

The life of signs in society — and out of it: Critique of the communication critique

Göran Sonesson

Cultural semiotics, as conceived by the Tartu school, seems to be concerned mainly with obstacles to communication: something which is a “text” in the culture (or non-culture) of the sender becomes a “non-text” in the culture of the receiver; or it becomes a text only being read by means of another “code” which, at least initially, leaves it deformed (cf. Sonesson 1992, 1998a, 1999b, c, in press a, b). But what is then this communication to which cultures offer obstacles? Lotman has certainly expressed some ideas on this; and so has, before him, the Bakhtin circle and the Prague school; and Posner actually builds his version of Cultural semiotics around a variety of the communication model. Yet, it seems that we are essentially stuck with the model of communication developed by Shannon & Weaver within the framework of the theory of information.

Lifting the dead hand of information theory

Even today all semiotic theory relies, more or less explicitly, on the communication model derived from the mathematical theory of information, which was designed to describe a few, by now rather old-fashioned, technological means of communication, telegraphy and radio, and in particular to devise remedies to the loss of information often occurring during transportation (cf. Fig. 1). Largely because of the influence of Jakobson (1960) and Eco (1976, 1977), this model has been used inside semiotics as a model of all communication, all signification, and of all kinds of semiosis.

space when a telegram is sent or a radio program is aired, nothing of this is projected to the space which is perceptually available to human beings, except at the beginning and end of the chain. The dominance of spatiality is more readily explained from a medium such as the letter, which ordinarily travels by train, and before that, by stagecoach or by foot-trodden messenger.

The identification of communication with transport is probably suggested by the spatial layout of the diagram itself, rather than by the media modelled (cf. Fig. 1). Or it may have some even deeper source, as suggested by Reddy's (1979) well-known analysis of the "conduit metaphor" (which, if we are to believe McNeill's [1994] study of the relevant gestures, only occur in Western countries). Interestingly, the transport model of communication was criticised already in 1929 by Voločinov (1986), well before it was embodied in the mathematical theory of communication. Yet it continues to be the basis of Lévi-Strauss' widely accepted parallelism between the three circulations of signs, commodities, and women.

More importantly from our point of view, however, the idea of there being a message moving from one point in space to another tends to obliterate the fact that, in many cases, other instances of the communication situation have to accomplish the movement, or to be active in other ways. Indeed, the displacements required of the sender and the receiver constitute one of the principal factors distinguishing different media in general, and modern and traditional media in particular.

Until recently, to send a fax, the sender had to go to the telegraph station, but now he may accomplish the same act from his computer. The receiver still has to go to the cinema to see a film, if he does not opt for using a video recorder instead. If we insist on perceiving the real thing, we will always have to visit a cave to see prehistoric frescoes. Sometimes, even continuous movement is required of the receiver, such as the person in the art gallery walking around the artwork, or the housewife leaving repeatedly the projection of the soap opera to attend to her domestic duties. In fact, changes in this respect are responsible for the utopia termed "the global village" by McLuhan and "the third wave" by Toffler: they have to do, at least in part, with the subject being now able to accomplish from his home what would earlier have required an appreciable spatial displacement (cf. Sonesson 1987, 1995, 1997).

The active part of the receiver is better accounted for in an earlier, now much neglected, semiotic model, that of the Prague School (cf. Fig. 2 and Mukařovský 1970; Sonesson 1992, 1993a, 1997, 1999c; in press b). The Prague school notion of a “concretisation” of the perceptual objects conveyed always being necessary before communication takes place opens up this problem, but it does not tell us anything about the degree of the activity required, let alone its nature. Of course, movement is only one of its modalities. While it may be important to observe that, even in the transport model, this property is not always properly ascribed to the message, but may very well pertain to other instances of the communicative act, it is much more fundamental to observe that, even in the case of the message being spatially displaced, the sender *and the receiver* also have to take an active part.

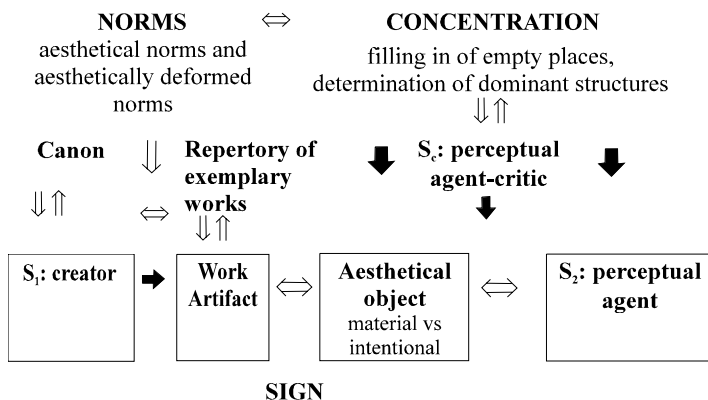


Fig. 2. The Prague school model.

Another way of pointing to the active part played by the receiver in communication may be to invoke the notion of dialogicity characteristic of the Bakhtin circle. Indeed, sometimes dialogicity seems to mean activity generally. Curiously, in Bakhtin’s own texts, and in many passages of the Voloshinov texts also, dialogicity implies very little activity, or at least an activity of a very one-sided kind: one person quoting (and often qualifying) something said by another, normally in written form, which leaves very little possibility for one quoted to

react.¹ However, in an early article, Voloshinov (1983a) does refer to the anticipation by the hearer of the speaker's message, and the speaker's anticipation of this anticipation. Perhaps more essentially, the Bakhtin school approach has been understood in this way in latter-day semiotics (e.g. Wertsch 1991)

Another object of the communication situation which may well have to be brought into movement, or more generally given an active part, is the "code" or, as I would prefer to say, the schemes of interpretation. This becomes explicit in the Tartu model where it is a question of "texts" becoming "non-texts" or "deformed texts" in another culture, and then gradually being transformed into "texts" when a "code" has been reconstructed. Such a confrontation of "codes" is actually yet another aspect of the globalisation anticipated by MacLuhan.

Communication as an act in time

The Tartu model is essentially about obstacles to communication. The Prague model, on the other hand, also takes into account the possibility of communication taking place successfully, and, contrary to information theory, to which much of semiotics refer, including the Tartu school, it construes the receiver as an active participant in the process. Also, where the Tartu schools seems to be essentially concerned with entities differently distributed in space, the Prague school models most clearly focuses on relationships between different temporal phases of the same culture (cf. Fig. 2 and Sonesson 1995, 1996b, 199c; in press b).

According to this conception, as it was notably developed by Mukařovský and Vodička, *norms*, which in part are purely aesthetic, and in part have an extra-aesthetic origin, determine the production of the *artefact* by its creator, both directly, as a *canon*, or set of rules, and in the form of a *repertory of exemplary works of art* which are offered for imitation. In order to become an *aesthetical object*, the artefact must be perceived by the art public, and this process of perception,

¹ It is true that, in his Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin (1984) does imagine that the quoted text may in some way react back, but for my part, I find this inconceivable. Bettetini & alia (1995: 150ff) rightly distinguish the "interactivity" found in certain multimedia from real interaction; but dialogicity in the Bakhtinian vein often seems to be even less interactive.

termed *concretisation*, itself depends on the existence of norms, which are ideally more or less identical to those employed by the creator. More commonly, and more interestingly, the norms may have been modified and even exchanged for others since the artefact was created, in which case a new interpretation of the artefact will result. Concretisation involves the determination of the *dominants* appearing in the structure of the work of art, that is, the elements which are to receive emphasis and which will then organise the remaining elements of the structure according to their purpose; it also allows the perceiver to fill in lacking details from his own experience.

This model is an adaptation of the conception of perception propounded by Husserlean phenomenology, with an added social dimension (cf. Sonesson 1992, 1995, 1994a, b). We may therefore restore to the model its general import, applying it to all objects of perception, while retaining its social character. In this sense, the production of any artefact given to perception involves norms of different levels of generality, and so does its concretisation into the perceptual experience of a given subject of perception. On the other hand, the idea of there being a perpetual movement in which de-automatized norms are exchanged for automatized ones, an ever-repeated dialectics of “struggle and reformation” (in the terms of the Prague theses) applied to established artistic forms, really reproduces the conception of art presupposed, and even explicitly formulated, by the exponents of Modernism, as I have argued elsewhere (Sonesson 1998b).

