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Global and local: Encyclopedic meaning revisited

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Abstract: This essay deals directly with the issues of meaning, language use, and communication as they connect with the concept of Encyclopedia. It provides an in-depth investigation into linguistic understanding as an interpretative process and not as a simple passage of information. This reading coincides with various studies in pragmatics, as well as with recent research in more narrowly linguistic fields.

Keywords: Eco, encyclopedia, meaning, interpretation, lexical semantics

1 Introduction

Lexical semantics seems to be trapped in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, it seems natural to associate lexical items with stable meanings; on the other hand, whenever one tries to describe these meanings in a generalized and principled form there seems to be no viable way out. All attempts in this direction have turned out to be unsuccessful, starting with the strict compositional models of structural semantics and up to the rather more flexible prototypical models that however cannot manage to cope adequately with the problem of context. Since meaning is always to some extent underdetermined, semantic models seem always either too rich and constrictive, or too poor and simplistic.

Confronted with such a dilemma, in both semiotics and cognitive semantics the notion of Encyclopedia has recently become fashionable. The complexity of word meanings cannot be represented by any kind of closed model, but must be seen as connected to a very broad and open repertoire of all kinds of knowledge, including contextual information.

However, the notion of Encyclopedia is not, and cannot be, a lexical model; it is instead a regulative theoretical hypothesis postulating how lexical meanings may be connected to a highly complex knowledge background. In other words, the Encyclopedia may be seen as standing for the general semantic

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potential of words. A complex semantic potential of this kind cannot be fully described, but only locally reconstructed. Such a theoretical perspective impacts radically on our usual way of thinking of the semantic type as a kind of general schema for meaning that can be affected in various ways by different types of contexts. Indeed, the basic idea of meaning when conceived in terms of semantic types may be questioned, together with the complementary notion of contextual deviation.

If we adopt a localist and textual approach to lexical meaning, as has been happening lately within the semiotic framework, the whole idea of abstraction and semantic idealization needs to be radically reviewed. Such a move implies an equally drastic rethinking of the traditional communicative model, which, since Saussure and Frege, has been based on the existence of a shared general semantic schema, accessible simultaneously by all participants in a communicative exchange. In this article, an alternative model is presented, one that parallels the “normal” process of communication to that of language acquisition, claiming that one and the same mechanism regulates both language use and language acquisition, and stressing the aspect of lifelong learning implicit also in the everyday use of word meanings.

2 The paradox of lexical semantics

The analysis of lexical meaning has always seemed caught up in a somewhat curious paradox: on the one hand, terms seem undoubtedly and almost “naturally” to refer back to a core of stable, intersubjectively shared meanings and, on the other, any systematic and general attempt to describe such meanings runs up against a series of problems for which, even to this day, no satisfactory solution has been found. We could say that the history of lexical semantics is, in part, the history of these failures. The first was the failure represented by structuralist models.

Research in lexical semantics over the last twenty years, even though there are differences between their various presuppositions and results, recognizes the impossibility of reaching an unambiguous, definitive lexical model. Terms are not associated with fixed, predefined meanings nor is it possible to decompose them semantically into a limited and closed set of features, as the structuralist project had claimed. In all its versions,¹ the structuralist approach aimed at a

¹ The strong componential hypothesis is not exclusive only to European structuralism, but runs through all the research in lexical semantics, from the models of Katz and Fodor in the 1970s and 1980s, right up to the more recent attempts in the computational field.

semantic decomposition into minimal units of meaning that, when subsequently combined, would provide the entire semantic system with all its possible conceivable lexical variations. The essence of such a project consists in reducing the number of variants to a restricted nucleus of invariants, perhaps the best-known and theoretically most articulated formulation of which is to be found in Hjelmslev (1943).

The structuralist project was successful regarding the treatment of the expression plane of language. Phonology provided the basic inventory of minimal features through the combination of which, the complete expression plane of a language can be reproduced. It was therefore, in principle, possible to expect to produce the same closed system of minimal features for the content plane. However, it soon became clear that it was impossible to determine a fixed and stable nucleus of invariant features on the content plane which could predict every possible use in every given context.

The illusion of being able to achieve total stability on the content plane probably arose from what we can define as “the illusion of the signifier.” There is indeed something that remains constant in the different contexts and this is the signifier.² Since in the various contexts “the same term” (signifier) always recurs, why not assume that the content to which this term refers also maintains the same stability? But the two planes of language are not isomorphic and do not function on the basis of the same parameters. A conceptualization more closely linked to reality is that of the signifier as a vector of relative stability that “traverses” various contexts, situations and uses, locally determining in each case a partially different content configuration.

