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Converging Semiotic and Social:

Can the Theory of Signs Become a Theory of Social and Political Development?¹

In 1978 Michael Halliday published a book under the title *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*, giving an initial impetus to exploration of the interface of semiotic and social. In that book he identified a new object of research that lies at the intersection of the social and linguistic sciences. That subject comprises the functional and meaningful aspects of social life, as those aspects manifest themselves in human communication and language. This is what Halliday calls *social semiotic*, which, as he theorized, is a connection of the language sign system (*langue*) and language practice (*parole*) with the *social system* and *social practice*. It went beyond the usual interpretations of society and language as merely juxtaposed domains. Halliday insisted that in their very existence language and society are an inseparable unity of mutually supplementing elements of human existence which are *the social* and *the semiotic*. He emphasized that “language is as it is because of the functions it has evolved to serve in people’s lives” [Halliday, 1978, p. 4].

Halliday’s approach was further developed and reinterpreted by Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress in their book *Social Semiotics* (1988). They showed that the convergence of social and semiotic is relevant not only for the domain of linguistics, but for all the modes of human communication, to the entirety of human activity and existence. This conceptualization arose as a result of the further synthesis of ideas from the field of critical social theories (primarily Marxism) and Halliday’s “systemic functional grammar”. The authors of *Social Semiotics* went beyond the Halliday’s linguistic agenda by offering a frame that could fit all the social semiotic phenomena (including language, but not limited to it). According to Hodge and Kress, “social semiotics studies all human semiotic systems, since all these are intrinsically social in their conditions and content” [Hodge, Kress, 1988, p. 261]. Thus, at a new level of elaboration, they essentially reformulated the idea of Charles W. Morris, who, 50 years earlier, noted that the concept of *sign* is the fundamental category common for all humanities and social sciences [Morris, 1938, p. 2].

Charles Morris was, of course, not the only thinker who spoke about social semiotics before the term of *social semiotics* was coined. One of the most important steps in this direction was taken by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who formulated in his *Philosophical Investigations* a fundamental idea of

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the relationship between forms of language (“language-games”) and “forms of life” [Wittgenstein, 2017, §23]. Ferdinand de Saussure also played a crucial role in linking the linguistic with the social, proposing the concepts of language as a “social fact” [Saussure, 1955, p. 21] and language as a “social institution” [Saussure, 1955, p. 32], i.e. as something that exists fully only as a “treasure” belonging to the community [Saussure, 1955, p. 30]. He also suggested the idea of *semiology*, a general science that studies “the life of signs within society” [Saussure, 1955, p. 33].

Many other researchers in the twentieth century have made significant steps in describing and explaining how some forms of linguistic and forms of social are related to each other. It has been shown how language forms become forms of social action [e.g.: Austin, Urmson, 1962; Searle, 1989]. There appeared a whole galaxy of structuralist and poststructuralist philosophers who in one way or another addressing the problem of “the life of signs within society” [e.g.: Barthes, 1957; Foucault, 2005]. Finally, there emerged a wide variety of approaches to the analysis of discourses, focusing on how social circumstances limit and predetermine the use of language and how language supports social structures and power relations [e.g.: Laclau, Mouffe, 1985; Fairclough, 1989]. Moreover, the concept of *semiotic institutionalism* was introduced to connect the notion of social institution with the notions of meaning, habit and interpretation [Heiskala, 2007].

Despite this active work at the crossroads of sociological and semiological knowledge, progress in this area has been uneven to date. A number of important results have been obtained and many bright ideas have been voiced, but the task of systematically studying the relations between forms of communication and forms of social life is, in fact, only just beginning to be solved. I think, in this situation it is important to analyze the evolution of social-semiotic methodology. In social semiotics some important steps have already been made to transcend the disciplinary boundaries between the methodological frameworks of social studies and semiotic research, but there are still many challenges to be faced. I suggest that the development of the interface between semiotic and social can be (both retrospectively and prospectively) represented as a trajectory of *two frontiers of semiotics* which are the *semiotic-material frontier* and *semiotic-methodology frontier*².

When it comes to *the semiotic-material frontier*, in the recent decades the semiotic studies have evolved significantly, moving from the Hallidayan phase of “language as social semiotic” [Halliday, 1978] through the phase of “semiotic as social” [Hodge, Kress, 1988] pioneered by Hodge and Kress towards the current phase of “social semiotic as multimodal” [Kress, 2010]. The next step on this trajectory can be the transition to the phase of “social as semiotic”. This would imply that today’s sociosemiotic focus on multimodality is to be supplemented with the focus on *multiactionality*, i.e. social semiotic analysis will have to be able to consider different spheres of social activity as *social*

² In more detail these topics are discussed in [Фомин, Ильин, 2019].

modes (which are isomorphic to the semiotic modes). This trend is already noticeable in microsociological research, as one can observe a convergence of multimodality studies with the analysis of multiactivity [Haddington, 2014; Jewitt, Bezemer, O'Halloran, 2016, p. 95]. Moreover, as Risto Heiskala [Heiskala, 2007] have shown, the synthesis of semiotics with Parsons's and Habermas's variants of structural-functionalism may provide a framework in which the distinction between social sub-systems ("economic system", "administrative system" and "lifeworld") would correspond to the semiotic distinction between monetary signs (the constraints of scarcity), legal signs (the constraints of organized violence) and "ritually affirmed symbols" (communicative constraints). Furthermore, other possible trajectories for the advancement of *semiotic material frontier* may also be discussed in the context of various interdisciplinary domains (biosemiotics, cybersemiotics, semiotics of culture, memetics, biopolitics, etc.) which also in different ways contribute to the extension of the pool of objects analyzed in semiotic studies.

As for the *semiotic-methodology frontier*, the essence of its advancement consists in the search of ways of integration of social semiotics with other approaches of social and political studies. The development of social semiotics in this respect is less dynamic, but, I think, it is possible to outline some trajectories that seem promising. First of all, one can imagine an integration of systemic functional social semiotics with other functionalist approaches. In particular, there can appear interfaces between social semiotics and three key flows of functionalist research: (1) in sociology (and political science), (2) in linguistics, and (3) in cognitive science. Secondly, one also cannot ignore the fact that although social semiotics declares that it studies all the anthroposemiotic phenomena, actually today it is almost exclusively focused on microsociological analysis. So, an important direction for expanding the methodological toolkit of social semiotics could be the development of methods that make it possible to study temporally protensive and spatially extensive social events³.

Finally, the *semiotic-methodology frontier* can be moved further, if social semiotics becomes deeper integrated with the whole range of other interpretive approaches and qualitative methods used in social studies. There is already some noticeable progress in this direction in the field of multimodal research, but even there social semiotics mostly works today as a donor of separate useful concepts and tools. Its ambitious potential of becoming a transdisciplinary methodological integrator (a "coenosopic antidote" [Deely, 2015, p. 31]) for the extremely fragmented domain of interpretivist studies is far from being fully realized.

³ The framework of *multimodal analysis of political performatives* developed in HSE University and INION RAN is an attempt to develop a social semiotic toolkit of this kind [Ильин, 2016a; 2016b; Фомин, 2016; Ефимова et al., 2016; Алексеев et al., 2016].

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