

On Vít Gvoždiak's "John Searle's Theory of Sign"

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1. Overview

Vít Gvoždiak published a reconciliatory analysis of Searle's social ontology with semiotics in Gvoždiak (2012). Without prior knowledge of his paper, I wrote an analysis of the same subject (Msimang 2014). Even though Searle's social ontology is a common point of reference in the formulation of semiotics in these papers, it also serves as a point of departure in their understanding of semiotics and its development.

The semiotic theory expressed in Gvoždiak (2012) is an inherently linguistic (speech act centred) theory, whereas the semiotic theory presented in Msimang (2014) tends more towards a general theory of communicative systems in which social ontology, which follows from speech act theory, is an interesting part. It is my purpose in this note to contrast the two positions of semiotic theory as they appear in the aforementioned papers in reference to their appropriation of Searle's social ontology.

2. Differences in the understanding and formulation of signs

2.1

Gvoždiak's (2012) basic thesis is that "signs are (1) systematically arranged, (2) arbitrary and (3) social" (Gvoždiak 2012, 149). He argues that they are observer-relative, with the 'observer' being a linguistically competent individual in Searle's sense of the speech act. His notion of the sign

and representation is thus fundamentally intentional (Gvoždiak 2012, 152-155). The implicit theory of language which Gvoždiak uses to support this understanding, and what relation it has to Searle's own linguistic theory, is not a matter that can be done justice in this note. Here I focus on the notion of sign he draws from it.

Gvoždiak argues that the sign is representational in nature. By its nature, it must be a conveyor of meaning. As Gvoždiak's notion of sign is a speech act centred one, he goes on to say that "representation is a synonym for intentionality and its manifestation is most obvious in language" (Gvoždiak 2012, 152). This point is central to his discussion of signs (Gvoždiak 2012, 156-157).

The explanatory target of such a notion of sign or the symbolic attribution of meanings, following Searle, is the fact that it is possible to give "symbolic functions to objects and also to processes" in the environment (cf. Msimang 2014, 191) which could be seen as just but another way to say that "every brute fact can serve as the X term in a sign function" (Gvoždiak 2012, 152). In contrast to Gvoždiak (2012), the aim of Msimang (2014) is to show how this is not a complete notion of the sign.

Without going into an analysis of intentionality, one could point out that such a narrow definition of signs limited to the context of speech acts would not recognise non-intentional sign action such as the non-intentional representational content the red milk snake gives off to its would-be predators or the representational content a bee gives in its dance. For such representational content to count as a sign even though it is not always intentionally representational, a different kind of understanding of meaning attribution or the sign is required. In the development of semiotics in reference to social ontology in Msimang (2014, 191), it is argued that status functions, which are an intentional class of signs, "are just the anthroposemiotic-level manifestations of biosemiotic meaning attribution", meaning that human intentionality is not a necessary component in the functioning and creation of signs as representations.

From his speech act centred semiotics, Gvoždiak (2012, 150) argues that "the first semiotic finding is that signs are never intrinsic to our physical world" on the basis of Searle's argument about status functions. Illustrated by way of an example, it is argued that "The wink is a sign (X counts as Y in C) but the twitch is not (it is solely X)," so that X cannot count as a sign in any significant sense in any context it is put in. Given that we ac-

cept that signs are not intrinsic to the physical world, it does not follow that involuntary actions such as twitching do not carry semiotic content and cannot be construed as signs.

The position that involuntary movements do not contain semiotic content can only be held in the context of a speech act because non-speech acts do not convey linguistically set meanings. Nevertheless, a twitch can carry symbolic content so that a twitch (X) is a sign (Y) in the context of some situation (C). For instance, twitching can indicate pain, or a twitch-like blinking state can indicate that a person is falling asleep.

In contrast to the central thesis put forward by Gvoždiak, the argument in Msimang (2014) is that signs are not inherently social as there are numerous ways in which meaning is codified in human and natural systems which do not necessarily require the high-level codification systems of natural language (and the social institutions thereof). What is argued in Msimang (2014) is that the speech act is just but a sub-domain of communication systems identified in semiotics and, although significant, should be explicitly situated in the larger triadic theoretical construct which brings together the cultural signs of language with the natural signs of biology.

The argument made is that an 'X' may count as a sign in lower order iterations of meaning below that of social construction so that phenomena like twitches fall into the domain of the involuntary communication systems of the body. The point that Gvoždiak is making about these kinds of behaviours being involuntary and so not part of the semiotics of speech acts is valid, but this finding does not extend to justifying his claim that all signs are social signs. Being involuntary does not exclude a phenomenon from being a sign even if it does exclude it from particular kinds of expressive domains (e.g., speech acts).