According to Mukařovský, the constraints resulting from the norms may in some cases acquire the force of law, but at the other end of the scale they can just as well appear as simple recommendations. Perhaps we may be allowed to take this idea a little further, suggesting that the norm could also merely be an observed regularity, a habit, in the sense of Peirce and Husserl: that is, in other words, that which is considered to be *normal*. Thus we are brought back to the sciences of normality, Gibson’s “ecological physics” and, beyond that, the Husserlean Lifeworld, which describe the core of all conceivable cultures, that which is taken for granted (cf. Sonesson 1994a, b 1996a, b).

Curiously, the *temporal metaphor* also embodied in the communication model has not come in for scrutiny: what is accomplished by the sender as well as by the receiver are acts in time, which are close but do not coincide. This is true of the telegraph, but not of everyday face-to-face interaction, nor of the messenger travelling

during many years. It applies even more awkwardly to the case of media having to be recreated before being received, such as a piece of music or, in a different way, a movie. The temporal presupposition seems even more beside the point in the case of prehistoric frescoes having been painted once and for all at some forlorn location. Once again, the communication model obliterates precisely those changes which characterise the age of information: even pictures have now become temporal acts, as testified by the television image and the picture imported from some Web server.

Instead of a continuous process initiated by a subject and affecting another, communication really should be seen *as a double set of acts*, which may coincide spatially and/or temporally, but often do not, and which are initiated by at least two different subjects, the sender and the receiver, or, to choose more appropriate terms, the *creator* and the *concretiser*. Curiously, the case of the radio, and to some extent even the telegraph, should really have suggested this model: no matter how much a program is broadcast, no communication will take place until somebody puts his radio receiver on. Nowadays, when we have to start up our computer, connect to the Internet service provider, start the e-mail program and then fetch our mail on the server, we get an even more acute idea of the double initiative required for communication to take place.

In these terms, what the Prague model says is that the two subjects involved in a process of communication may initiate their acts in time using different sets of norms; and what the Tartu model says is that they may initiate their acts in space using different cultural systems.² This is a way of saying that the meaning which is there for the receiver is not exactly the meaning which was there for the sender. In terms of the conduit metaphor, what goes in is *not* what comes out. A radical version of such a critique was formulated already by Voloshinov (1986) and was later echoed by Lotman (1988) and Wertsch (1991: 71ff). However, while Voloshinov thinks meaning is always transformed by being transmitted from one subject to another, Lotman allows for both the traditional model of communication and

² One tends to think of cultures as individuated in space, but of course we may also distinguish cultures in time; indeed, cultures may in fact be dispersed in time as well as in space, to the extent that they correspond to different subcultures, interests groups, and so on.

for another one in which meaning tends to grow (also cf. Lotman 1979: 96f). The first model is best for assuring the conservation of meaning; the second one serves to generate new meaning; it is a “thinking device”. Both models are present in all cultures, but one or the other is dominant in certain domains of activity and periods. Wertsch, who agrees with Lotman, identifies the second model of communication with Bakhtinian dialogicity. But to call “dialogical” a kind of communication in which the receiver is not even interested in finding out what the sender meant to say is at least an abuse of ordinary language.³

Such a conclusion seems to me not to take the Bakhtinian critique seriously enough. If the Bakhtin circle is right, then the communication model cannot be left in place, not even as an alternative. On the other hand, if we accept the Bakhtinian critique in its radicality, we are faced with an idea of communication which is not only difficult to model, as Lotman (1988: 35) suggests, but even to conceive in any other way. Elsewhere, Lotman (1977) applies this second model to “internal communication”, the communication of a subject with himself, and this may be a reasonable use. It is however difficult to see what application it could have to the encounter of two subjects. But a more adequate solution to this conundrum is in fact suggested by another piece of Tartu school paraphernalia.

According to an idea, suggested by Lotman (as well as by Moles), the sender and receiver of any situation of communication start out with “codes” — or, as I would prefer to say, systems of interpretation —, which overlap only in part, struggling to homogenise the system of interpretation as the communication proceeds (cf. Fig. 3 and Sonesson 1995, 1997). We can extend this idea by referring to the Tartu school conception that cultures may be sender-oriented and receiver-oriented, and by transferring these properties to situations of communication. The

³ This becomes particularly absurd when Wertsch (1991: 76f) applies this distinction to Gilligan’s critique of Kohlberg’s ethic scale, claiming that women react in a more dialogical way, by answering another question that that posed by the interviewer. It may be more adequate to say, in Ricoeur’s (1990: 199ff) terms, that women are more inclined to the “ethical” aim of living a good life, rather than applying abstract “moral” rules; but that of course contradicts the more general socio-psychological finding, that women tends to be more respectful of rules than men.

communicative act may then be said to be *sender-oriented*, to the extent that it is considered to be the task of the receiver to recover that part of the system of interpretation which is not shared between the participants. It will be *receiver-oriented*, to the extent that the task of recovering knowledge not held in common is assigned to the sender. Art, as conceived in the 20th century, has been characteristically sender-oriented; mass media, in the received sense of the term (which is not really applicable to all modern media), have been noticeably receiver-oriented. Contrary to Wertsch, I would say that a dialogue is that takes place when each of the subjects adapts his schemes of interpretation somewhat to that of the other; that is, in Piagetian terms, when there is both *accommodation* and *assimilation*. On the other hand, when sender and receiver fail to negotiate the parts of the interpretation system which they do not both possess, the resulting concretisation will be a *deformation*. One or both of the subjects will then assimilate the message without accommodating to it. In this sense, both sender-orientation and receiver-orientation are deformations; but they are normally deformations which are prescribed by the culture.

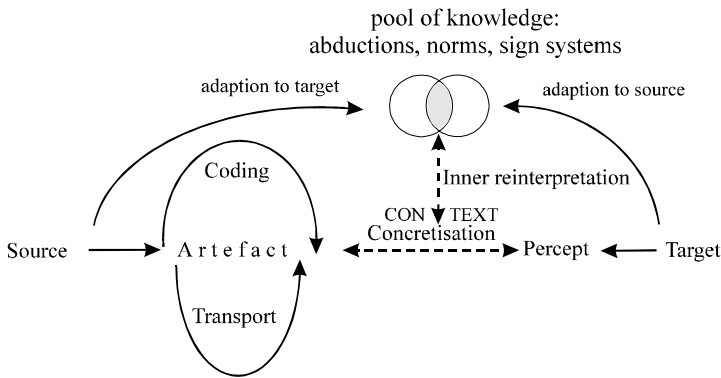


Fig. 3. General model of communication.

In order to make sense of dialogicity (not necessarily Bakhtin’s sense), we have to think of communication, not as a single, delimited act, close to a specious present, but as an extended stretch of behaviour, in which several acts take place and are reacted to, and meaning is continuously renegotiated. It is precisely because we accept too easily this view of meaning as a single, short art of give and take, that

examples such as Voloshinov's "Well" (1983a) and "H'm" (1983b: 124ff), Grice's (1989: 93ff) 43 cents at the tobacconist's and Sperber & Wilson's (1983: 55) smell of gas seem to make nonsense of the rules-governedness of communication and establish meaning as something ineffable (cf. below Sonesson in press d).

In the case of verbal language, as well as various media relying it, it is easy to think of some kind of "originary" situation, in which a speaker produces sign after sign, until he has succeeded in conveying his meaning completely. This whole sequence of signs then seems to form part of the same act of communication. In some cases, common in the arts, but of course also in any written message, the sequence of signs is completed before reception takes place, so that any further sign required will be part of another act of communication. This would seem to be the normal case in visual communication. However, one may imagine the case when we make ever new and revised sketches of the street system, until our interlocutor manages to understand how he is supposed to reach our house.

The terms "system of interpretation" is used here to distinguish the emergence of meaning from *recoding*, the process of assigning new expressions to parts of signs (phonemes, graphemes, etc.), which is how letters are transferred into Morse signs, radio signals, and more recently digital coding. Recoding, just like physical transportation, is one possible, but not obligatory, part of the communicative act (cf. Fig. 3). Both serve to distinguish different modes of communication. In fact, it is precisely because recoding, unlike communication, is a simple question of equivalence, that I do not want to use the term "code" to speak about the mapping of expression to content.

The ghost out of the machine

The temporal presupposition entails another one: before the moment of sending, there is a *subject* making a decision to send. This is very clear in the case of the telegraph and other technological means: one must decide to go to the telegraph station or to open the Fax software of the home computer. There is much less clearly a preparatory stage, a phase of decision which can be separated from the act of sending, in ordinary verbal conversation, gesture, and so on. But can a subject not

making the decision to send before sending properly be called a sender?