It is impossible, therefore, to define an overall minimal set of conditions that are always valid for the application of some given term, unless these conditions are reduced to such a restrictive limit that it would, in practice, drain it of any content. Lexical semantics seems imprisoned in a dead end without any exit: the underdetermination of word meanings always ends up making lexical models either far too specific or not specific enough. A model that is too rich becomes “unwieldy” and thus not sufficiently adaptable to contextual variability, and one which is too poor and over-simplified runs the risk of becoming vacuous. The structuralist models were certainly, from this point of view, too impoverished and at the same time overly rigid, as shown by the many criticisms levelled against them since the 1970s from a wide variety of disciplinary

² This is, of course, true only in part, because even the individual term, identified as a constant unit, is the result of a process of abstraction from each occurrence, infinitely variable, particularly if we consider oral production. The stability of the abstract process, however, alights on two different levels and produces different results.

perspectives. For example, from philosophy, by Putnam (1975) with his theory of stereotypes and linguistic community. From psychology, through the research Eleanor Rosch initiated in the mid-1970s on the structures of categories and concepts. Her research led to the notion of prototype that has been used extensively since then in lexical semantics. And from semiotics, specifically through the criticism of dictionary models and the preference for encyclopedic models (see Eco 1975a and Eco 1984a).

The insuperable limit of all the strictly compositional models of meaning is obviously the issue of context. Each strong model of meaning aims at unambiguously determining the conditions for its application (it is not just by chance that these models speak of “necessary and sufficient conditions”), thus showing themselves to be *context-insensitive*; in other words, non-adaptable to the continuous variations that inevitably characterize linguistic meaning. The role of context in lexical semantic representations immediately brings into play the pragmatic component of language and opens the perennial, never resolved, issue of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics. This opening to pragmatics, although an obligatory step, in fact poses more problems than it resolves given the elusive and essentially indefinable nature of context, which can range from the simple “linguistic surroundings” sometimes defined as a co-text, to the virtually infinite set of all extra-linguistic elements which arise in actual enunciation situations.³ Context thus appears to be a sort of real “black hole” for lexical semantics not only because it is difficult to delimit, but also because it affects in quite different ways the “inferential computations” that ought to lead us to the desired interpretation. If then the *pars destruens* of dictionary models proves to be relatively easy, it is much more difficult to articulate a positive model which overcomes their limitations.

At this moment, and once we have accepted the impossibility of a closed structural model of meaning, there seem to be two principal directions that emerge in semantic research, taking into consideration only linguistically oriented perspectives.⁴ These can substantially be traced back to two divergent, mutually opposed strategies: on the one hand, an “emptying,” so to say, of the

³ On the variety of possible accessions depending on context, see Duranti and Goodwin (1992).

⁴ I shall not deal with philosophical literature here. It is, however, worth noting how one of most important areas of current research, the theory of direct reference dealt with in the works of Kripke (1972) and Putnam (1975), moves explicitly, particularly in Putnam, from a hide-bound criticism to dictionary-based models, akin to those being developed, over the same period, in psychology and cognitive linguistics. In the theory of direct reference, however, the criticism of compositional models, which hark back to the notion of a Fregean sense, resolves itself by abandoning every representational form of meaning in favor of the sole indexical component of reference.

semantic, placing the whole explanatory burden on the pragmatic, and on the other hand, a virtually unlimited extension of the semantic component towards an encyclopedic model. If the first of these two trends mainly characterizes the research paradigm of *Relevance Theory*, as well as the varied field of studies that goes by the name of *Lexical Pragmatics*, the second trend is, on the other hand, dominant in research on Cognitive Semantics. This is what one of its main exponents has to say on the subject:

One of the central tenets of cognitive semantics is that the meaning of words is encyclopedic: everything you know about the concept is a part of its meaning ... Thus, that aspect of “pragmatics” which involves the employment of “world knowledge” or “commonsense knowledge,” and even contextual knowledge (since the speech act context is part of our world knowledge, albeit a very specific piece of knowledge), becomes part of semantics. (Croft 1993: 336–337)

It is interesting to note that, with the assumption by semantics of the role normally ascribed to pragmatics, cognitive linguistics differs from functional linguistics with which, however, it shares many other basic assumptions and moves somewhat closer to the semiotic paradigm.

For Eco too, meaning cannot be anything else but encyclopedic, where the Encyclopedia is “the ensemble of all registered interpretations, conceivable in objective terms as the library of all libraries, where a library is also an archive of all the non-verbal information that has somehow been recorded, from rock paintings to film libraries” (Eco 1984a: 109, my translation).⁵

Now, an Encyclopedia of this kind, which includes all given interpretations, inevitably removes any possible distinction between, not only semantics and pragmatics, but also between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, the three areas into which traditionally, from Morris onwards, semiotics has been divided and that, in Eco’s perspective, are united within the totality of semiosis.

Pragmatics cannot be a discipline with its proper object as distinguished from those of semantics and syntactics. The three provinces of semiotics are dealing with the same disciplinary “object” ... The object of pragmatics is that same process of semiosis that also syntactics and semantics focus on under different profiles. But a social and perhaps biological process such as semiosis can never be reduced to one, and only one, among its possible profiles. (Eco 1990: 205)

⁵ This passage as well as others on which the writer dwells, do not appear in *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language* (1984), but only in the Italian text. Original Italian is: “l’insieme registrato di tutte le interpretazioni, concepibile oggettivamente come la libreria delle librerie, dove una libreria è anche un archivio di tutta l’informazione non verbale in qualche modo registrata, dalle pitture rupestri alle cineteche” (Eco 1984a: 109).

