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A semiology: Problems and routes[1]

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1. If I should summarize in one sentence what the semiology I intend to present here consists in – a semiology that is, certainly, a generalization and a development of the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and his continuators from the Prague School – I would say that such a semiology is not a theory of knowledge – philosophers have already dealt with that – but rather a theory of the rationale, the *raison d'être*, of knowledge and, to be more precise: a theory of the *raison d'être* of the knowledge of material reality. The principle upon which this semiology is built is that the validity of such knowledge does not only depend, as it is usually admitted, on its *truth*, but also on its *pertinence*. In fact, pertinence appears as a criterion of validity that is logically prior to that of truthfulness, for the question of whether knowledge is true or not is only raised regarding knowledge that has been already deemed pertinent. If truthfulness is a relation between knowledge and the object being known, pertinence is, on the contrary, a relation between knowledge and the subject, by definition socio-historical, who either construes or uses such knowledge. This is why a semiology that takes as its starting point the principle that truthfulness and pertinence both contribute to the validity of knowledge can also be characterized as a study of the knowledge of material reality that takes into account the subject of knowledge, and thus approaches knowledge considering its social and historical dimensions.

The epistemologies that take truthfulness as the only criterion for assessing the validity of knowledge often run into a problem for which they cannot reach a satisfactory solution; namely, the problem of making compatible the existence of a material reality that would be independent of knowledge and the socio-historical character of knowledge itself. What assures us that a material object does in fact exist independently of the knowledge we might construe about it is the limit established by the principle of non-contradiction within which knowledge can be true. Let us take a given characteristic *a*. It cannot be true and false at the same

[1] The original version of this article is available in: Prieto, Luis Jorge 1987. Une sémiologie: problèmes et parcours. *Dégres* 49/50: j1–j12. For further commentary on this article and its translation, see Chávez Barreto, this issue.

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time that a given object is *a*. If, for instance, the characteristic is "white", it cannot be true and false at the same time that a given object is "white".[2] We cannot, therefore, state that a given knowledge which is deemed true in a specific socio-historical context can be false in another without erasing this limit and without, at the same time, eliminating the object itself.

There have been attempts to avoid this complication by introducing, alongside the distinction between true knowledge and false knowledge, the distinction between "total" knowledge and "partial" knowledge. According to this distinction, there could only be one "total" knowledge that would be true of a given material object, but there could be infinitely many ways of "partially" knowing the same object. The link between knowledge and its socio-historical context would then be established, but not because the knowledge of an object would be true in a specific socio-historical context and false in another. Instead, the link would be established because the true knowledge of an object construed in a specific socio-historical context could be different from an *equally true* knowledge of the same object construed in another specific socio-historical context.

The socio-historical character of knowledge lies, undoubtedly, in the different ways of producing true knowledge of one and the same object, depending on the societies where such true knowledge is construed. But, to explain this, one would have to answer why "partial" knowledge is construed, and why, in construing "partial" knowledge, only a given "part" of the object, instead of another, is taken into account. If one holds truthfulness as the only criterion for establishing the validity of knowledge, it would seem that one is forced to regard both the construing of "partial" knowledge and its diversity as a consequence of the limitations of human beings' intelligence. The perfect knowledge of an object could only be a true and total knowledge of it. This knowledge, because of its uniqueness, would stand above socio-historical relativity and could only be an ideal to aim for, but it would remain forever out of reach. Thus, from this point of view, we would only be able to construe "partial" knowledge that would approach less, or more, and in different ways, the ideal of such perfect knowledge depending on the specific socio-historical context in which it would be construed.

Explained in these terms, the socio-historical character of knowledge is portrayed as a purely negative trait: knowledge would be socio-historical simply because humankind is not able to construe knowledge that is not socio-historical. The perspective changes completely if we acknowledge that the

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[2] This example is only found in the Spanish (Prieto, Luis Jorge 1993. Una semiología: problemas y resultados. *Estudios* 2: 22–31) and Italian (Prieto, Luis Jorge 1989. *Saggi di Semiotica I*. Parma: Pratiche, 9–22) translations of the original text. – I.C.

validity of knowledge also depends upon its pertinence. Knowledge is necessarily socio-historical because, in the same way that knowledge is either true or false, knowledge is either pertinent or non-pertinent. The pertinence of knowledge depends upon the interests of the [knowing] subject. Those interests are socially and historically conditioned. The fact that knowledge is "partial" does not constitute a defect that comes from the limitations of the intelligence that has construed such knowledge; quite the contrary: the very foundation of knowledge is to consider from an object only what counts for the subject's interests, or, to put it in other words, to retain from the object what makes it realize, or not, a *concept* that is pertinent for the subject. Regarding "total" knowledge – if there is any sense in talking about such a thing – what has been said before would be applicable to it, if such knowledge was possible, to the same extent that it is applicable to any kind of knowledge: if knowledge takes into consideration the totality of the features borne by an object being known, it would only be because such totality of features matters for the subject's interests, that is to say, such totality of features would be pertinent, and by virtue of that pertinence both the totality of features and the knowledge it allows one to construe, would inevitably have a socio-historical character.