Another problem concerns the modifications of the status of sender and receiver introduced by Jakobson (1960). These terms, in Jakobson's version of the model, are amalgamations of what Shannon and Weaver call sender and source, and receiver and destination, respectively (cf. Fig. 1). In this parlance, receiver and sender are really mechanisms, such as the telegraph and the radio sender, not human beings. Jakobson and Eco do away with all the technological mediations, treating them as if they were always or never there.

Quite apart from the distinction between machines and men, however, we really need to have more instances, not less, in order to account for the complexities of sending and receiving. Several subjects are involved in the sending of a book: the writer, the editor, the editorial board, the proof-reader, the typesetter (nowadays largely identical with the writer in front of his computer), the enterprise doing the distribution, the critique, the bookseller, the one who buys the book as a present, etc. Of these intermediaries, only the critique has been given a place in the Prague school model; and a similar function is accomplished by the gate-keeper in some version of mass media studies (Cf. Sonesson 1987). Today, on the Internet, search mechanisms and portals serve as such intermediaries; but given the hyper-link structures of the Internet, any page may be, directly or indirectly, an intermediary to all the others.

Complicated cases may be cited from ancient and modern media alike. In Ancient Greece, inscriptions accompanying grave sculptures were intended to be read aloud by those who were able read, while the others were listening, and they were often written in the first person — which makes it difficult to decide who the sender is, the artist, the one reading the text, or the statue itself (Svenbro 1988). If you fetch a picture from a database somewhere out there on the Internet, it is not obvious who is the sender, the one who made the picture, the one who put it into the database, or you who pick it up. And to take a more homely example, should we not have to regard the “zapper” in front of his television set as a sender as well as a receiver of the mixture of images which he is perceiving (cf. Sonesson 1995)? In fact, the data base examples can be extended: when I use a database which I have myself set up at my home computer, I am certainly the receiver of the information, but I am also, together with the one who has

created the software, a sender, or (as Bettetini et alia 1995: 191 say) a co-author.

Fortunately, there seem to be norms determining who the important sender of different kinds of messages is. The general view in our culture, for instance, is that the author is a more important sender of a book than his printer; but in some cases, as that of the critique or other avatar of the gate-keeper, the layman and the scholar take different views on the matter. In the case of ancient media, however, these norms are not always easy to recover; and they are not always fixed in the case of the new ones. There is an extreme opposition between medieval art, where the donator was the sender who counted, and modern art, where the artist is considered the sender of “ready-mades”, and even, as is the case of the Swedish artist Dan Wolgers, of an exhibition, which he ordered from an advertising agency (Sonesson 1998b).

Particularly in the case of modern media, however, we are all the time confronted with cases in which it is not possible to distinguish one single — or even one most important — sender of the message communicated. In the end, however, this difficulty is perhaps not peculiar to recent media. When reflecting on the sense in which my own life is a story I tell to myself, Ricœur (1990: 189) suggests that I am myself the principal personage as well as the narrator, but only a *co-author*, or, in Aristotelian terms, the “sunaiton”; for the life which I live will be determined as much by the acts of other people and by the obstacles reality makes to my wishes, as by the plot I have written for myself. It will be remembered that Bakhtin (1990) found such a collusion of hero and author suspect, in literature if not also in life. And yet the Bakhtinean “ventriloquation” seems to describe a case in which I am only one of the authors of what I say (Bakhtin 1989; and for a more homely example Wertsch 1991: 129f, 138; as applied to photography Sonesson 1999a, c; in press d).

As was first observed in the Prague School model, and as literary historians know well, senders and receivers may even be instances embodied within the message. The possibility of filling in slots in the text now rapidly becomes accessible to everybody in the form of the false personalities you may take on when on the Internet, in particular in the case of the MUD-MOO (multi-user dungeon/mud-object-oriented), where, in extreme cases, you may appear even as part of the furniture (cf. Turtle 1995).

The Prague and Tartu models give, in some respects, a more satisfactory account of the complexities of communication than the Shannon & Weaver model, in so far as they add subjects and norms, and the use of different interpretation systems, but they offer little help in the study of semiotic diversity. Also the dialogue, which is internal to both sender and receiver, according to the Bakhtin/Vygotsky model, and the transaction in which the sender and receiver are identical, but the message changes, as conceived by Lotman, add important qualifications, but fail to address the central issue (Sonesson 1995, 1996).

The basic problem of the communication model is that it is about recoding, not about original semiosis, that is, not about the emergence of meaning, but about its transformation. It tells us how letters are transferred into Morse signs, radio signals, and more recently digital coding, which really amounts to giving new expressions to parts of signs (phonemes, graphemes, etc.). It could certainly be argued that this conforms to the Peirce/Jakobson metaphor according to which meaning is a translation into other signs, but Peirce, at least, entertains the possibility of a final interpretant. In fact, all conceptions of meaning must start out from some zero-degree, however hypothetical. It has been called the Lifeworld.

The three world-wide circulations

According to Lévi-Strauss (1958: 329), there are three vast circulations going on in the world: the circulation of words, of merchandises, and of women. They are studied, in turn, by *linguistics*, *economy*, and *social anthropology*. Jakobson (1990: 19f, 460f) took this idea up and extended it: the three circulations concern messages (not only verbal signs), commodities (which comprise goods and services), and mates (men or woman as the case may be). The sciences which study these phenomena are *semiotics*, *economy*, and *social anthropology* in conjunction with *sociology*. The latter addition is perhaps not circumstantial: Lévi-Strauss is thinking about the kind of societies studied by anthropology, in which friendly relations are established between tribes by one tribe given wives to another, which then may give wives to a third one, until, in the end, the first tribe receives wives back from one or other tribe in the chain of exchange. In the societies studied by sociology, on the other hand, the circulation would rather consist in one

man and one woman given themselves up to each other (or so the rhetoric goes). Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss agree that these sciences studying circulations are all part of some more general science which they call the study of communication, but Jakobson also emphasise that they all imply the presence of language or other signs, so that, in the end, it may seem that this more general science is semiotics itself.⁴

Dan Sperber (1982) has taken exception to these parallels: while circulation is a constitutive factor of the kinship system, it is only an accidental property of language, which is essentially a repertory of messages; and when information has circulated for a sufficient time, we will all be in possession of it, but a woman or a horse which is exchanged is lost for the donor; and while language signifies by means of a code, women only acquire meaning by means of the attention being directed to them. It is easy to agree with the general drift of Sperber's argument, but sometimes he is widely off the mark. To begin with, a language which does not circulate (i.e. is not used in any acts of communication) is not much of a language; in fact, it is what we call a *dead* language (like Latin, or Hebrew until it was reborn). On the other hand, the circulation of women is certainly not constitutive of *women*. In fact, I think that, in the kinship system, women do not signify at all; it is the act of exchanging them which carries meaning. And this is certainly a difference to the exchange of signs, in which the latter carry at least the primary sense, which the exchange serves to convey. In fact, it is easy to imagine a way in which a woman, arriving from one tribe to another, does carry meaning in herself: speaking another language, having different customs, etc., she may appear as a "non-text" to the members of the receiving culture.⁵ In fact, she may even carry meaning as the individual person she is: even after reducing the message to make translation possible, as Lotman (1979: 91) so nicely puts it, the message may still contain indications for reconstructing the personality of the other (cf. Sonesson 1987, 1992: 91 ff).

Communication in the material sense (in the sense of the spatial metaphor rejected above) really implies that something which leaves one

⁴ In fact, Jakobson's position as far as the different sciences goes is much less clear-cut than I suggest here; cf. the passages referred to above.

⁵ This may be to suppose too much heterogeneity between tribes which exchange women; it applies much more properly to women or men marrying into another society at the present time.

place is not there any more when it arrives at a second place: this is true of the train, as well of the letter which it may transport, and even of content of the latter, but not of course of the units of which the message is made up (cf. Fig. 4). The circulation of women (and of mates generally) as well as of commodities suppose a double movement from one place to another: one tribe gives women to another tribe and receives women back (or a man and a woman “give themselves up” to each other); and when receiving a horse, I give money or perhaps a donkey back. But the exchange of signs is not necessarily double; it does not even necessarily imply any spatial movement in the Lifeworld. A television picture or a web page is transferred from afar but they are not perceived to move in space. It seems rather absurd to speak of the meaning of a fresco painting being transferred by circulation — though there is of course a movement of the photons from the rocky surface to the eyes of the observer. A fresco painting is an example of a sign which would certainly not remain at its place of origin if it were transferred to a museum. But the same is true of my drawing of the street systems if I send it to you by the post. As we said, it is also true of the accompanying letter, though not of its constitutive elements. However, there is a sense in which a picture postcard or a reproduction of Mona Lisa will remain at the point of origin while being sent of to some distant place (cf. Sonesson 1992: 91ff).