Now, if we return to the more circumscribed problem of lexical semantics, leaving aside for a moment the preoccupation with foundational issues at the basis of Eco's theoretical formulations, we see that the Encyclopedia is first and foremost a theoretical hypothesis, rather than an operational concept that can be applied to the description of lexical meanings. In reality, the Encyclopedia cannot ever be represented in its totality and this is, rather than being a limiting factor of the model, its principal qualifying feature. Let's take another look at what Eco has to say on this: "The Encyclopedia is a semiotic postulate ... It must remain a postulate because in fact it cannot be described in its entirety" (1984: 109, my translation).⁶

There are various reasons for this descriptive impossibility, which range from the impossibility of materially classifying all the interpretations included in the Encyclopedia, which are infinite, to all the possible contradictions and inconsistencies within such an inseparable whole, to the continuous transformation of the Encyclopedia, which would render every description virtually outdated as soon as it had been formulated. It is therefore quite obvious why such a model cannot be immediately applicable within lexical semantics.

However, although descriptions of the Encyclopedia at global level do not exist, they do exist at local levels, making it possible to construct local portions of the Encyclopedia on a case by case basis, thus creating specific contextually delimited interpretations that themselves might become the object of lexical semantics. This possibility seems reasonable, yet it still leaves many crucial questions unanswered. For instance, just how local ought a local representation to be? In other words, does each individual lexical instance have a description of its own that can be reconstructable solely on the basis of each individual text or specific context, or does there exist an internal structure, a shared platform on which different contexts can operate, a sort of margin of describable regularity? The insistence on describability seems essential since, although difficult to deny, the existence of some fundamental regularity in lexical meaning, the real problem for lexical semantics is in dealing with lexical meanings in a *systematic* way. If this proves impossible, it means we must renounce the notion of a general *theory* of lexical meaning. But, as we shall see, such a renunciation has significant theoretical consequences; first, the need to re-think the very foundations of the communicative mechanism, as previously sketched out by Saussure. In other words, the abandoning of a general and systematic treatment of the lexicon implies a radical re-thinking of the connection between meaning and communication and how they interact with one another.

⁶ Original Italian from *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*: "L'Enciclopedia è un postulato semiotico... Deve rimanere un postulato perché di fatto non è descrivibile nella sua totalità" (1984: 109).

Before venturing along this path, it is however necessary to understand whether a systematic lexical description really is impossible, and, if so, for what reasons. The idea that terms refer to a stable and definable meaning seems so natural and self-evident that we do not see why we should so easily abandon the attempt to describe it.

In the following pages, I shall tackle this problem within a semiotic perspective, formulating it in terms of the relationship between global and local representations, even though the various problems discussed are of a fairly general order and will need to be asked no matter within which disciplinary paradigm they are to be formulated.

3 Global and local

For some time now in semiotics we have been talking about a “textual turn,” to indicate a shift of attention and interest from the more general level of the system of signs, and their possible classification, to that of specific communicative processes, and thus individual texts.⁷ It would, however, be misleading to read this “turn” as a simplistic passage from systemic to processual analysis. The analysis of text in fact implies a reconstruction of the underlying semantic system, but this reconstruction nonetheless acquires a character that is always and only applicable locally and never globally. It is no longer the general semantic system as a whole that is to be reconstructed, only some highly circumscribed sections of it. From this point of view, the textual turn is not opposed to the encyclopedic approach, as is sometimes erroneously claimed. As we have just seen, the global Encyclopedia (i.e., the System in all its entirety) also remains an unrepresentable semiotic postulate for Eco, so that only local encyclopedic sections can be representable. In a certain sense it could be said that the textual turn corresponds to that which, in a more pragmatically oriented context, would be the accentuation of the role of contextualization in determining meaning. If meaning is always textually or contextually determined, can there still exist a role for a lexical semantics, that is, for a general description of meanings at a systemic level?

The textual option, pushed to its most extreme consequences, cannot but deny such a possibility, as demonstrated coherently by Rastier et al. (1994), who

⁷ Semiotics speaks mainly of texts, and much less of oral interactive situations, given the still predominant attention paid by semiotic research into written texts compared with oral interactions.

asserts that every lexical insertion behaves like a *hapax*. This paradoxical affirmation is not without logical coherence, but still, in some way, it does not fully convince us. Rastier's provocation would hard to refute if contexts were indeed infinitely variable and thus always novel, and to some extent unforeseeable. But things are not like that. Far from being infinitely variable, contexts (and the texts that represent them) present a high degree of repeatability and thus also predictability: this has been the basis for development of all the attempts at lexical description based on the idea of prototype, stereotype or frame, such as Fillmore's *Frame Semantics* in the 1970s and 1980s, Fauconnier's *Mental Spaces*, or the experiential domains developed by Langacker, Croft, and many others. Our experience of the world, and the meanings we attribute to it, presents itself to us as highly structured, reiterated and generally highly predictable configurations. On this basis, the idea of lexical regularity can be entertained. As I have previously maintained elsewhere (Violi 2001) all terms, from this point of view, are never independent of context, but always indexically linked to a standard context of (implicit) reference. We might say that the stability attributed to meaning is nothing other than the stability of the situations that make up our lives and that tend to repeat themselves according to highly predictable schemas. It is within this implicit contextual background that semantic features are distributed according to different degrees of centrality, some positioning themselves at center-stage and others at the periphery. This hierarchy, however, even when it may appear in part motivated, is not ever unmodifiable.

