

Semiotics and International Co-Operation

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Abstract

Las intervenciones de cooperación internacional llevadas a cabo en los países empobrecidos son hoy en día un texto concreto compuesto por Autores diferentes (como las ONG, los organismos internacionales y las asociaciones locales presentes en los sitios necesitados) cuyo propósito es conseguir un desarrollo real. Problema básico de la cooperación internacional siempre ha sido el de encontrar modalidades operativas eficaces para producir intervenciones que tengan sentido y verdadero valor en el mismo lugar de la acción y que sean a largo plazo. La semiótica permite, aprovechando su propio modelo de interpretación textual, formular una semántica de la intervención que consienta organizar intervenciones directas eficaces y dotadas de sentido: las intervenciones son en efecto enunciados de los que se pueden formular los preceptos lingüísticos de producción, las condiciones de enunciación, los procesos pragmáticos de interpretación de parte de los usuarios (lectores), el significado logrado y el proceso de producción en cadena de interpretantes que de ello se desprende. Asimismo pueden describirse las condiciones y los límites interpretativos para evitar usos incongruentes, ilícitos y aberrantes respecto a las mismas posibilidades interpretativas del enunciado, es decir desenlaces incompatibles o bien contradictorios con las propias finalidades de la intervención. La semiótica reconoce en ese texto insólito, del que consta la intervención para el desarrollo, su capacidad de examinar e intervenir en los asuntos más destacados del presente histórico, tal como es hoy día el conflicto teórico y social acerca de los modelos de desarrollo y de la relación entre desarrollo y bienestar, y recibe de una casuística totalmente nueva análisis empíricos que enriquecen su modelo general.

International co-operation today is undergoing a fortunate time of expansion. This is demonstrated by the continuing increase in intervention in the field by NGO's and different international organisations, by the creation of national co-ordination organisations, by the increase in actions entrusted to ethically motivated volunteers, and by the consideration of theoretical and operational principles by political and institutional bodies, such as the Ministry Co-operation sectors and European governments. On a theoretical level, this widespread, tangible movement has brought with it new-born theoretical movements such as economic analysis on world development models and defence of biodiversity and rural cultures, but also traditional disciplines which examine the typical features of contemporary society. Semiotics forged its innovative identity in the 1960's, showing itself to be the science which was fitted to the new consumer society and mass communications, in which every social and cultural item in circulation could be examined, being a 'message', that is, based on its semiotic properties. Semiotics' deep-rooted vocation has been, ever since its formation, in its ability to explain the salient facts regarding contemporary society as well as a general philosophical analysis of the workings of human conscience. Today this leads it to deal with crucial matters such as the growing trust in the ability of co-operation to directly intervene in the world's crises, conflicts, and suffering.

Semiotics can help co-operation to solve a fundamental problem: how to identify ways of producing sensible intervention in the field, just like it does in describing the production of sense in the formulation and interpretation of text. Its models' explanatory mechanisms are also effective for several other kinds of fact with sense, apart from texts, for many types of text objects found in the *media*, for cultural and social issues. From this point of view, intervention in the field is a specific utterance of the overall text of development and hence one can gather the rules for good training and correct formulation in order to organise intervention better than in the past.

Experience in the field and the considerations of NGO's from the 1990s onwards, extensively described in their work reports and in the texts of organisations such as UNESCO, have allowed preparation of a formal framework for co-operational intervention procedures based on semiotic principles and tools. Facts and people involved in co-operational intervention can be described according to the roles and factors singled out by the semiotic theory of interpretation, thus distinguishing factors, responsible parties and processes to do with collaboration, following that particular text built up from development. Authors of the text are those who, in different ways, take part in intervention, with wishes and objectives maybe even different from one to another but are equally responsible for the result obtained thanks to the combination of their efforts: Non Governmental voluntary Organisations (NGO's), volunteers that take part in their intervention, international institutions (like the United Nations), centres of local power, local governments' public institutions, spontaneous mass social movements, international financial and economic organisations (IMF and World Bank), opponents of the conditions imposed by the international financial organisations or multinational companies, etc. Utterance or Text are the material or objective conditions produced by intervention and organised in technical development mechanisms prepared in the field. Readers or users are those who make use of the intervention, basically the local citizens, who really make use of the mechanisms prepared. The interpretation or attribution of meaning to the text is the activation and use of the technical