Gvoždiak (2012, 150) gives a narrow definition of semiotics as "the study of every possible thing that can be used for lying", implying that signs are inherently intentional or voluntary and that what is not intentional or voluntary cannot count as a sign. But the voluntary/involuntary demarcation is insufficient for separating signs from non-signs. The use of signs in deceit (creating false impressions) in the animal kingdom is profuse and ranges from the somewhat intentional acts of some species of birds limping to convince predators they are easier to catch because of injury (see Gochfeld 1984) or performing other displays to distract predators from the nest which are examples of somewhat voluntary and intentional behaviours ani-

mals perform to purposely deceive (Walters 1990), and there are also natural affordances that animals have used to communicate false information such as in Batesian mimicry and camouflage which are examples of non-voluntary signs used for ‘lying’ or deceit though the animals themselves need not have any intention (let alone any comprehension) of the act to have successfully deceived other agents (see Pasteur 1982). The point of these examples is to show that being voluntary or being involuntary is not a requirement of a sign as signs are manifestly both. Thus, such a distinction cannot be taken as the hallmark of the sign.

Msimang (2014, 187-196) attempts to introduce the reader to the theoretical underpinnings of this general aspect of signs by showing how the logical form ‘X counts as Y in C’ can be amended so that it can be incorporated in the general definition of meaning – the subject which semiotics claims to deal with – with speech act theory fitting into this picture as a sub-domain of the larger semiotic enterprise (*ibid*). The basic claim is that

To say that some particular thing, x, counts as something other than itself, y, in some specific context, c, is a semiotic statement describing a “codified” relationship between a sign, x, the symbolic meaning the sign engenders, y, within some system of signs, c. (Msimang 2014, 189)

Contrary to Gvoždiak (2012), Msimang (2014) argues that the context in which signs operate is not limited to human social communication systems but extends into even animal and cellular communication systems (see Sebeok 1962; Emmeche 1999) with some structural qualifications in detail needed depending on the degree of intentionality or the kind of meaning attribution that is at play (Msimang 2014, 196).

2.2

Gvoždiak’s (2012, 154) view that “[s]emiotics often concerns itself with the economical nature of the expression plane while striving to find a similar principle on the content plane”, is not the way semiotics is understood, at least in the biosemiotic tradition. Semiotics is not generally seen to be a study concerning itself with the efficiency in which expressions are made and communicated, let alone is it seen to be the study of the most efficient solution to the codification and expression problems of communication. Semiotics is construed as the study of communication systems in general

(with the exception of Saussurean semiotics which concerns itself with 'psychosocial' signs) and shows specific interest in the workings of actual – rather than ideal – communication systems. The main communication systems of interest in semiotics are found in the natural world and in society at large (see Sebeok – Danesi 2000). It may be that Gvoždiak's notion of the semiotic enterprise in this regard can be traced back to his view of language, reflected in his position that as "language users we are truly *homo economicus*". In contradistinction to this, he also states that

Since general semiotics involves both closed systems (words) and open systems (sentences, texts), the question of representation arises regardless of whether our language is economical or not and to reduce the sign problem to its economy means to give up the notion of sign as a function. (Gvoždiak 2012, 154)

Instead of trying to understand Gvoždiak's formulation of the sign in terms of his specific linguistic thesis, we might make progress by focusing on the definition of a sign he gives and what that would mean for any formulation of semiotics.

Gvoždiak (2012, 154) argues that "every person can, individually, impose a function arbitrarily upon whichever object they desire" but that such an imposition "however, is not a sign". To make the point, Gvoždiak uses examples in which the representational content needs to be set by a community of speakers such as the meaning of a wink or the meaning of the phrase "The President of the Czech Republic" as attributed to his father. It is true that any such statement "completely lacks the collective dimension [necessary for the meaning it is meant to convey because] it would not constitute an institutional fact" (Gvoždiak 2012, 155). It is not clear how this is to preclude non-collective facts from being signs except if institutional meaning was what was being proposed as a new definition of the sign. If a sign is that which stands in place of something else by being in a meaningful relation to it, then individual attributions of meaning would still count as signs. For one, an individual may create a new kind of marking to remember some particular thing so that every time the individual is impressed by the marking it stimulates some particular meaningful memory in that individual in spite of any recognition of that sign as having symbolic significance by a community of speakers. Even though social facts abound, private facts or non-collective meaning attributions (e.g., the wooden ruler that is

kept as a back-scratcher) can still count as signs (e.g. wooden ruler = BACK-SCRATCHER).

3. Concluding remarks

Gvoždiak (2012) makes an argument for a collectively intentional and speech act centred construal of the sign and semiotics. Through his interpretation of Searle's social ontology, he came to the view that all signs are necessarily social signs and that the representational content of signs must be intentional in nature and not only intentional in interpretation. He says that "basic semiotic terms suggest that Searle's philosophy offers an explanatory framework to key semiotic questions, namely the differentiation of non-signs and signs, the place of intentionality in semiotic description, and the nature of sign correlations".

On the other hand, the claim in Msimang (2014) is that social ontology is defective as a theory of sign because it is inherently intentional (*viz.*, based on speech acts). I argued that although the iteration of sign-functions in social ontology can continue up indefinitely, their iteration downwards reaches a threshold at the level of the speech act. From that point it is argued that signs, in the form X counts as Y in C, have purchase in the natural world only if signs are not defined in terms of intentionality but rather in terms of the representational structure of the XYZ relation.

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