In reality, if we look closely, the regularity that lexical semantics tries to capture through notions such as frames, prototypes or domains, is a largely statistical concept, based fundamentally, though not exclusively,⁸ on frequency of recurrence. However, since frequency is not a concept based in any way on theory, the semantic hierarchy that bases itself upon it can obviously, and at any time, be altered, suspended or modified.

This is certainly not a new idea since it was already present in Eco's work as far back as 1984 when, in *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language*, he wrote:

A "dictionary" hierarchy of properties is not a notion to be completely discarded. And various semantic theories make every effort to distinguish between diagnostic, or central or prototypical properties and others more prone to variation. But it is sufficient to admit, as has already been said, that this 'resistance' of properties depends not only on the inert force of beliefs and opinions rooted in a culture (the paradigm) but also on the extent to

⁸ Various types of assessments can enter the debate, as amply discussed in Violi (2001). These elements, however, do not contradict what is being maintained here, namely the pre-set and not unambiguous nature of lexical representations.

which a particular discourse intends adhering to, or otherwise criticising and destroying that given paradigm. (Eco 1984a: 133, my translation)⁹

This passage already contains all the terms in the current debate on the global/local issue, but I do not think that all the theoretical consequences implicit in it have been dealt with yet.

The first consequence is that a semantic lexicon conceived in this way is not, nor can it aspire to be, a *theory* of meaning in general, but a sort of cultural ethnography or, in other words, a “semiotics of common sense.” Eco gives us a quite precise idea of what is to be understood by a “semiotics of common sense” – the collection of “beliefs and opinions rooted in a culture” implies a collection that is considerably less stable and perhaps also less structured than the various models based on prototypes, mental spaces or domains would have us expect. Not only is the common sense captured by these semantic representations fragmentary, contradictory, and ambiguous, but it also presents a high degree of variability on both the diachronic and the synchronic axes.

The diachronic dimension is essential in any study of lexical semantics, because meaning changes over time, as is shown by the fact that we constantly update our dictionaries. The hierarchy of properties and their respective distributions, from nuclei with more central positions to those that are more peripheral, is therefore very unstable and always subject to variation over time.¹⁰ And from the perspective of the synchronic dimension, meaning is always subject to variations and oscillations within the system in relation to the differentiated use by groups, sub-groups, and also single individuals. On this point we should perhaps focus more on the consequences, including semantic-linguistic traits, that are implicit in social change. Within its systems of values and beliefs, a strongly cohesive and unified society will tend to attribute more stable meanings

9 Original Italian from *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*:

Una gerarchia “dizionariale” delle proprietà non è nozione di cui disfarsi del tutto. E diverse teorie semantiche si sforzano di distinguere tra proprietà diagnostiche o centrali, o prototipiche, ed altre più soggette a variazione. Ma basta ammettere, come si è già detto, che questa ‘resistenza’ delle proprietà dipenda non solo dalla forza inerziale di sistemi di credenze ed opinioni radicate nella cultura (il paradigma) ma anche dalla misura in cui un determinato discorso intende cimentarsi, o meno, nella critica e distruzione di quel dato paradigma. (1984a: 133)

10 I have provided elsewhere (Violi 2001) numerous examples of these transformations. It is enough to think of the property “being extinct,” which is certainly central today in the meaning of dinosaur, but not yet part of the meaning of koala, and even less of whale, but could unfortunately become so very soon, and so on.

than would be the case in a more fragmented, multiple and contradictory society, such as the one in which we are currently living.

To speak of *one* common meaning, or of a semiotics of *a culture* as something unitary will turn out in these cases to be highly misleading, because many different meanings, models, and cultures interweave and permeate one another other within the discourses of the various social groups and single individuals involved. The idea of multiple affiliations, multiple identities, multiple cultural roots, so widespread today in anthropology and in the sociology of culture, cannot but have consequences including at the level of a lexical semantics, if it is so strictly a consequence of a semiotics of culture. The same terms may become vehicles for different meanings, even opposing ones, and are therefore difficult to reduce to an accepted univocality. “Culture,” despite its singular definition underlying our lexical usage, collapses into a composite plurality of “cultures” and affiliations, which are sometimes highly contradictory in relation to one another, thus setting in motion a continuous work of readjustment, superimposition and remodelling of linguistic usage. Just as monolithic and homogeneous societies do not exist, monolingual cultures do not exist either, and not only because of the contemporary widespread presence of different linguistic communities. Variations are always present even within one and the same linguistic group, we are all always contemporaneously members of different communities within which the same linguistic forms have different meanings.

We have now returned, by a different path, to the crucial question of invariants and variants, or rather, to the link between *types* and *tokens*. Lexical usage does not seem to correspond to a linear and predictable logic of tokens that repeat, with very slight modifications, the respective *type*; it is, rather, variation which dominates the picture. When we repeat lexical forms in a given context and for specific relational purposes, we inevitably alter and vary the meaning of these forms. From this point of view, synchronic and diachronic variations are part of one single complex picture, as has been widely suggested in studies on linguistic change (see, for example, Croft 2000).