As a contrast and complement to the emphasis on circulation found in the semiotics of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, it is worth while considering, with Lotman (1976), that the *accumulation* of both information and merchandise precede their interchange and is a more elementary and more fundamental characteristic of a culture. According to Lotman, material objects and information are similar to each other, and differ from other phenomena, in two ways: they may be accumulated, whereas sleep and breathing, for example, cannot be accumulated, and they are not absorbed completely into the organism, unlike food, but remain separate objects after the reception. Here Lotman seems to treat the sign as being pure information, perhaps because he thinks mainly about verbal texts, where the material base is extremely mutable. On the contrary, a picture is as much a material object as a piece of information, as much an artefact as an object of perception. This is why we can accumulate pictures in a double sense: as material things, in the safe-deposit box of a bank, or as experiences in the mind. In both senses they maintain a certain distance with

respect to our body. But it is only as an experience in the mind that they may be shared with everybody, and that they remain at the point of origin while proceeding in their circulation.

	Position of displacement A B	Final stage	Several B (endstage s)	Dis- placement of receiver B A
Transport	a → a	a at B, nothing at A	no	–
Exchange (of women, goods, etc.)	a → a, b ← b	a at B and b at A	no	–
Language	a → a	a at A and B	possible	–
Picture postcard	a → a	a at B (sometimes also at A)	no	–
Television pic- ture, film pic- ture	a → a ¹ ... b ⁿ	a ¹ ... b ⁿ at A ¹ ... B ⁿ (and usually at A)	yes	film (and to some extent TV): b ← b
Publicity poster	a → a ¹ ... b ⁿ	a ¹ ... b ⁿ at A ¹ ... B ⁿ	yes	b ← b
Fresco painting	–	a at A	no	b ← b

Fig. 4. Communication and circulation.

Some of the characteristics that Lotman attributes to information brings to memory those which are mentioned by Masuda (1980), one of the first propagandists of the information society: information is not consumable, no matter how much it is used, but it can be transferred to a new place without disappearing from the point of origin; it is not accumulated if it is not used as is the case of material goods but, on the contrary, by being used increasingly and being integrated with other information. Against Masuda as much as against Lotman it is possible to object that information must be incarnated in some type of material substance, quite apart from the fact that all access to the information depends on some material apparatuses called computers, hard discs and compact disc player. In the world of ideas the content of a book exists indefinitely; but, in reality, it evaporates with the last paper copy which moulders away or the last person that dies or forgets the content. Also

computerised information is dependant on the continuous wear of the units of storage, such as floppies and hard discs.

In this sense all information goods are temporarily limited — even though some limitations can be of relatively long duration. Roland Posner (1989) distinguishes two types of artefacts: the *transitory* ones (such as the sound of a woman's high heeled shoes against the pavement) and *enduring* ones (such as the prints that the woman's shoes may leave in clay, in particular if the latter is later dried). The transitory artefacts, in this sense, also have a material aspect, just as the lasting ones; they only have the particularity of developing in time, which is why they cannot be accumulated without first being converted. If we except the case of the animated sequences, the computer picture must be considered a lasting artefact; although it is very easy to go from a variant to another. At the same time, the computerised picture does not have the tangibility that we expect to find in an enduring artefact.

Normally, it is Posner's transitory artefacts whose development in time causes them to seem somehow "less" material (which is of course nonsense but must be taken seriously in the Lifeworld). It is easy to understand that thinkers of the Enlightenment like Diderot and Lessing could conceive of language (which they tended to imagine in its spoken form) a "more subtle material" than the picture, which endures in time (at least until air is let into the prehistoric caverns or car exhaust is allowed to devastate the frescoes of a later time). Harold Innes (1950) differentiated all cultures according as they emphasised more enduring storage media which were difficult to transport, such as stone tablets, or media which were less enduring, but easier to transport like the papyrus — in other words, according to the relative accent the cultures put on the aspect of accumulation and transport, in the sense of Lotman. In a similar way, Metz (1990) has claimed that a photograph, but not a film, could become a fetishist object, in the Freudian sense, precisely because the former has more of a material character (cf. also Sonesson 1995).

The difference between type and exemplar is described by Peirce with the terms "type" and "token" (or "replica"). In the previous phrase, for example, the word "and" appears once, considered as a type, but twice considered as a token. The letter "t" is also one type only, at the same time that only in the first sentence of the paragraph there appears eight tokens of it. This reasoning is easily extended to other systems of

meaning; a reproduction of Leonard's "Mona Lisa" is of the same type as another reproduction, but they constitute two exemplars or tokens of those which exist. Considered as a totality, this article is a single type, but it will appear in as many tokens as this book is printed. As a first approximation, it seems that it is a sign the type of which provides for more than one token which may be universally shared, in the sense of Sperber and Masuda, and which may be said to remain at the point of origin while being sent out to circulate.

Yet it is not evident that the relation between type and token always is of the same kind. It seems reasonable to say that a painting first must be made in one exemplar before existing as a type; the first exemplar serves to establish the type, from which then further exemplars can be derived. In the same way, the first exemplar of an article must be written by the author, before a type is established, which then plays the role of a directive guideline for the different exemplars that are later created. In the case of phonemes, words, musical notes and so on, the procedure is different: there is not a first "I" which only then creates the type which is then repeated. It may certainly be possible to determine when a phoneme, or in any case a word, was used for the first time, but normally this is not relevant for the native speaker. And to the extent that it becomes relevant, the typicality has changed its character.

It will be convenient to distinguish between *temporarily bound* and *temporarily free* relations between type and token; in the first case but not in the second the type is established in time by means of the creation of a first exemplar (cf. Sonesson 1998a). Tokens of temporarily free types may be sent off in all directions, but the types are still always available at the place of origin and elsewhere. The case of temporarily bound types is more complex. Written texts are temporarily bound types, but they are entirely made up of temporarily free types. The scribbles made by the famous author on the back of his bar bill may remain the only tokens of their type, if they are not rescued by his editor. But once these notes make it unto the printing house, they are made available everywhere, at the bar where they were written as well as at any other place. Until recently, a picture was almost always, from the very beginning, a temporarily bound typicality: whether it was a drawing or a photograph, all its elements were temporarily bound — although the photograph is more easily made into a first exemplar engendering an indefinite number of tokens. With the advent of com-

puter graphics, however, a picture is easily made from the combination of temporally free entities, whether these are items of clip-art or scanned images, or the product of algebraic formulas. This means that, also in the case of pictorial communication, both the temporally free and the temporally bound types may give rise to an indefinite number of tokens. Thus, also pictures may still be present at the place of origin while reaching other coasts.

The distinction between temporally bound and temporally free types is not identical to the one which Goodman (1968) makes between *autographic* and *allographical* arts. Among the temporarily bound typicalities previously mentioned, the verbal text is allographic, whereas the visual work of work is traditionally autographic; in other words, the art work, but not the work of literature, is defined as to its identity as well as its value by our inherited social practice by means of its temporary association to the first exemplar created by a certain individual. This is why we do not have to queue up in front of the Stockholm National Library to read the only exemplar of “*Röda Rummet*” written by Strindberg, while a similar conduct is expected of us in the case of a work of visual art. The copy of the novel which we may buy at any book shop is a token of the temporally bound typicality produced by Strindberg, and so is the reproduction of *Mona Lisa*, which we can buy at the Louvre. But our current social practice assigns different values to these two instances of multiple tokens from one type.

To understand the decisive events of the history of the art, we have to take into account the entire hierarchy of values present in our society: the radicality of the first ready-made that Duchamp exhibited did not consist in treating a temporally free typicality as if it were a temporarily bound one. In fact, the bottle dryer and the urinal also depend on typicalities which are temporarily bound. They are founded on some kind of prototype. The difference is to be found in the different values attributed to the first exemplar that creates the type in the production of the object of use and the work of art. By signing the urinal (with a false name, to be sure), Duchamp did not only transform a temporally bound type with an indefinite number of tokens into a type having only one token, but he also transmuted an allographic entity into an autographic one. And this is where the adventure of Modernist art begins: very soon (thanks to Linde), Duchamp’s urinal

becomes a type engendering new tokens. But to exist as art it still needs autography — the signature of the author.

