Neo-Gricean Pragmatics; Performative Clauses; Politeness; Pragmatic Presupposition; Pragmatics: Overview; Proxemics; Reflexivity; Rules and Principles; Shared Knowledge; Speech Acts and Artificial Intelligence Planning Theory; Speech Acts.

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Metasemiosis and Metapragmatics

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Metasemiotics

The empirical study of metasemiotics derives from the general semiotic framework proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, who endeavored to explore the foundations of knowledge in a manner not unrelated to Kant's exploration in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. But Peirce viewed our ability, as humans, to make contact with an external reality as the result of complex layered sign processes. He developed a hierarchy of signs, based upon a series of trichotomies – the most often-quoted of which has been that of the icon, index, symbol. Within each trichotomy, one component is closest to experience, another closest to knowledge, with the third term standing between them. Thus, icons are closest to experience and symbols to knowledge.

The relevance of the Peircean hierarchy to metasemiotics is that signs closer to the side of knowledge depend on those closer to the side of experience in a chain-like fashion. Thus, a symbol, where the relationship between a sign vehicle and its meaning is based on a learned rule (as in the relationship between a word and its meaning in language), is closest to the side of knowledge. However, it cannot be understood as having anything to do with experience unless it is related to indices – where the sign vehicle is connected to its object or meaning by spatio-temporal contiguity. An index is closer to the side of experience than a symbol – since the index involves the perception of contiguities in space and time – but it in turn depends upon icons, where the icon involves recognition of similarities rather than contiguities. Hence, symbols depend on indices, which in turn depend on icons.

Can one say that these relationships of 'depending on' that connect symbols to indices to icons in a chain of semiosis are forms of 'aboutness' or representation analogous to the relationship between a metalanguage and object language? The parallel is not exact, since the metalanguage–object language connection involves fully explicit or conscious focus on the object signs, and this cannot be said of the semiotic chain just mentioned. However, the Peircean chain of semiosis does involve something resembling metasign–sign relationships. Consciousness of the object sign is at one end of the chain, with the earlier layers progressively less accessible to consciousness, albeit presumably closer to experience. While consciousness and knowledge are not, from this perspective, identical – knowledge can be implicit or operational – consciousness is associated with the form of knowledge that is maximally distant from experience. In any case, metasemiotic research, in recent decades, has included metasign–sign relationships that are not of the explicitly representational sort.

The Peircean semiotic framework, as utilized to analyze speech and linguistic communication more generally, was taken up most explicitly by Roman Jakobson (1960). In his formulation of the six types of sign function operative in language, Jakobson includes the metalinguistic function, where the focus of the message is on the code, that is, on the very representational relationship of the object-language signs to their referents. This most closely parallels the accepted metalanguage–object language distinction, and is clearly metasemiotic. However, of the other functions, the poetic function – where the focus of the message is on the message itself – is also metasemiotic in the present sense, even though the connection between the metasign (the poetic form of the message) and the sign (the message) is not a matter of explicit reference. Jakobson points out the converse functional relationships of the two types of metasemiosis.

Some of the other functions of language should perhaps be regarded as implicitly metasemiotic as well, for example, the expressive and conative functions, where the focus of the message is the speaker, in the former case, and the addressee, in the latter. To be regarded as metasemiotic, the focus on the speaker would have to be on the individual person as speaker, that is, as engaged in a speech act, rather than, say, as a person in general. Similarly, in the case of the conative function, the focus of the message would be on the addressee as addressee, that is, as intended recipient of the message.

Because of the difficulty of analyzing metasign–sign relationships that are not based on explicit reference, one direction that metasemiotic studies have taken is towards referential aspects of language that are about speech. The ethnography of speaking, associated with the founding work of Dell Hymes (1974), took as one of its central objects of investigation the ethnographically describable components of languages that refer to the act of speaking itself. In English, for example, one can study the deployment of verbs of speaking: *to say*, *to question*, *to pronounce*, *to repeat*, and so forth.