In this context the illusion, not only of a universal model like the structuralist one, long since disappeared from the scene, but also of the utility and possibility of a reasonable description of regularities as pursued by the semantic studies inspired by the prototype model, appears more and more problematic. This does not, however, imply a totally unstable, constantly changing universe of meaning. Certainly, terms do refer to some given *semantic potential* that can be reconstructed and that we can, more or less easily, tap into. Yet, the description of this meaning potential cannot have the characteristics of a systematic treatment of the lexicon since it cannot include a full range of constraints on

contextual insertion, and therefore cannot prove predictable in a strong sense. The interesting issue regarding lexical representation is, in fact, its constraints: to what extent is a model capable of foreseeing the correct applicability contexts, drawing a line between applications that are consistent and others that are – more or less – divergent? In fact, no model is capable of doing so, given that all semantic properties, even those that are most central, can always be suspended and cancelled in appropriate contexts. If we can talk at all of constraints, then this concept will need to be interpreted only in a weak sense and not in terms of high predictability. The difficult balance between the global and the local seems thus to come down strongly in favor of the local.

This was also the position assumed recently, from a different perspective, by psychologist Eleanor Rosch, a pioneer in the field of research on the prototypical structure of categories. All her earlier work on categories was based on attempts to reconstruct a general systematic regularity that was also sensitive to context. Today, Rosch insists instead on the notion of situation, and no longer sees concepts as regulative configurations with representational or identificational functions, but as an actual part of the situation. Concepts and categories never occur in isolation but always within situations and complex networks of other conceptual situations, activities and configurations: “Concepts occur only in actual situations in which they function as participating parts of the situation rather than as representations or mechanisms for identifying objects” (Rosch 1999: 61).

Consequently, it is no longer concepts (which in this perspective we could consider equivalent to general meanings) that ought to be the subject of analysis, but only situations that become the only units within which “human interpretations, emotions, and motivations hold sway” (Rosch 1999: 74). It is interesting to note how close these positions are to semiotic textual localism, but in this area semiotic tools might prove more capable in providing further analysis that could then introduce further distinctions.

In the inevitably unstable balance between cultural and stereotypical regularities, and the modifications introduced by specific situations and contexts, a crucial role is played by a typology of texts, *genres*, and types of discourse. Not all contexts, and not all texts, actually modify the paradigm in any profound way, in some cases, texts adhere very closely to common sense meanings while in others they profoundly subvert them. The inferential system that regulates textual interpretation depends on the specificity of individual texts and the different degrees and modalities of interpretative cooperation they require. The same lexical term requires and induces very different inferences depending on whether it appears in a newspaper article or in a hermetic poem. From the point of view of the regimes of meaning that characterize texts, their typological

differences can be seen as the result of the variable balance between the semantic structure of a given text and the semantic potential of word meanings – i.e., between the local and the global. A possible typology of discourses would then have to be based on the parameter of rejection or acceptance of standard meanings recorded in the underlying encyclopedic paradigm.

The two extreme polarities would be respectively constituted, on the one hand, by texts that tend to drift away from the basis of standard meanings, thereby requiring more innovative, unexpected interpretative inferences and, on the other hand, by more parasitic texts that cling more closely to stereotyped and socio-cultural verisimilitude, where inferential movements are reduced and more predictable. Between these two extremes, an endless stream of intermediate positions unfolds, within which each individual text modulates its own semantic regime according to different degrees of conformity or non-conformity with the universe of commonsense meanings, constructing its own specific semantic micro-universe of reference and guiding the necessary interpretative choices and inferential movements accordingly. We must not forget either, that the most innovative lexical usages in their turn constantly modify the universe of common sense meanings, transforming the semantic potential of terms in accordance with the unceasing migrations back and forth between text and system, local and global.

At this point, we could reformulate the global/local issue into the following seven points:

- i. Lexical terms do not refer to fixed meanings, but are connected to what I would define as a complex *semantic potential*, encyclopedic in nature, which cannot be represented in its entirety, for the reasons already indicated by Eco (1984a). We might think of this potential as the “purport” of the content level as defined by Hjelmslev, who deliberately used the Danish term *mening* (meaning) to indicate this concept, later rendered in English by the word *purport*, and in Italian by the word *materia* (matter).
- ii. To say that the semantic, or encyclopedic potential cannot be fully represented, obviously does not mean that it does not exist, or that we do not have an understanding of it.¹¹ Terms are endowed with a capacity for activating their semantic potential, and from this point of view, terms are not only specified by contexts but also function as activators of contexts and of possible inferential pathways. In a certain sense it is the lexical terms themselves that create their own applicability conditions, rather than the context that defines the limits for such conditions. The use of a term

¹¹ Even if this skill varies greatly from person to person and can obviously vary depending on different semantic areas or fields.

produces the necessary inferences for constructing the context which justifies its use. Since a given term has been selected, the interpreter must seek from “within” or infer *ex novo*, a context for its possible interpretation. Elsewhere (Violi 2001: ch. 9.9.2), I have maintained that words operate as potent abductive devices, instructions for both the construction of the situation and its interpretation, often forcing the activation of a context of interpretability and creating their own conditions for applicability. If this is true, it might be possible to investigate this question further and discuss the very use of the notion of context. On closer examination, it continues to be based on, and at the same time reproduces, the usual type/token relationship, where the type (invariant) acts as schema for the lexical meaning, whereas the context constitutes the applicative variants. But if, as we have seen, this framework is not sustainable, because the variants are the only effective point of departure for the step-by-step reconstruction of meaning, then it is not only the concept of *type* that has been weakened, but also that of context, given the complementarity between these two notions. Rather than contexts that modify invariant patterns, we should think instead of actualized tokens through which the step-by-step configurations of semantic potential are specified.