Norms as normativity and normality

We will suppose that, as soon as there is a meaning, or something which could be taken as a meaning, there is a corresponding act of communication; or rather, as we said above, a double act, of creation, on the part of the sender or “addresser”; and of interpretation or concretisation, on the part of the addressee. It should be obvious that interpretation, as the term is used here, is much more general in import than in the usage of most literary critics and other interpreters of works of art. The latter mostly seem to be involved with cases in which interpretations becomes problematic, in which the trajectory from expression to content is not straightforward, but rather has to overturn obstacles to reach its goal. For my part, I don’t think there is any solid reason for postulating any absolute limit between problematic and straightforward tasks of interpretation. I also suppose that some tasks of interpretation which are problematic and/or complex do not involve art, and vice versa. Indeed, in my view, all interpretation takes its point of departure in the ongoing practice of the everyday world, and never stops being continuous with that very practice: there is thus no special kind of interpretation in the aesthetic sciences. This is also why I do not believe interpretation by “qualified” interpreters such as literary critics and art critics, or even historians of literature or art, to be different in principle from that made by laymen; it only supposes a longer and more self-reflective scrutiny, or so it is to be hoped.

From semiosis to communication

In order to reconstruct the notion of culture in anthropology, Posner (1989), in his interesting systematisation of cultural semiotics, makes use of the model of communication derived from the mathematical theory of information (Cf. Fig. 1), in addition to the Tartu school concepts. In relation to the standard version of the communication model, however, Posner introduces two new elements: he ascribes an intention to the sender; and he splits the message into the two levels of the sign, signifier and signified. In this sense, there is *communication*, when a *sender*, who finds himself in a *context*, intends to convey a *message*, consisting of a *signifier* and a *signified* correlated by a *code*, to an *addressee*, with whom he is connected by means of a *medium*.

The addressee then uses his knowledge of the code and the context to interpret the message.

Interestingly, Posner argues that *semiosis* (the process corresponding to a sign) is something wider than communication. Only a medium, a sign or a message, a context and a recipient are necessary for semiosis to occur. This means that there are two reduced cases of the communication model, which may or may not be combined. Sign processes involving no sender are called *signification*; and since there is no one around intending to communicate, the addressee is transformed into a mere recipient. Sign processes which function without a code, i.e. without any standard, conventional or innate, for correlating expression and content, are called *indication*.

Consider some of the examples given by Posner to illustrate the notion of signification, i.e. semiosis without a sender: red spots on the skin taken by the doctor as symptoms of measles; and the silhouette of a person with a skirt taken by Europeans as a sign of a woman. These examples seem to me rather problematic. In the first one, we recognise Grice's (1989: 213ff) favourite case of "non-natural meaning", which also lacks a sender. Elsewhere, I have argued that the symptoms, such as those of measles, are not signs in the full sense of the term (Soneson 1989: 17f). The expression consists of a string of features, each one of which establishes the content more firmly, i.e. with more probability.⁶ Symptoms suppose only a provisional differentiation of expression and content (cf. Piaget's criteria referred to below): when the expression in its entirety is given, the content is also given. Indeed, an illness is nothing else than the complete set of its symptoms, the last one of which may be death.

The second example is rather different, yet it is similar in not supposing any clear differentiation of expression and content. When the silhouette of a person with a skirt is used to indicate the woman's rest room, or to signify woman in Blissymbolics, expression and content are quite separate, but then the nature of the semiotic systems are such that we tend to ascribe intentionality to their use as a matter of course. At the other extreme, there is the case in which we meet a person who wears a skirt and conclude from this fact (probably along with several

⁶ This is why I find Grice's (1989: 213) claim that "those spot meant measles" entail "he had measles" dubious, if it is not justified by the retrospective view taken.

other factors) that she must be a woman. It could be argued that, here again, expression and content are not clearly differentiated: the skirt being a sign of being a woman is secondary to its being part of being a woman (this does not apply to a man, transsexual or other, who puts on a skirt, but then again this is a clear case in which we would ascribe an intention to the sign). In an article in which I discuss differences between the Occidental clothing system and the Mesoamerican one, I have suggested that for the Mesoamerican women to don a *quechquemiltl* or a *huipil* is not to signify anything, but when young women studying anthropology in Mexico City do the same thing, their apparel is a sign which is both clearly differentiated and intentional: it says something like “I am a radical person who is in favour of the self-determination of indigenous people” (Sonesson 1993b). Posner rather seems to think about seeing the shadow of a person from afar and concluding from the contours opening up below the waist that it must be a woman, which would account for this being our only clue to the sex of the person in question. Seen in this way, the case does not seem to be so different from the former one.

These examples therefore seem to suggest that semiosis without a sender is also a process in which expression and content are not clearly differentiated; or rather, in which this differentiation is operated very provisionally by the receiver, only for the purpose of interpretation. If this is so, the decision to rename the addressee into the recipient may not have been an altogether happy one, for while it is true that there is no one addressing the interpreter here, the latter is actually far from passive, as is suggested by the new term. Rather, this is the case in which the interpreter comes into his own, a case, we might say, in which the process seems to be initiated on the “receiving” end. The receiver is not only a co-sender, but in fact the only one.

There may be cases of “pure” interpretation, in this sense, but most cases are probably rather indeterminate on this scale. Consider again the case of clothing discussed above: it is true, in a sense, as suggested above, that the Mesoamerican women do not wear a *huipil* or a *quechquemiltl* or whatever, to signify something: but we know that the choice of one or another, or some combination, as well as the pattern on the cloths, originally (and to some extent even today) served to separate different tribal groups. So we can postulate some kind of *Ursituation* in which the leaders of the tribe decided (probably not very explicitly) to wear their cloths in such a way that they are dif-

ferentiated from members of other tribes. Something similar could apply to Occidental women in relation to skirts (more so, perhaps, at a time when trousers first became a possible alternative). We are confronted with cases of *remote intentionality*.

Next, let us consider the examples of indication, or semiosis without a code, given by Posner. In some cases, according to Posner, codeless semiosis is also sender-less, as is the scratching noise in a conference room which is taken by the audience as a sign that the microphone is in operation, or a person crossing the main street taken by the driver in a side street as a sign of there being no fast traffic in that part of the main street. In other cases, semiosis without a code may have a sender, as when a man intentionally imitates the involuntary body movements of a woman in order to express his sympathy with her. Finally, some sender-less sign processes may follow a code, such as when the doctor diagnoses an illness, or when we classify an abandoned piece of clothing as a skirt or a dinner-jacket.

It will be noted that Posner here generalises the notion of code (in the sense of our system of interpretation) from the ordinary meaning of being a conventional standard correlating expression and content, to include also those correlations which are somehow innately given to human beings. However, I have been unable to find any examples of the latter in Posner's article. Perhaps he would like to say that the symptoms are "innately" connected to the illness which they signify: but, clearly, what allows the doctor to make a diagnosis is not any biological fact as such, but some regularities which he (or rather, earlier physicians) have been able to observe, between the presence of certain symptoms and a particular illness. The standard of correlation in this case is thus neither innate nor conventional, at least in the sense of a correlation being postulated between expression and content.

But precisely this kind of observed regularity seems to be present in the other cases which Posner claims to occur without a code. For instance, we know that the scratching noise in the microphone signifies it is working, because we have observed that at some earlier stage; and the person crossing the main road signifies that it is free from traffic precisely because we have observed that relationship earlier (or rather, it is an interpretation based on our anticipation of coherence). The skirt as a sign of a woman is certainly also an observation made in a particular Lifeworld, rather than an explicit convention. Indeed, even the imitation of a woman's involuntary movements to signify sympathy

thy only can be meaningful if we have observed such imitation to convey sympathy beforehand.⁷

In many other contexts, I have suggested that meaning starts out from that which is normal, i.e., expected to occur, rather than that which is normative, i.e. prescribed. Husserl talks about “the normal way of behaviour which things have” (Cf. Sonesson 1994a, b; 1996a, b). Indeed, Peirce had a name for interpretation based on that which is normal in the world of our experience: *abduction*. We start from a single fact and conclude to another single fact based on a regularity which is merely taken for granted. Thus, for instance, in Peirce’s example, we know that somebody is a sailor because he walks in a way which we have come to expect of sailors. This seems to be exactly the same kind of regularity occurring in the world taken for granted which appears in most of Posner’s examples.