2. The problem tackled by the phonologists of the Prague School, albeit under a terminology that hides its true nature and prevents us from seeing its whole scope, is none other than the problem of the *raison d'être* of a given knowledge. A phoneme is nothing else than the manner in which a speaker knows a sound. In other words, a phoneme is the concept by means of which the speaker knows the sound by recognizing the sound as a realization of the concept. By asking why, depending on the sounds being dealt with (and obviously depending also on the language), two given sounds can sometimes be distributed by the speaker into two phonemes and sometimes into one phoneme, phonologists face the problem of establishing why, from all the true knowledge of which a given sound can be an object, that is to say, of all the concepts that one could construe and of which a given sound could be a realization, the concept effectively construed by speakers, and which is therefore pertinent for them, is precisely the concept that constitutes a phoneme. The answer given by phonologists to this problem is well known. In terms that are not exactly theirs, this answer consists in claiming that the phoneme is the pertinent concept for the speaker because the phoneme retains all the features, and only those features, of the sound that are pertinent in relation to a signified.

The features of the sound that are pertinent in relation to meaning are the features that must be taken into account in order to understand others and to make oneself understood, that is to say, in order to execute the practice of

communication by using the sounds as means. Thus, the pertinence of the manner in which a speaker knows a sound is explained by phonologists via a *practice* within which they make the sounds play the role of means. The semiology presented here generalizes this explanation to all knowledge of material reality: the historically and socially conditioned interests of a subject are manifested through practices that, by being executed, serve the interests of the subject. From this it follows that pertinence, which is always linked to the interests of the subject, and which is borne, from the point of view of the subject, by the way in which they know a given material object, always depends upon a practice in which the subject makes the said material object play a specific role. This role is not necessarily the role of means. The means of a communicative practice is a material object (i.e. the signal) just as the means of any other practice, but the goal of communication, the sense (Fr. *sens*), is an object of thought. In other practices, the goal might also be a material object which is, evidently, not produced *ex nihilo*, but produced by the transformation of another material object. Thus, the roles that a material object can be made to play in a practice are either the role of means, the role of goal, or, finally, the role of the "raw material" that will be transformed, thanks to the means, to produce the goal.[3]

The interest a subject has in the means of a practice presupposes an interest in the goal of that same practice – and thus, the interest in the goal is logically previous to the interest in the means. The pertinence that, for the subject, is borne by the concept determining the goal of the practice as a goal (in other words, the concept that the object to be produced must realize so that the goal is attained) is thus also logically previous to the practice that seeks to produce this goal and, therefore, the pertinence of the concept cannot depend upon the practice. Yet this does not contradict the generalization, made by the semiology presented in this text, of Praguian phonology. Indeed, the concept that determines the goal of a practice is a concept that must be realized by an object so that this same object can be made to play the role of means or raw material in another practice. Thus, even if the pertinence of the concept that determines the object intended to be produced by the subject via executing a practice does not depend on that particular practice, it does depend, in every case, upon a practice. One must additionally point out that, according to what has been said, although the object playing the role of goal in a particular practice has already been known in a given manner that does not derive its pertinence from the fact that it is made to play such role in this particular practice, the object is necessarily also known

[3] The goal and the raw material, given that the former results from a transformation of the latter, are numerically the same object. – L. J. P.

in another manner for which the pertinence cannot be explained without taking into account the practice in question. A given means can be used to achieve a goal only to the extent that such means belongs to the extension of a given concept, to wit, the concept that constitutes the utility of the means in question. Thus, if a determinate means is chosen by the subject to produce an object that realizes a given concept, it is because the subject recognizes that such an object realizes the concept constituted by the utility of the means in question – a concept whose pertinence, evidently, depends upon the practice in which such means is used.