- iii. This reading forces us to rethink the question of the very descriptability of the semantic potential connected with lexical terms. It is without doubt that recurrent regularities are present, and that they can also be described, as the various semantic prototype theories attempt to do. These models have their usefulness, provided one bears in mind their fundamental limitations. First of all, they are always modifiable and transformable and they therefore cannot provide us with tight constraints on the applicability of terms. Then, secondly, and more importantly, they do not constitute a *theory* of a semantic system in any strong sense, because they do not represent patterns of general meaning, but only of regularities that are weak and that refer back to a common sense-based semiotics, as previously defined. From this point of view, these models are in a certain sense akin to monolingual dictionaries: dictionaries exist, are useful, and show us that there is some sort of generality of meaning at the systemic level. But they can in no way fulfil the role required of a systemic semantic theory, for various and obvious reasons.¹²

¹² In the first place, the list of words covered is not a rigorously defined system, but only a more or less satisfactory approximation of uses defined in terms of time. In the second place, the list of words in dictionaries is neither common nor shared. Dictionaries can differ, even considerably, from each other and can never represent the voice of each individual speaker.

- iv. The passage from the semantic potential to the locally defined textual system requires a conversion device between the systemic and process levels. In structural linguistics and semiotics this is the system of enunciation. Enunciation is the bringing into play of the virtual semantic potential by a specific subject who determines, within a specific text or enunciation context, the local meaning that this text will finally assume.
- v. It is thus always a specific, individual, “embodied” subject who is in charge of the conversion of global potential to local sense, firmly rooted in a text or a specific situation. Enunciation in this perspective is not only a formal device as described by Benveniste (1966), but is the bringing into play of an open meaning potential by an embodied subject. Enunciation does not only have the task of structuring subjectivity through language, but also of locally reorganizing meaning. To paraphrase Peirce, we could say that meanings, like signs, are always what they are for somebody, in some respect or other. The local meanings that make up the product of actual enunciation are not only the individual texts, but also the meanings traceable to individual uses of the terms, to local and even idiosyncratic semantic redefinitions.
- vi. Referring to the theory of the semiotic modes of existence, we could say that the semantic potential, at the systemic level, corresponds to a virtual mode of existence that characterizes, for instance, Eco’s concept of the Encyclopedia. The taking charge of this system by an enunciator represents the moment of actualizing that potential, and finally it is the local meaning that constitutes its realization.
- vii. From this point of view, local meaning is no more than a reconfigured and reportioned portion of the semantic potential, and is thus close to the idea of the substance of content, which, in Hjelmslevian terms, was deliberately linked to the notion of “use.” If this analogy can be proposed we must also recognize that which gives form to the “purport” of content (the potential *mening*) is not a formal pattern, but an activity, namely, that of enunciation and of its subject.

4 Communication and comprehension

That an adequate semantic description capable of a certain completeness is possible only in relation to local, textually defined, semantic universes does not surprise us. Basically, it is only at the level of text, Saussure’s *parole*, or Hjelmslev’s *use* if we prefer, that “linguistic objects” (i.e., concrete realizations) exist. The semantic potential of the system is, like the Saussurean *langue*, always and only ever a reconstructed virtuality. Models that strive to represent semantic

potential, whether they are prototypical semantic models or monolingual dictionary models, will also be virtual reconstructions based on concrete linguistic objects, texts or textual *corpora*, and not the other way around. They are idealizations that aim at the recognition of virtual regularities at the system level, often successfully, but they can in no way constitute a *theory* of general meaning, in other words, a predictive model able to foresee all possible uses in all various contexts.

A conclusion of this kind opens up some difficult questions of a theoretical nature. Renouncing a strong model capable of describing general meanings in a consistent and unambiguous manner forces us to re-think the communicative model inherited through tradition, a model that was based precisely upon the existence of general meanings. Communication was in fact made possible and at the same time guaranteed, by reciprocal and totally symmetrical access for everyone involved in communication, and also by the same general meanings, which were shared by everyone. Communication presupposed in this manner a process of substantially aproblematical comprehension that was complementary and the inverse of that of production.

A similar model is well represented in the well-known model that Saussure (1916) presents at the beginning of his *Cours de linguistique générale* [Course in General Linguistics] where two human heads in profile (not insignificantly deprived of bodies) are linked by a line traced between their brains, passing through their ears and representing language as the “vehicle” for mental communication.