Contrary to Posner, then, we will talk about a system of interpretation each time there is a standard of correlation between expression and content, based on some regularity, something which is or can be repeated all over again. This standard may be based on convention, observation or innate relationships. It seems to me, however, that an innate correlation could only be the foundation of a relationship of interpretation, to the extent that it becomes conscious as such.

Like our earlier discussion of semiosis without a sender, this one has had the effect of shifting the initiative from the sender to the receiver or, better, to the interpreter. For the “code”, in the sense of an observed regularity, is something which is contributed by the interpreter (although a member of some interpretative community), not some shadowy creator. Rather than considering semiosis without a sender as a degenerative case of semiosis, we should start from the other end. Given the Prague school model of communication, for instance, we should allow for cases in which concretisation precedes the artefact, in the sense of being the first thing making it into an artefact, as happens when phases of an on-going process are singled out as expressions of later stages (Cf. Fig 2 and 3).

⁷ The example is curious, because what we know from the study of non-verbal interaction, is that we tend to unintentionally repeat the movements and positions of those persons with whom we feel sympathy. This then would be a case of an “innate” standard of correlation between signifier and signified. A man who imitates a woman’s movements intentionally would only be able to do it based on an observation of such unconsciously produced regularities.

The pragmatic fallacy

In the following, I intend to take exception to the currently reigning model in the analysis of meaning, usually known as the “pragmatic model”, in order to suggest that semiotics is a better alternative. It may certainly seem strange to oppose semiotics and pragmatics. One of the two well-known pioneers of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, called his own philosophical stance pragmatism (and later pragmaticism). And even the term pragmatics itself originated as a subdivision of semiotics, proposed by Morris with reference to what he understood to be the dimensions of the Peircean sign. The point is not whether Morris understood Peirce correctly. The problem really begins when Morris’s tripartition is taken over by Carnap: the third part becomes what Bar-Hillel has characterised as “the pragmatic waste-basket”, the place where you put problem you cannot or will not resolve. It seems to me that, even today, after Grice and Searle, pragmatics essentially remains as “waste-basket”. In order to get rid of this overflowing waste-basket, however, we may have to tolerate a little more disorder on the desktop.⁸

While Bar-Hillel may have been preoccupied by the lack of formalisation, what worries me is the absence of explanatory power: “pragmatic” approaches leaves as a complete mystery how meaning is conveyed.⁹ Semiotics, on the other hand, is about *how* something means, over and above *what* something means. So while it may be better to speak about the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions of a meaningful event, instead of three different sciences (as suggested by Eco 1992: 283ff), analysis will only be complete when the pragmatic dimension has been resolved into the semantics of another semiotic system. Thus we can give all semiotic systems their

⁸ In the most thorough attempt to define the limits of semantics and pragmatics I know of, Levinson (1983: 5ff) has to admit he is unable to do so. Even his half-hearted suggestions that it can be done by defining semantics are merely “truth-functional” breaks down, when he later observes (p. 122ff) that implicatures must have access to a much richer semantic interpretation.

⁹ It is true that this is not always the case in the study of implications (cf. Levinson 1983: 97ff); it must be admitted that Sperber & Wilson (1986) sometimes go to great lengths to find the missing expression.

due, without unduly privileging verbal language; and we will be able to explain the *how* of meaning, not just its presence.

In the following, I will take “pragmatics” (or, better, “contextualism”) to be the idea that meaning is not the result of some general standard of interpretation, but is produced in a context, understood as some peculiar co-ordinates of time and space, and resulting from the specific intentions an individual brings to such a context.¹⁰ Semiotics, then, is the opposite idea, according to which there is always some kind of regularity which accounts for the possibility of meaning being conveyed, and intentions are only part of the content present in certain types of signs. The claim for the semiotical character of the present model rest on its being derived from the basic concept of the sign. In the present context, it is of no avail whether we follow the Peircean or the Saussurean tradition: indeed, we are concerned with such basic properties of the sign that we could even refer to proto-semiotic work antedating both Peirce and Saussure. For the same reason, the model to be suggested is not vulnerable to the critique of the sign voiced inside semiotics, as, for instance, by Greimas and Eco: the sign, in our sense, is not necessarily static but could be seen as more of a process; and the expression plane of the sign is not necessarily continuous and perfectly delimited.

A sign, then, in our sense, consists of an expression and a content, which form a unity of inter-defining terms, and it is linked to a (potential) referent in the outside world. The trouble is that, as far as I have been able to discover, all semiotical traditions take the terms “expression” and “content” as givens. Elsewhere, I have tried to define these terms, with extensive help from Husserl and Landgrebe, on one hand, and Piaget, and the other (cf. Sonesson 1989: 49ff, 193ff). The expression is that which is directly given without being thematic, while the content is indirectly given and thematic. Normally, expression and content are discontinuous, both in the sense of being felt to represent different categories, and in the sense of the one not going over into the other in space or time. This accounts for what, following cognitive psychology, we will call the *prototype* of the sign: the

¹⁰ This seems to me to be true of most currents of contemporary hermeneutics, as well as of speech act analysis and much of linguistic pragmatics; and it is also true, as we will see, of at least some formulations due to the Bakhtin circle.

central instance of the category. But as some of these criteria fail to apply, we go continuously over to meanings which are less signs, or not signs at all. As we know from genetic psychology (cf. Sonesson 1992), such as transition happens in the development of the child, even though it may never had happened in ontogeny (as claimed by Sperber & Wilson 1986: 53, 258). The symptom model of the sign, which may be relevant to perception, if not entirely to pictures, can be described as the case in which the complete series of expressions is equivalent to the content (cf. Sonesson 1989: 17f, 1992a). The domain of interpretation is thus wider than the prototypical sign.

So far it may seem that at least the prototypical sign concords with what Sperber & Wilson call “the code model”; but this model clearly supposes the connection between expression and content to be a convention, which is something which I see no reason to accept. In the following, I will allow the standards of interpretation to be based on iconic and indexical links, as well as symbolic ones; and, contrary to what Sperber & Wilson imply, I think most semioticians would do the same today. In this respect, I certainly side with the Peircean tradition, rather than the Saussurean one, at least as the latter was interpreted by the French Structuralists and their contemporaries, such as Eco, in the seventies.¹¹ But it should not be forgotten that there is a venerable semiotic tradition, before Peirce and Saussure, for distinguishing different kinds of “grounds” making something into a sign (cf. Deely 1982; Manetti 1993).

Given this general concept of the sign, an act of interpretation can be seen as process in which something (an expression) is taken as evidence for the presence of something else (a content and, beyond that, a referent). In the case of verbal language, it is easy to think of some kind of “originary” situation, in which a speaker produces sign after sign, until the evidence for his meaning is complete, as manifested by the hearer. This whole sequence of signs then seems to form part of the same act of interpretation. In some cases, common in the arts, the sequence of signs is completed before reception takes place, so that any further sign required will be part of another act of interpretation. In non-verbal semiotic systems, its more difficult to establish an originary act of communication. Thus, in the case of visual communication, it is possible to think of the case when we make ever

¹¹ This was actually the main point of Sonesson 1989.

new or revised sketches of the street systems, until our interlocutor understands how he is going to reach our house. But this is a marginal situation: the normal case, in visual communication, rather seems to be the foreclosed series.

Two observations are in order: meaning is here, if not defined by, at least essentially dependant on, being seen from *the point of view of the hearer* or, more generally, the addressee. This is a conception which is implied by the Peircean sign model, and more generally by Peirce's idea that everything is addressed to another subject (cf. Colapietro 1989); it is also clearly built into the Prague school model of communication (see Sonesson 1992: 100ff). Grice (1989: 352f) has objected to such a characterisation, on the ground that hearer's meaning would have to refer to speaker's meaning. It is however a basic postulate of the view defended here, that both speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning are relative to the meaning of the signs. But even if we should go along with Grice in taking speaker's meaning as primary, the point of view of the hearer is important. A speaker may very well mean something in the sense of having an opinion; but he can only mean something in the sense of conveying a meaning, if there is somebody to which this meaning is conveyed (at least potentially). It is true, of course, that we all know, "semioticians included" (as Sperber & Wilson 1986: 24 put it) what the speaker's intentions are, in general, what counts. But it is not only the case, as Peirce tells us (quoted in Colapietro 1989: 105) that "it is much safer to define all mental characters as far as possible in terms of their outward manifestation"; in communication, it is the very business of the mental characters to become outwardly manifested.