But other empirical researchers have felt limited by confining investigation just to explicit portions of a linguistic code that refer to speaking. Erving Goffman developed what would become a major line of research on framing. The frame tells one how to interpret what is going on in a specific communicative situation. Thus, we distinguish the interpretation of speech as used within a theatrical play from seemingly identical speech used in an everyday context, an observation also made by Gregory Bateson (1972), who refers to the flow of signs of such framing as (generally unconscious) metacommunication. (Bateson was interested in the implications of this for psychiatric work, among other areas.) Frames, like theatrical plays, also permit rekeyings. For example, the rehearsal of a play can be understood as distinct from the play itself, and also distinct from a rehearsal that occurs within the performance of a play. From the point of view of general metasemiotics, it is important that the metasigns that instruct us as to how to interpret the signs (the play, for example) need not be themselves explicitly referential, in the way in which metalanguage is.

Arguably the most important development in the latter part of the 20th century in the area of metasemiotics was Michael Silverstein's distinction between metasemantic and what he called Metapragmatic usages (see especially his 'Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function') (Silverstein,

1993). Metasemantics covers the realm usually studied in the metalanguage-object language literature, and seems to be what Jakobson had in mind in formulating his notion of the metalinguistic function. The distinction between metasemantics and metapragmatics parallels that between the linguist's narrow reading of semantics and pragmatics. Where 'semantics' refers to the explicit meanings of words, deriving, as per Ferdinand de Saussure, from their systematic relations to other words as part of grammatically formed language – the realm of what Peirce called symbols – pragmatics refers to the meanings conveyed by speech that must be inferred from context and paralinguistic features, including intonation contours and voice qualities. The corresponding Peircean sign modes for pragmatics are the icon and the index. In an often repeated example, suppose someone says: "My, but it's chilly in here!" when there is a window open with cold air blowing through it next to where the addressee is seated. The semantic statement may take on the pragmatic meaning of a request to close the window. Correspondingly, if there are semantic codes for interpreting the explicit meaning of words, there are also pragmatic codes for making inferences about implicit meanings.

'Metapragmatic' refers to linguistic signs that are about the pragmatic code, about how to interpret the extrasemantic meanings encoded in speech. Much of the ethnography of speaking research falls into the realm of metapragmatic investigation, for example, in studying the words, in a given language, that describe different ways of speaking. In English, the word 'to cajole' makes explicit reference to a speech act wherein the speaker is endeavoring to persuade the addressee by pragmatic means such as distractive flattering or suggesting possible benefits, without explicitly promising them. The word is thus explicitly metapragmatic in denotation.

But the distinction between metapragmatics and metasemantics does much more. By opening metasemiotics to the analysis of sign–object relations that are not symbolic (or semantic), it also opens the possibility that metasign–sign relations may be nonsymbolic (i.e., pragmatic, based on indices and icons). This brings into explicit focus the idea of frame analysis, in Goffman's sense (1974), and metacommunication, in Bateson's. We can think here of a two-by-two matrix, where the semantic-pragmatic distinction applies to either the sign–object relationship or the metasign–sign relationship, as in **Figure 1**.

While the ethnography of speaking has included more than is indicated here, we may perhaps use the phrase 'ethnoscience of speaking' as a convenient shorthand for studies of ethnographically describable
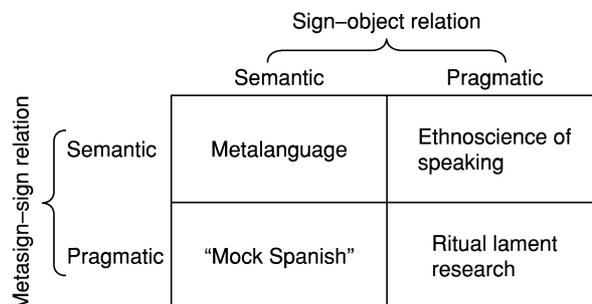
Figure 1 The semantic/pragmatic distinction can apply to either the sign–object relation or the metasign–sign relation, generating different areas for empirical investigation.

explicit linguistic formulations of the pragmatic uses of language.