3. In generalizing the manner in which phonologists account for the pertinence of phonemes to the manner in which to account for the pertinence of every knowledge of a material object, it is implied, given that no knowledge is ever construed that is non-pertinent, that a material object is only known if it is made to play a given role in a given practice. Thus, it seems necessary to me clearly to explain this point of view, which has brought up many objections. I do not intend to claim that there is always, at the basis of knowledge, and especially of scientific knowledge, an actual practice being exercized, nor an explicit acknowledging of the possibility of a practice by the knowing subject. My position can be formulated in much more traditional terms by simply saying that a construed concept, a concept that we use, is always the concept that an object must realize in order either to be the cause or the effect of another object that realizes another given concept. But this means accepting that we do not establish relations of cause and effect between objects that realize specific concepts simply for the pleasure of knowing the "laws of nature", as some contemplative ideologies would like to make us believe. Such relations are established because the effects are of interest to us, or because they can eventually become of interest to us, and thus because their causes are, or can eventually be, also of interest. In my opinion, this is also valid even for disciplines that do not have a wide range of "application" as, for instance, astronomy. The calculus made by Le Verrier based upon the "perturbations" of Uranus' orbit that led to the discovery of Neptune is, precisely, the establishing of a concept (mass, orbit, etc.) that an object must realize to be the cause of an object that realizes the concept "Uranus with a perturbed orbit". The objects that intervene in Le Verrier's calculus do not realize the aforementioned concepts only, and therefore, the knowledge derived from Le Verrier's calculus is not the only true knowledge one can have of those objects. Yet that knowledge is the pertinent knowledge for a practice that would have as its aim to "produce", beginning from a raw material that realizes the concept "Uranus with an unperturbed orbit", an object that instead realizes the concept of which Uranus is recognized as a realization: a concept that, at least partly, is defined by the "perturbations" in its orbit.

At the time of Le Verrier's discovery, it could have been ridiculous to speak of such practice. Yet the knowledge that is corroborated as true knowledge by Le Verrier's discovery is none other than the knowledge that finds its pertinence bounded to the practice, effectively executed in our times, of astronautics.[4]

4. Besides the object that is made to play, in a given practice, the role of means, which is always a material object, and, when the aim of the practice is to produce a material object, such an aimed object, and the raw material by means of which the aim will be attained, there is still one more material object that necessarily intervenes in any given practice.

In a practice, the object that is made to play the role of means becomes a cause of the aim only if it undergoes a transformation (for instance, to be moved) caused by the *body of the subject*. In order to be a cause of this transformation of the means, the body of the subject itself must also be transformed: for instance, the "inactive hand" of the subject must become a "hand that holds". Now, for there to be a practice, such transformation of the subject's body and the object resulting thereof (e.g. the "body (of the subject) with a hand that holds") must not be caused by another object, and neither of these may be the necessary consequence of the state of the subject's body at the moment when the transformation occurs: for there to be a practice, the inactive hand that becomes a hand that holds, or, even better, the neural pulse that causes the hand's transformation, must be capable of not happening and thus the hand must be capable of remaining inactive. In other words, there is only a practice if the transformation of the subject's body, which provokes the transformation of the object that constitutes the practice's means, is a *decision*. A decision is a *non-natural transformation*, understanding by "natural transformation" a transformation that is necessarily produced if the transformed object, before the transformation, and other objects with which it interacts bear some specific characteristics.

The body of the subject, thanks to the subject's faculty of decision, has a fundamental trait: it can be a *cause* – cause, for instance, of putting the means of a practice in movement – *without having been an effect*. Because a practice presupposes an enchainment of causes and effects and a starting point for this enchainment where there is a cause that is not an effect, it can be claimed that there is no practice without decision. Conversely, even if the body of the subject is the cause of a given effect, this effect is not the result of a practice if the characteristics of the subject's body that enable it to produce the given effect are

[4] The example of Le Verrier has been partly translated from the Spanish version of the text (Prieto 1993: 26, cited in fn2), and it thus differs slightly from the French version. – I. C.

also an effect. If, for instance, the body of the subject is pushed and by that motion a given effect is produced, that is not a practice executed by the subject.

Certainly, it is always possible to ask if we actually do possess an ability to decide, or if, rather, the non-natural character that we recognize in our transforming of our bodies is simply an illusion, a mirage that the brain's physiology will one day destroy. I do not believe that science, in its current state, can give us an answer to this question, but we can explain what is at stake.