Suppose we have two people, A and B, talking to each other ... The starting point of the circuit is in the brain of one individual, for instance A, where facts of consciousness which we shall call concepts are associated with representations of linguistic signs or sound patterns by means of which they may be expressed. Let us suppose that a given concept triggers in the brain a corresponding sound pattern. This is an entirely *psychological* phenomenon, following in turn by an impulse corresponding to the pattern. Then sound waves are sent from A's mouth to B's ear: a purely *physical* process. Next, the circuit continues in B in the opposite order: from ear to brain, the physiological transmission of the sound pattern; in the brain, the psychological association of this pattern with the corresponding concept. If B speaks in turn, this new act will pursue – from his brain to A's – exactly the same course as the first, passing through the same successive phrases. (Saussure 2013 [1916]: 13–14)

A similar “vehicular” representation of the communicative process is possible only because what is presupposed is a completely shared conceptual system, i.e., general meanings independent of contexts, situations, and specific enunciations.

If this level is put into question, then the situation becomes complicated. What is it that can guarantee the very possibility of understanding each other

and on what can we definitively base the whole communication process? It is clear that a model like Saussure's, which I take as a trigger for debate since it still represents the implicit basis of a very widely diffused way of conceiving the communicative process, is built on what we might define as an *ideology of the type*. This, in substance, is an objectification of the *type* over the individual *token*, thereby once again privileging invariants over variants. The meanings in our minds are taken as stable, intersubjectively invariable, and they can thus guarantee the possibility of a total correspondence of communicative roles. In this model, it is the very possibility of accessing, in the same way and by the same means, the whole range of general meanings independently of our various experiences and the various situations in which we find ourselves, which allow us to understand each other and communicate with each other.

Now, not only have we seen that general meanings, independent of contexts, situations and enunciations, do not exist, but the same idea of abstraction and idealization connected with them also seems problematical. In the reality of our communicative practices we do, in fact, idealize much less than is generally assumed. What we have internalized, rather than a model made up of rules and invariants, is more of a diffuse awareness of the variations of individual linguistic patterns, *along with a high degree of tolerance for these variations*. We do not tackle every individual enunciation, every text, with an abstract and general model of lexical meaning in order to evaluate just how close they are to the level of the idealized *type* and to compute, eventually, their deviations. Rather, we “adjust” almost automatically to the discourse of the other, trying to make out its possible meaning even when this differs from our own. This does not mean that we always succeed, or that we always fully “understand” what the other person “really” wanted to say to us. Comprehension, too, is something more blurred and approximate than models like the Saussurian one would suggest. In most cases, comprehension is something gradual, we understand some things, but not necessarily everything. Actually, there is no need to always understand “everything,” it is enough to understand “just the right amount,” in that particular context and situation, to manage to offer, or *to offer one another*, an acceptable meaning for us at that very moment in time, of that particular text, utterance or conversation.¹³ Comprehension, even for the same subject and in relation to the same text, varies over time and the degree of comprehension

¹³ It is important to insist on the temporal feature of every interpretation, which may, at another time and in another context, change – even considerably. It is a common experience, which has happened to us all, to re-read, at different times, a text which has already been read, “understood” and maybe even fixed, only later to discover a new and unexpected sense that we had not suspected at the time of first reading it.

necessary for you to be able to say you “have understood” varies enormously depending on each individual case, and neither is this something definite and written in stone.

Our methods of communicating thus seem characterized by gradual and hazy comprehension, and by an openness to the “meaning of the other” that allows us to perform a continuous attribution of meaning to the words of others. Rather than recognizing meaning already given *a priori* in the terms used, it is actually a question of reconstructing meaning that is locally definable, and that will also prove to be constrained by the conversation currently in progress. The stability of meaning is thus always relative, defined in terms of the moment, and anchored within a relation-based situation and modality.

To speak of being “open” and “accessible” to the meaning of the other person, rather than of a principle of cooperation, however defined, implies that the emphasis shifts to the less rational and less self-aware aspects involved in this process. Rather than purely working out the intentions of the speaker, we are here in the presence of an active predisposition towards making sense, a basic and virtually unconscious act that traverses the whole of human action and is probably rooted in the evolutionary process, and, possibly, not exclusive to our own species.

For the same reason, the concept of negotiating meanings seems unsatisfactory to me today: it is too rational and “voluntary” to explain processes that arise more spontaneously and are far less “negotiated.” Negotiation implies a strong contractual hypothesis that presupposes fully conscious subjects who enter into a transparently contractual relationship, a framework that does not seem to correspond to the continuous work of a less well-defined, unconscious adaptation that allows us to reconstruct the meaning of the other person. It seems to me to be more productive to adopt the notion of relationship as a basic device for human understanding, an aspect that functions right from the very beginning of our lives and is constitutive of our subjectivity. It is this disposition to form a relationship with the other that allows, or rather constrains, us to communicate and therefore to adjust to the meaning of the other person.

This idea is not new and can be traced back to Aristotle. Franco Lo Piparo (2003), put forward the notion of co-feeling as a translation of the Aristotelian *sunestànestai*, a feature that belongs not only to human beings but also to virtually the entire animal kingdom. Animals are capable of communicating to each other their respective feelings of pleasure and pain, but this communication is not, for Aristotle “a banal and mechanical transmission of information from one organism X to a different organism Y,” as shown in the Saussurean model. It is rather based on a shared sensorial ground, “to signal sensations, in each animal species, is cause and effect of a shared capacity for co-feeling the

sensations of others” (Lo Piparo 2003: 28, my translation).¹⁴ We could say that co-feeling is the basis for relationships and that this in turn represents the background which makes communication possible.