The second observation is that, in characterising the sign from the point of view of the addressee, we have described something which sounds very much like *inference*. Within the semiotic tradition, signs have often been seen as inferences (cf. Manetti 1993), Peirce, of course, distinguished three types, induction, deduction, and, most notably, abduction. We can even enlist the support of Grice (1989: 349ff), who suggests that the two meaning concepts he describes may share the property of being consequences. On the other hand, Sperber & Wilson (1986: 13) claim all kinds of inferences will come out of confusing signs and inferences; the former, they say, are "not warranted". In the case of the symptom model, which we described above, such a distinction cannot be maintained: indeed, it is probably because they fail to

note the peculiarities of the linguistic situation of communication which we mentioned above, that Sperber & Wilson wants to maintain the distinctions between the “code” and the inferences.

Thus far, we have been able to side with Grice, but now we must part company with him. The common sense dogma which is at the heart of pragmatics as a current of thinking is formulated by Grice (1989: 340) as the second part of his fourth strand: “what words means is a matter of what people mean by them”. In one sense this is trivially true: in all communication, as was suggested above, the addressee is directed to the intentions of the addresser. But there is no way for the addressee to reach these intentions other than by means of some kind of sign which conveys them, either the sign of interpretation, or some other sign interpreted for the sake of the first sign. And it is from these basis that the varieties of interpretation may be adequately distinguished.

The Context as Another Text

One of the properties which characterises the speech act (or “pragmatist”) approach is the reliance on context for the determination of meaning, to the detriment of rules and regularities. I will examine, first, some examples given by Voloshinov, which seem to me to embody the extreme case of the pragmatist approach;¹² and then I will suggest that more well-known cases cited by Grice and his followers can be treated in the same manner.

The first example offered by Voloshinov (1983a: 10ff; cf. 1986) involves two persons sitting together in the room in silence, whereupon one of them utters the single word “Well”, without receiving any answer from the other. Taken in isolation, Voloshinov claims, this utterance is completely void and meaningless. Even if we add that the intonation of the word was indignantly reproachful, but softened with a touch of humour, we are not much advanced. In order to interpret the utterance, we have to acquire knowledge about the spatial purview common to both speakers, as well as of their common knowledge and understanding of the circumstances, and their evaluation of those

¹² It seems evident to me that Voloshinov is not just a pen-name for Bakhtin (for which see now also Morison & Emerson 1991), but on this particular issue the position of both men seem rather close. Cf. Bakhtin 1986.

circumstances. In this case, it so happens that they are seated in front of a window, and that when looking out of it they discover that it is snowing. They both know that it is May, which, in Russia, means that they are in their right to expect spring to begin. Finally, they are both longing for the beginning of spring and they are sick and tired of winter. Given these circumstances, Voločinov maintains, the meaning of the utterance becomes completely clear.

The second example is interesting because Voloshinov (1983b: 124ff) here presents us with two sets of circumstances which could be referred to the same utterance giving it different meanings (and because, in some ways, it is a dialogue). However, what recurs in both these situations is not entirely verbal, either (although Voloshinov fails to mention this fact): a man with a grey beard, sitting at a table, says, after a minute's silence, "H'm", after which a young man who stands in front of him flushes deeply, turns around and goes away. In one case, this event takes place at an examiner's table, and the examinee has just answered wrongly on one of the simplest questions put to him. Although the examiner's reproachful utterance contains some sympathy, the examinee feels ashamed and goes away. In the second case, the event takes place at a cash-desk, where a cashier hands over a fat bundle of notes, the winnings, making his utterance with a slightly envious admiration.

Voloshinov's claim is that there is nothing constant in these situations apart from the expression plane of the word (excluding even the intonation and other paralinguistic features). The same expression has "totally different meanings" (1983b: 126). The idea of there being an system of normatively identical language forms which the individual consciousness finds ready-made results from linguistics having mostly studied dead languages (1983c: 35, 42). For the speaker a linguistic form is important not as a stable and self-identical signal, but as an ever changeable and flexible sign. Signals are recognised, but understanding requires something much more than recognition (1983c: 40f).¹³

¹³ In other passages, Voloshinov (as well as the late Bakhtin 1986), actually tries to steer between the Scylla of "abstract objectivism" (Saussure) and the Charybdis of "individualistic subjectivism" (Spitzer, Croce), but the quoted passages are in contradiction to this goal. However, we are not interested in interpreting Voloshinov here, but in giving an extreme example of the pragmatist model.

The most obvious objection to Voloshinov's examples is that they are in no way typical of the use of verbal language, nor, indeed of any other semantically rich semiotic system (such as pictures, for instance). In both cases, the same message could be delivered by much more elementary means: by a grunt or some other non-linguistic sound (which is perhaps how "H'm" should be classified), by some gesture, or even by simply turning the gaze in some particular direction. It seems rather strange to speak about signs as something in which the only constant element is the expression (which then is not even an expression, properly speaking) and about signals when recognition is required (which supposes a mapping from expression to something else, i.e. a content). Indeed, what Voloshinov here describes seems much closer to phonemes, graphemes and other elements of the second articulation (in which case the repetition on the expression plane does not entail any repetition of the content plane). In no typical situation of communication, either in language or in pictures, could the constant element on the content side be so reduced. Not even an "abstract" picture would seem to carry so little content.

Another objection would be to say that examples such as these make for a very poor start in the study of literature or art in general, indeed, in the study of any "text" which is made to be interpreted outside of the context of its production, even such a "speech genre of ordinary language" (as Bakhtin 1986 would have said) as a letter. In the case of written language, according to a famous Plato quote, the "father" of the text is normally not around to attend to his "child"; and, in the case of other semiotic systems, such as pictures, this is the normal case, as we suggested above. That is why contexts must either be rendered as text, that is, circumstances must be transformed into a part of the utterance, or the message must be of such a kind that it can be interpreted without knowledge of attendant circumstances. In fact, what Voloshinov himself does in the articles quoted is precisely to follow the first procedure.¹⁴

The basic objection, however, is of a different order, because it will apply not only to the extreme case of pragmatism, as exemplified

¹⁴ Indeed, in Voloshinov's second situation, as I noted above, what is constant in the two versions is not only the verbal signs, but signs of several other semiotic systems, such as the beard, the sitting position, the minute of silence, etc.

by the Bakhtin circle, but to all pragmatist approaches. It consists in saying that meaning is still, in these descriptions, of the order of generality, i.e. it involves constant elements which can be repeated, or “iterated”, tokens which must be referred to a type. Consider the case of the spatial purview: the point here is precisely that what can be seen by both parties to the conversation is the same. Of course, it is impossible for two persons to see exactly the same environment, even in a purely physical sense, as Bakhtin (1990), along with Husserl and Schütz (1964, 1967), has forcefully demonstrated. But there is a sense in which they may be said to see the same-for-the-purpose-of-the-conversation, and it is precisely this which explains that Voloshinov is able to render this element in his description of the situation. The identical argument applies to the “common knowledge” and the “common evaluation” involved in the situation. There is something which is repeated from the first to the second participant in the conversation, and it is precisely this which is repeated a third time by Voloshinov interpreting the situation. Context is not some mystical communion between speaker and listener: it consists of iterable elements stemming from other semiotic systems than language.