conditions arranged in the text by the population concerned, who confer sense and values to it, according to their own cultural codes, thus receiving a series of immediate and direct consequences and results from the intervention. The meaning of the utterance is the result gained, that is the real sense acquired by the intervention, determined by the interaction of factors in the field, that is, the co-operation between the material conditions prepared and their interpretation by the people involved in the intervention: in fact the meaning is the real transformation in living conditions experienced thanks to the action carried out. Further consequences of the first immediate results can be understood as subsequent interpretants of the text which reveal its chain of semantic potential. The interpretational limits are constraints put on use of the text, that is, the interpretation of intervention, which prevent outcomes that are incoherent to, contradictory to, or incompatible with its basic objectives. It does this by placing conditions or correcting the forms of its implementation.

The formal scheme of roles provided by interpretative semiotics (such as Author, Text, Reader) allow us to overcome the difficulties and mistakes stated in the current considerations of the players involved in co-operation, such as the NGO's and different institutional and international bodies. Among the perennial basic problems in intervention since the 1950s, when international action was initially deployed by the major organisations, appear for example: the external and abstract nature of intervention projects, due to lack of real knowledge of the place in question and lack of actual contact with the experiences of people involved in the field; use of European or American evaluation parameters and economic and production models often incompatible with local cultures because they ignore the real forms of life and subsistence, as well as the material and technical conditions of the societies in question; an unequal spreading of the intervention's benefits, generating wealth and education only in certain sectors of the population, often the elite who have local control of the operations; the immediate termination of benefit from intervention as soon as the aid-workers' actions are over. The application of parameters and models coming from outside, and unrelated to the population in question, in fact lacks the necessary supporting base: sharing of the cultural model applied, which can be expressed as lack of motivation, of a general shared vision of the objectives, of technical conditions, of the functioning of operational mechanisms. These produce a vast range of mistakes of faults with varying seriousness. They start from banal technical mistakes which make intervention useless (like silos made of plastic and fibreglass while melt under the sun's heat in Sudan), to errors arising from a poor knowledge of local culture (such as the water sterilisation method rejected in the Peruvian Andes because according to the local culture it condemns those who use it to be invalids or outcasts, or the European-style housing built for the Guajiro indigenous group in Venezuela, completely unsuitable for the life and social uses of the people which were going to use it) and end up with damage caused by actions which bring about changes in social values through unwitting interference with the organisation of life and work in the communities. The typical mistake is to intervene on one single factor in isolation from its organic context (social, cultural, technical and environmental) to apply a purely economic or technological solution, surely positive from a western cultural perspective but which all in all produces damaging consequences or is perceived to be negative by the local social organisation: the digging of clean water wells in rural areas where women come to take water by hand many kilometres away may be refused because the women consider

themselves damaged by a technique which, although it brings relief, lowers their role in society and furthermore greatly increases their agricultural workload because of this ease of irrigation. In short, the traditional difficulties of co-operation can be gathered into three basic conceptual assumptions which give rise to problems, damage, and mistakes: the assumption of planning intervention without having any knowledge of the technical context, the assumption that methods and objectives for all cases are naturally valid universally, founded moreover on the belief that one's own development model is certainly the right one, and anthropological misunderstanding of the differences between various systems of values between the various cultures. Basically there is always discussion about characteristics of the development models applied, as was reported at the end of the 1990s by various international organisations, by spontaneous mass popular movements, and by researchers and intellectuals interested in the damage produced by the economic and industrial development model promoted by the Structural Adjustment Program's policies. Such policies were imposed on impoverished countries by economic and financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. For this reason, debate about aid intervention hinges ever more often on debate about development models.

Many organisations, above all small to medium size NGO's, in the 1990s started to reflect about how intervention was carried out, having faced obstacles, difficulties and real failures in the field. The solution to difficulties on a theoretical level comes about through definition of rules for an effective action: that is, it's sensible, agreed upon by the users, long lasting, compatible with the culture and the natural technical environment, distributed in a harmonious way and not in contradiction with its basic reason for being. A «sensible» action is one which is able to transform life conditions in a stable way. «Agreed upon» is an action which is accepted with the population concerned's active collaboration, and «accepted» in an action which is perceived favourably as positive. Some cases of actions carried out by small NGO's allow observation of examples of correct action formation following principles of this kind and at the same time they can be described by means of semiotics which allow drawing up of a general operative and theoretical model.