First of all, it is only to the extent that human beings can decide, and thus their bodies can be causes without having been effects, that there can be a *history* different from "natural history". Without decision, all human behaviour would fall into the natural order of causes and effects, human behaviour would not disturb that order, and that order would, therefore, have nothing external to it. If the ability to decide exhibited by humans would be but an illusion, the ethical dimension of their acts and their behaviour would be an illusion as well, for only the transformations of the body that are not imposed by its material state, or by the material state of another object, possess such dimension.[5] Finally, without the ability to decide, there could not even be a subject. This could be but a corollary of what was said above, given that it is difficult to conceive of history without a subject (and of a subject without history). Nevertheless, the links between decision and subject seem interesting enough to consider them at length.

By "subject", I understand a material object (the body of the subject) which is conscious of its individuality, or, in other words, what is usually called "numeric identity".[6] I have said that a natural transformation of an object is a transformation that is necessarily produced if a given object, and other objects with which it interacts, bear certain characteristics. The individuality of those objects, that is to say, their numeric identities, plays no role in such transformation: the substitution of those objects by other, numerically distinct, objects would yield the same result, or the same transformation, provided that all objects would bear the same characteristics.[7] In contrast, the transformation of the subject's body that constitutes a decision, if there is one, only depends upon the individuality, the

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5 This sentence is only present in the Spanish and Italian translations, cited in fn2. – I. C.

6 The individuality, or numeric identity, of an object is not determined, as it is usually claimed or implied, by the totality of its characteristics. Between the characteristics borne by an object and its numeric identity there is always an irreducible heterogeneity, an object can lose or acquire characteristics yet remain itself as an individual. – L.J.P.

7 The construction of concepts, and therefore the construction of sciences, is made possible by, on the one hand, the necessary dependence of a transformation upon certain characteristics of the objects and, on the other hand, the independence of the transformation regarding the numeric identity of those same objects. – L.J.P.

numeric identity, of the subject that decides. Because of that, I give a fundamental role to the subject's discovery of their ability to decide in the process whereby the subject becomes conscious of their numeric identity. It seems to me that the fact of discovering their own ability to transform their body, independently of any other thing that is not the body as an individual, unique, and unrepeatable object, is precisely what allows the subject to become conscious of their numeric identity, and by recognizing themselves as *one*, constituting themselves as a subject.

5. An object is a fragment of material reality that is recognized as one, thus, a fragment of material reality to which a numeric identity is attributed. Hence, by recognizing the numeric identity of their own body, the subject recognizes themselves as an object. Certainly, in order to recognize as *one* a given fragment of material reality, it is necessary to recognize as *one* at least one *other* fragment of that reality. Thus, a fragment of material reality does not have its numeric identity recognized, and consequently it is not recognized as an object, if there is not at least another fragment of material reality whose numeric identity is recognized, and which is, thus, recognized as an object. But the starting point of this dialectic resides in the subject's discovery of the ability to decide possessed by the fragment of material reality that is their own body, and this discovery leads the subject to discover not only the numeric identity of such a fragment of material reality, but numeric identity *tout court*. In other words, it is by discovering themselves as an object that the subject discovers *the object*. And it is because of this that among the (two) fragments of material reality to which (at least) the subject recognizes a numeric identity, there is always the fragment that is their own body.

The discovery of the *object* implies, certainly, a fundamental reordering of the way in which the subject apprehends material reality. Let us imagine what the apprehension of this reality must be for a conscious being that is not conscious of their numeric identity, as it is probably the case of lower animals and of human beings in the first moments of their lives. Such a being is capable of sensing but, given that they have not discovered themselves as an object, and thus they have not discovered *the object*, a sensation cannot appear to them as the manifestation of something that pertains to an object. The consciousness of this kind of being, one could say, does not go beyond a merely "adjective" level: it perceives "hungry", "red", but not themselves as an object that would be hungry, or something else as an object that would be red. The consciousness of a subject is, instead, situated at a "substantive" level: for a subject, sensations appear as the manifestations of *properties*, of *features* borne by objects.

Since *time* is that within which a transformation takes place, that is to say, that what exists between an object that bears a given feature and *this same object*

that does not bear it anymore, only a substantive consciousness can include time among its contents, and, with it, the dichotomy *life/death*. The same holds for the impossibility of contradiction, at least regarding the features borne by a *given object* in a *given moment*. In this way, the objects, and the features they bear, through which the subject organizes its perception of material reality appear to it as objects that *are* (for nothing is but *in time*), and given that they *are*, they appear as objects that cannot, simultaneously, *not be*.[8]

Having begun from the problem of the *raison d'être* of phonemes, the semiology presented here arrives at a theory of the subject. It could not be in any other way given that such a semiology begins from acknowledging that the *raison d'être* of phonemes, just like the *raison d'être* of any knowledge that has as its object parts of material reality, resides in a practice. And a practice can only be a practice of a subject, which is only a subject because it can execute practices. These are but two sides, or two consequences, of the same fundamental fact: human beings' ability to decide, which allows them to escape natural causation and thus become the producers of history. Yet this possibility of creating a reality that is situated beyond nature, and is granted to humans by their capacity to decide, should not make us forget that such capacity is a consequence of human nervous system, and as such, it is biologically rooted. This is the particular situation of humankind in the universe: humans are, one could say, biologically "programmed" to be able to produce a reality that does not abide by biological "programming".