What has been said so far about the examples given by the Bakhtin circle also apply to those of Grice and his followers. In one case, Grice (1989: 93ff) goes to his regular tobacconist (from whom he also purchases other goods) for a pack of his regular brand of cigarettes, and instead of saying anything, he puts down the sum of 43 cents, which is the price of the pack, on the counter. The tobacconist understands what Grice wants and hands him the pack. In this case, Grice claims, he has meant something (“non-naturally”, I suppose), which he had not in case he had put down the money on the counter only to demonstrate that he was in possession of the sum necessary for buying the pack. This example obviously supposes that none of the other goods which Grice is in the habit of buying from his tobacconist have the cost of 43 cents. It is possible, of course, that Grice has already bought something else having this price, but then it has not been one of those things he *habitually* buys. So, in this example, the gesture of putting down a particular sum on the counter only means something because there is a regular connection, known to Grice and the tobacconist, between the sum and the pack of cigarettes. It so happens that the relation between the sum and the product is conventionally as-

signed; but what makes the connection meaningful here is the observation of a regularity in the behaviour of Grice.¹⁵

Next, consider an example from Sperber & Wilson (1986: 55). When Peter opens the door to their apartment, Mary stops and sniffs ostensibly. Following her example, Peter notices that there is a smell of gas. What Mary does, according to Sperber & Wilson, can be paraphrased as “There is a smell of gas”. On another occasion, Mary and Peter have just arrived at the seaside. Mary opens the window overlooking the sea and sniffs ostensibly. In this case, Sperber & Wilson maintains, there is no one particular thing which Mary may be said to mean. In fact, however, I think it is reasonable to say that Mary does the same thing on both occasions: by exaggerating the movements associated with smelling, she manages to frame off the movement, so that it appears as an iconic sign of what it would otherwise be. This gesture means “There is a smell worthy of notice”. No doubt the kinds of things we expect to smell at our doorstep and from a hotel room overlooking the beach are appreciably different. It could actually be argued that both stories correspond to type situations, which we have all experienced many times, if not in life so at least at the cinema, so that we will immediately know what kinds of smells are being referred to.

Let us now consider a somewhat more subtle example. In his *Memories*, a prime minister of Sweden in the last century, Louis De Geer, tells us about the circumstances in which he found out that his future wife, Caroline Wachtmeister, returned his love. He tells her that he finds the summer residence of her family so enchanting, that he could quite understand if she never wanted to leave it. After a moment's reflection, she answers him: “The people here are more dear to me than the place itself”. This answer, together with the fact that she hesitates before giving it, inspires in De Geer the conviction that she loves him: she would not hesitate to leave the place with somebody she loves, and she would not admit this to somebody she did not like. Pettersson (1990: 60f), who retells this story, concludes that “communication is not an end in itself”. The question, however, is how all this is conveyed by Miss Wachtmeister's answer. For my part, I would

¹⁵ I fail to see the point of saying that, in the other instance, nothing is meant. Of course, the message that Grice wants a particular brand of cigarettes has apparently been conveyed in some other way. But there must be some factor, for instance, in the attitude of the tobacconist, which makes the showing of the money mean “I have money”.

certainly had drawn the opposite conclusion from the one De Geer does. So either De Geer is making a wild guess, which, for all we know, turns out to be correct; or there is some regularity, either in the behaviour of upper class people at the time, or in Miss Wachtmeister's own behaviour, which justifies his conclusion. So, once again, meaning is only possible because there is a regularity.

Neither the Bakhtin circle, nor any other "pragmatist" seems to me to have any rival theory to offer about how interpretation is possible. If meaning does not rely on constant elements, in fact, if it includes something beyond constant elements, it is not clear in which way interpretation in the common sense world differs from telepathy or god-sent illumination. Bakhtin, it is true, proposes at least two elements of a rival theory, but, contrary to what he seems to think, they are only partial and no substitute for a theory built on rules-governed interpretation.

The first element has to do with that which first made Bakhtin famous in the West, the idea underlying Kristeva's notion of *intertextuality* as the meaning derived from the relationship to some other texts being recognisable as the background of the text to be interpreted. Thus, for instance, Bakhtin (1982: 401) observes that "every discourse has its own selfish and biased proprietor; there are no words 'belonging to no one'." A text which refers to another text, either by simply reproducing it, or by somehow modifying it, thus depends for its interpretation on the identification of this other text. It is true that, unlike Kristeva and her followers, Bakhtin is not interested in the relationship between the given text and another particular text by a named author: before the passage quoted above, he speaks about the language of priests, of peasants, etc., and elsewhere he refers to standardised phrases, maxims, familiar sayings, and the like. Once he even tells us that the reference to another particular author in a text is of little interest.¹⁶ From this point of view, Bakhtin's conception is quite different from the familiar reduction of his idea to the traditional study of influences.

¹⁶ In Sonesson 1994c I tried to transplant "intertextuality" to "picture depictions", which I construed as consisting of a recognisable picture which was the referent and some kind of "commentary". Thus, I also failed to note that the essential issue for Bakhtin did not involve individual cases.

However, neither the traditional study of influences, nor the dialogicity between texts which interests Bakhtin, are what they seem to be: they are both possible kinds of interpretation, because they operate on the level of *types*, not tokens, i.e. they depend on our recognition of constant elements. Indeed, what Bakhtin here refers to is the repertory of standard phrases which Merleau-Ponty (1971) — erroneously, of course — identifies with Saussure's concept of "langue". But Merleau-Ponty's confusion is understandable, to the extent that these phrases are types, not tokens, and the same is actually true of any work of art. Above, I have noted the different nature of two kinds of types, the *temporally free types*, such as phonemes, words, and syntactic patterns, which are not experienced as having an origin in time, and the *temporally bound types*, such as a novel or a painting, in which case the first token produces the type at a particular moment in time and space, after which more tokens may be derived from the type (cf. Sonesson 1998a). Only in the second case does the sign really "belong to someone".¹⁷

Thus, it seems we will have to distinguish two levels of generality, the element of the system which is not dated, and the token which is felt to repeat a dated type. Bakhtin's second proposal is in fact explicitly concerned with generality, and it is more of the order of our first type of typicality: the *speech genres*. Although he insists that utterances are always individual, Bakhtin (1986) claims that we have access to "*relatively stable types*" (his italics) of utterances, which permit us to determine, at one stroke, words, syntax, context, social relations, set of values, sense of time and space, possible actions, and so on. These speech genres do not only correspond to well-known literary forms as the novel and the poem, but also include smaller com-

¹⁷ Of course, words, and even phonemes, have their origin in time (and space), but that is not relevant in the process of interpretation. It is also true, as Bakhtin and, in particular, Voloshinov would have said, that "standard language" can be seen as being imposed on everybody by a particular class or other social group, in which case it also "belongs to someone". But only in a case where this is felt to be true by the speakers of the language would the question whose voice standard language incarnates be relevant to interpretation.

binations of linguistic elements of which these, as well as everyday conversation, are made up.¹⁸

Bakhtin is of course not the only one to talk about the importance of genres to interpretation: both Hirsch and Gombrich have made the same observation. Indeed, Danto's famous example of the telephone book being presented as a work of visual art is of this kind, although it is not clear what the clues to this sea-change would be. But in the real world, Duchamp's presentation of the urinal as a art-object is precisely this kind of genre shift, which is operated by its being placed in a particular place, the art gallery, in which particular genre conventions apply (cf. Sonesson 1992, 1996a). The uproar about the Benetton publicity was due to the fact that pictures containing internal cues for news photographs were presented in a frame which categorised them as advertisements. But the important fact is that, in all these cases, meaning is only possible, because there is a regularity, which, given one element, makes us expect another.¹⁹

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¹⁸ These two types of typicality, to the exclusion of anything similar to the language system, is normally what we find in pictures.

¹⁹ For more discussion of pragmatics versus semiotics, see Sonesson in press d.

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Жизнь знаков в обществе и вне его: критика критики коммуникации

Ставится вопрос о модели коммуникации, которая соответствовала бы рассмотрению культуры в текстуальном аспекте, тому, каким образом соотносятся общие свойства коммуникации и семиозиса.

Исходя из этого, рассматриваются пространство, время, позиция субъекта, роли интерпретации и нормы и т.п. в процессе коммуникации, имея в виду и сравнивая лингвистическую, экономическую и антропологическую циркуляции. Подчеркивается, что в моделях коммуникации под особым вниманием оказывается трансформация смысла, а не его создание. Сравняется подход к проблемам коммуникации в работах тартуско-московской и пражской школ и в трудах Бахтина и Волошинова.

Märkide elu ühiskonnas ja väljaspool seda: kommunikatsioonikriitika kriitika

Püstitatakse küsimus, milline on see kommunikatsiooni mudel, mis sobiks kokku kultuuri tekstuaalse käsitlusega, ehk kuidas suhestuvad kommunikatsiooni ja semioosise üldised omadused. Sellest lähtudes vaadeldakse ruumilisust, ajalisust, subjekti positsiooni, interpretatsiooni ja normi rolli jm. kommunikatsioonis, silmas pidades ja võrreldes lingvistilist, majanduslikku ja antropoloogilist tsirkulatsiooni. Rõhutatakse, et kommunikatsiooni mudeleis on tähelepanu all tähenduse transformatsioon, mitte selle loomine. Võrreldakse kommunikatsiooni käsitlust Tartu ja Praha koolkondades ning Bahtini ja Voloshinovi töödes.