Co-feeling, being a biological device also common to non-human species is a necessary pre-condition but not sufficient in itself to explain human communicative behavior characterized by the specificity of language. If this were not so, the result would be that knowing or not knowing a specific natural language would not make any difference, something that is obviously untrue. It then becomes interesting to ask exactly what it means to know a language and how we learn it. Looking at the model of language acquisition can prove to be particularly interesting since it also provides a better explanation of “normal” lexical-linguistic use.

5 Acquisition and linguistic use

The mechanism of acquisition is interesting because it refers to a situation in which lexical meanings are learned prior to and without any notion of general meaning, which is rather the intended goal of actual learning itself. How is it possible to begin to use language without already possessing it? How is it possible to use lexical terms that still lack, apparently, a *type* pattern? What I would like to maintain is that the learning situation is not much different from normal linguistic functioning. It is only a question of extending, in a weaker form, the concept of the learning process to the normal procedures we put into practice when we communicate and understand.

Recently, in the psycholinguistics field (see, in particular, Tomasello and Bates 2001; Tomasello 1999, Tomasello 2000, and Tomasello 2003) models of language acquisition have been developed that are very different from the classical Chomskyan hypotheses. For Chomsky, the “enigma” of acquisition was its continuously innovative aspect, specifically whether, in order for a child to make sense of sentences it has never heard before, it would need to be already endowed with innate schemas. A more accurate and extensive set of empirical data, however, shows that things are not exactly like that. The language to which the child is exposed is much more repetitive and a great deal

¹⁴ Original Italian: “[la comunicazione degli animali non è, per Aristotele] una banale e meccanica trasmissione di informazione da un organismo X a un differente organismo Y”; “[si fonda invece su una sensorialità condivisa per cui] il segnalare sensazioni, in ciascuna specie animale, è causa ed effetto di una condivisa capacità di co-sentire le sensazioni altrui” (Lo Piparo 2003: 28).

less creative than previously believed, both in terms of the sentences produced by the mother and those produced by the child itself. Learning is *usage-based* and connected with interactive situations. It is the social and relational dimension of the activities carried out together with the adult that prove essential to language learning and acquisition. Children learn language from the situations in which they are involved, where activities are carried out on a very repetitive basis, structured around specific goals. The child recognizes situations such as eating, dressing, going to bed, handling objects, and playing with toys, and so on, as intentional configurations and plans of action.

Starting from this “doing things together” with someone else, always within a relational structure, the child begins to imitate the linguistic behavior of adults and repeat expressions that are of a holophrastic nature, precisely because they recall a complex configuration of actions and situations (the word “din-din” will also stand for “din-din’s ready,” “eating din-din,” “here’s din-din,” “I want din-din,” etc.). Children hear sentences before they are capable of distinguishing individual words. They generally tend to associate the whole sentence with a certain situation, with a given communicative intention and then try to repeat the whole vocal/acoustic act. The lexicon is therefore also an abstraction, and a reconstruction *a posteriori*, requiring a breaking down of the units whose components in the initial stages are indistinguishable one from the other. From an ontogenetic point of view, language is, according to Tomasello, the internalizing of all the utterances the individual has ever heard. The necessary generalization, from this perspective, would no longer be an abstract general schema, but rather an individual abstraction based on a necessarily limited set of local situations, which can be gradually amended when anything new comes along.

In a similar perspective, learning and regular use of language are closely allied. In both cases, it is not so much general meanings that form the basis of use, but rather use that allows successive (and always partial) generalizations. The child does not possess a general semantic *type*, neither does the adult possess a complete and systematic competence. From this point of view, adult and child are in a similar situation, thus providing indirect evidence that it is not necessary to assume a pre-existent shared schema to be able to communicate.

If we then look more closely at the conditions in which language is acquired, we discover other interesting affinities. First, acquisition is always linked to relationships and intersubjectivity – if the child were not inserted into a community and not exposed to contact with other speakers, she would be unable to learn a language. The relational dimension is thus an essential condition for this to come about. Second, learning is always linked to local meanings in at least in two senses – the language is always learned on the basis of specific situations and contexts of use, and it is learned in a way that is

always linked to one's own subjective and personal experience. Finally, acquisition is a process that is deeply affected by temporal factors. It evolves continually in time, adjusting and transforming itself in line with the various new situations experienced as time goes by.

The acquisition model is therefore relational, local, and temporal – in other words, the same features that also characterize the way the usual communicative process functions, with its continuous capacity to adapt to variations and transform itself over time, in a process of renewal or simply of reformulating itself. This suggests the hypothesis that there are not two distinct models, one for learning and one for applying this learning after the learning process has been stabilized, but rather one and the same modality, which, albeit with its due differences, governs both phenomena. Just as meanings are never completely stable and fixed, so too is use, always in constant adaptation, adjustment, and transformation, in a sort of continuous learning process that never comes to a conclusion.

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