute fact can serve as the X term of a sign function but, on the other hand, sometimes a brute fact is just a brute fact. The paragon of brute fact description suggests its Dynamical-Object nature. Brute facts completely lack interpretant, which is not the case with descriptions (in the form of judgments, diagrams etc.). This is obvious in closer look at the linguistic sign; its function is a model of meaning but not the act itself we perform using this sign function (see Searle 2010, 14). Utterances are not SF declaration's aftermath but their very existence is based on meaning, or simply language. The language is already a language and that is why it does not require any previously existing one, as Searle points out (see Searle 1995, 72).

To conclude, we can say that interpretant is a mechanism that plays its role both in social institutional and social non-institutional facts. Sometimes it can happen that a thing is created without intention or effort to assign any function to it. As time goes by, however, the society (or social reality) turns such creation into the X term of a sign function regardless of creator's indifference towards (or even explicit opposition to) assigning such a function to it. The same is possible for the reverse. This should not be seen as an obstacle but rather an inherent feature of the social reality's ontology. "The object", Searle (1995, 36) points out, "is just continuous possibility of the activity".

The third semiotic principle directly emerging from Searle's writings is the constitutive and normative nature of signs without a necessity to be static and forever unchangeable (for some discussion see e.g. Koťátko 1998). Of course, sign description is easiest in the domain where normative consequences of signs are evident. When Guiraud (1978, 13) claims that "[t]he greater the redundancy, the more the com-

[2] If all signs are in some sense derived from or dependent on language, it is understandable why there are attempts to describe linguistic sign system by means of horizontal logic.

munication is significant, closed, socialized and codified; the lower the redundancy, the greater the information and the more open, individualized and decodified the communication", it indicates the tension between the I-intentional signs which show less normative power (if any) and the we-intentional signs where the consequences are inherent in their communicative nature.

4 Conclusion

What has been said above is only a brief sketch that interweaves some of Searle's theses with those found in the traditional semiotics. The reason why Searle's theory should matter to semiotics lies mainly in that it offers general concept for a description of (social) reality but at the same time comprises a theory of language. The theory can be applied with success to words or sentences as well as to other institutional facts (see, for example, Searle 2010, 91-92). Moreover, Searle offers a great starting point in the form of the relational triad which is well established in semiotics.

It seems to me that everything Searle is saying has a common denominator, sign, which, therefore, has three characteristics. (1) It is an institution and cannot be reduced to physical objects or laws. (2) It is a representation, that is, sign requires human agent capable of assigning functions upon objects. (3) It is a constitutive rule, an interpretant that homologizes use and recognition of objects as signs.

Naturally, there are other, different kinds of signs (I completely disregard, for instance, questions of icons or indices) but the related problems are connected to more specific semiotic investigations and do not have general solutions (apart from generic terms such as similarity which themselves need further analysis). What is important here is that if we consider something as a sign we can, at the same time, say that it is a fact. Searle's semiotics (see Searle 1995, 7-9) draws a clear line between subjective and objective in both the epistemic and the ontological sense.

Consequently, there are many ways in which signs can be described within this frame but the most important of them is that they are facts. In this sense, I appreciate Fish's response to Alan Sokal where Fish states the sign-fact thesis in the form of little catechism (as he calls it):

> Are there balls and strikes in the world? Yes. Are there balls and strikes in nature (if by nature you understand physical reality independent of human actors)? No. Are balls and strikes socially constructed? Yes. Are balls and strikes real? Yes. Do some people get $3.5 million either for producing balls and strikes or for preventing their production? Yes. (Fish 1996, A23)

Fish points out that when something is a sign it does not mean that it is not real. Similarly, Searle's theory is focused on the ontology of signs and it seems to me it is probably one of the most interesting pieces of the history of semiotics that does not use semiotic terminology. If we admit that philosophy of language is a branch of philosophy of mind (as suggested in Searle 1983, 160), it could strengthen our belief that there is a common ground for semiotics and philosophy.

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