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[8] It is possible that the levels of consciousness I call "adjective" and "substantive" correspond to the psychoanalytic "imaginary" and "symbolic", respectively, and that the passage from a level of consciousness to the other, made possible only by the discovering of numeric identity and of the object, is what psychoanalysis refers to when it talks about the substitution of the "partial" object (the mother) with the "total" object. By affirming that in the unconscious the principle of non-contradiction does not hold, psychoanalysis stops supposing that there are representations of objects in the unconscious. I propose, rather, the hypothesis (reinforced by the non-temporality – *timelessness* – attributed to the unconscious by psychoanalysis) that the unconscious constitutes a level of adjective consciousness, that its contents therefore are not organized in objects and, consequently, the question of the validity of the non-contradiction principle is not even an issue. These remarks *à propos* some problems situated at the border with psychoanalysis, of which I am, of course, the only one to be held responsible, owe a big debt to the questions posed to me by Alberto Camisassa and to the interesting discussions they brought up. – L. J. P.

Bibliographical note

I should mention, above all, the work of the thinkers that have laid the foundations on which the semiology presented here rests: Ferdinand de Saussure and Nikolai Trubetzkoy, certainly, but also, and to mention only the most important ones, Roman Jakobson, Louis Hjelmslev, Eric Buyssens and André Martinet.

I provided a more detailed overview of this semiology, although now surpassed in many regards, in *Pertinence et pratique, Essai de sémiologie,* Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1975.

Some articles which show, in a better way, the last developments are the following:

"Entwurf einer allgemeinen Semiologie" in *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, vol. I, pp. 259–265, Berlin, 1979.

Contribution (in French) to the "Tavola rotunda dei 'Quaderni de semantica' su 'Il concetto di natura umana in Chomsky'", in *Quaderni di Semantica*, 2/81, pp. 254–260 and 277–280, Bologna, 1981.

"Materialismo e scelte del soggetto" in *Rinascita*, no. 29, 4 March 1983, p. 42.

"Decisión y Sujeto" in *Psicoanálisis, Revista de la Asociación Psicoanalítica de Buenos Aires*, vol. VII, pp. 85–107, Buenos Aires, 1985 (also in German: "Subjekt und Entscheidung. Zur Rolle von Norm und Geschmack beim symbolischen Überleben", in *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, vol. 8, pp. 9–23, Berlin, 1986).

"Classe e concetto: sulla pertinenza e sui rapporti saussuriani 'di scambio' e 'di confronto'" in press for *Teoria*, Pisa.[9]

[9] Also in French: Prieto, Luis Jorge 1990. Classe et concept: sur la pertinence et sur les rapports saussuriens « de comparaison » et « d'échange ». In: *Présence de Saussure*. Geneve: Droz, 55–71. – The French version is part of the proceedings of a congress that took place in Geneva in 1988, that is to say, one year after the publication of the original version of *Une sémiologie*. Since the proceedings were printed after the first publication of *Une sémiologie*, Prieto could not possibly have included them in his list. Georges Redard's bibliography of Prieto in *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 45 (1991) lists this text as no 77 and provides two places of publication: the book *Filosofia e linguagio*, in which it was published in Italian in 1989, and the proceedings of the Geneva congress. However, the bibliography does not include Prieto's book *Saggi di Semiotica I*, also published in 1989, as yet another place where the article had already appeared. On the other hand, the 1989 edition of *Saggi I* gives this article the status '*Inedito*' (i.e. not published before). The complements to the bibliography of Prieto, also by Redard (published after Prieto's death in 1997, in *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 50), do report the publication of this text in *Saggi I*. There is, however, no record, at least in the available bibliographies, that the article was published in *Teoria* as Prieto states here. – I. C.

About the practices in which the goal is an object of thought:

"Langue et parole sur le plane du contenu" in *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, no. 35, pp. 131–143, Geneva, 1981.

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"Cinema e verità" (in collaboration with Brenda Bollag) in *L'Unità*, 28 December, 1985, p. 14.

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Translation by E. Israel Chávez Barreto