The recent language ideology research (see, for example, Schieffelin *et al.*, 1998) is part of metasemiotics, but much of it falls into the quadrant of pragmatic metasign–sign relations coupled with semantic sign–object relations. This is true, for example, of Jane Hill's work on Mock Spanish. Hill (2001) marshals numerous examples to show that Spanish phrases are deployed in American English in ways that devalue Spanish as a linguistic code. The phrase "hasta la vista, baby" – used in Hollywood films – is one in which the speaker devalues the addressee, in this case, lets them know that they are about to be killed. The idea that Spanish as a code is devalued for American speakers is nowhere explicitly formulated. That is, the metasign–sign relationship proposed by Hill is itself pragmatic and inferred. But the metasign is about the Spanish language as code, that is, about semantic sign–object relations.

Recent research on ritual laments, taking those laments as metasigns, falls into the final quadrant, in which both metasign–sign and sign–object relations are pragmatically interpreted. The lament is a metasign whose object is crying, including the specific instance of crying contained in the form of the metasign. Because the metasign is an icon of the sign, it is pragmatically related to that sign, and must be inferred rather than being explicitly formulated. Furthermore, it is not about the sign (the crying) as semantic, but rather about the sign as pragmatic, as an expressive index and social act. One salient meaning of the metasign appears to be that the instance of crying should be interpreted as a desire for social contact, a way of reaching out to other people, and of showing one's conformity to the social norms that govern relations between those people. All of this is accomplished without the aid of semantically explicit metasigns (**Figure 1**).

An important work on language, which includes Silverstein's paper mentioned above, is the volume

edited by John Lucy (1993) and entitled *Reflexive language*. One of the key theoretical questions raised in this volume and other recent work is the relationship between metasemiotics and consciousness or awareness. This research seems to suggest that consciousness of signs is maximal where the metasigns interpreting them are semantic. Correspondingly, pragmatic metasigns permit the manipulation of signs – as in the case of mock Spanish, for example, or advertising – relatively outside the awareness of the recipients of the signs.

Although awareness of signs may be maximal where the metasigns interpreting them are semantic, this does not mean that the metasigns are necessarily transparent to the object signs – unproblematic encodings of truth. There may be simultaneous pragmatic effects skewing the semantically encoded awareness. In his metasemiotic examination of philosophical discourse in the book *Talking heads: language, metalanguage, and the semiotics of subjectivity*, for instance, Benjamin Lee (1997) argues that Descartes' cogito argument – "I think therefore I am" – was influenced by implicit linguistic analogies between the verb *to think* and verbs of speaking: *I think . . .* is like *I state . . .*; *I aver . . .*; *I question . . .*; and so forth. Such pragmatic skewing of semantic metasign–sign relations is the foundation of much recent renewed interest in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Metasemiosis is not only a neutral reflection upon culture (whether accurate or skewed). It is also an active force, thanks to its ability to evaluate and affect, as well as represent. A key area in which metasemiosis plays an active role is in the circulation of signs (notably of discourse) in the world – a theme taken up in the book by Greg Urban (2001) entitled *Metaculture: how culture moves through the world*.

Metasemiotic research is on the threshold of producing new insights into questions of agency and intentionality in social action, as well as a clearer understanding of the nature of consciousness and knowledge. Humans in interaction are more and more seen as unlike billiard balls bumping up against one another, and therefore meaning (semiosis) is seen to play the causal role in human conduct.

So metasemiotics is the tool of choice for revealing the pathways and processes through which agentive causation takes place. Correspondingly, if consciousness is the product of a complex pathway of metasign-to-sign interconnections, leading from experience to knowledge, then metasemiotic investigation will prove essential for the clarification of fundamental problems about cultural relativity and truth.

See also: Iconicity: Theory; Indexicality: Theory; Jakobson, Roman: Theory of the Sign; Metalanguage versus Object Language; Semantics–Pragmatics Boundary.

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