An action which was started in Bolivia in 2007 by an Italian NGO allows observation of the usefulness of pragmatic semantics and «utterance conditions». Pragma-semantics singles out the processes of fixation of meaning following a determining grid which includes context, circumstances and co-text of utterance formulation (in the wording of Eco 1990). The 'Celim' NGO of Bergamo put these factors to work in the action «Increase of milk production for commercial purposes in five communities of Clizia and Toco municipality», carried out in 2007 in the Valle Alto rural region, in Cochabamba District, Bolivia. Here members of the NGO and representatives of the communities identified as a factor for development, examining the area's resources together, the increase in family income which could be obtained by increasing the quantity and quality in a traditional economic sector, such as dairy farming, which had been abandoned for arable farming. The initial direction of the communities concerned, which led to the Italian NGO's involvement, was in fact right towards agricultural development specialised in maize for export to Europe, a project which turned out to be unfeasible for technical and commercial reasons. The NGO's action then combined an increase in milk production by small dairy farms in the area, chosen by the local communities as an alternative to intensive maize cultivation with the creation of independent dairies, for the collection, conservation and

processing of milk. A commercial network for the regional and national distribution of milk and its by-products was set up, veterinary training was carried out, forage was made locally, and a co-operative of local producers was created, thus setting up a system of built-in actions which brought with it a general improvement in life conditions. The utterance of the action (creation of an advanced system of local production and national distribution of milk by small farmers organised in co-operatives) was formulated after jointly considering the aims that the community intended to pursue and after having examined the different sequences of factors, at whose intersection would give rise to a sensible action, given the specific case. The action's context (general environment of the facts) was decided by the communities: an utterance which involved the economic context was considered relevant (instead of one, for example, which acts to defend cultural traditions), as was one whose textual isotopy (the recurrent reference axis to interpret the actions performed) was the increase of family income in conditions independent from external economic bodies. The circumstances surrounding the action and affecting its formulation, were: lack of local employment leading to a high level of emigration abroad, the essential absence of conflicts between communities or particular social groups, disenchantment with the forms of its own historical and cultural conditions; existence of strong associative traditions in the communities (leading to consider co-operatives as acceptable); the fact they were used to cultivate different products; and previous experience in intensifying milk production. The circumstantial factors revealed a basic willingness for innovative solutions, as long as they respected the people's cultural identity, and in particular in the organisation of communities which was stimulated by individuals' belonging to the communities where they live. Thus they tended to reject solutions which developed economic individualism, whilst all the same equating progress with growth in production and income. The action's co-text included several technical and material factors: the existence of dairy farms (showing it was possible); production of milk in other areas nearby; the existence of national companies for milk processing; low per capita milk consumption, considered to be raisable, existence of national programmes to promote the consumption of milk at school (*desayuno escolar*); infrequent use of land for forage cultivation, the fact the natural environment was basically intact, and could be protected; the fertility of land for climatic reasons, the establishment of technical training courses for the various sectors of the activity; its position in a geographical area well connected to the main town Cochabamba and the rest of the country. From the interaction between pragmatic factors, the following utterance was formulated: «creation of an advanced system for local production of milk and its national distribution, run by small farmers grouped in co-operatives», whose sense isotopy is the increase of family income through the two axes of the rise in production (under the direct control of local producers) and independent commercial distribution (controlled by a local co-operative). There were various sub-programmes: improving irrigation (digging of new wells), subdividing the land into different crops oriented to feeding cattle (as well as people), improving the dairy cows (more productive breeds and checking by vets), setting up of micro-credit to purchase adequate equipment (milk cooling and conservation plants with a 20000 litre capacity), training for farmers to use the new equipment, training for technical staff (vets, directors, distributors), establishment of a farmers' committee to negotiate the sale of milk to the plants already in operation. The meaning of this action is determined by the interpretation of factors thus predisposed by the population concerned, that is, in their reading

as economic and social improvement, compatible with their own values and their own cultural ways of community social organisation, and thus by activating the preset processes, obtaining economic change.

This action makes it possible to describe the action's enunciation conditions as well, that is, rules of how transmission and reception of the utterance should function: mechanisms which regulate the utterance's production processes, allowing its sense to be usable at the same time. The NGOs in recent years have identified working rules for actions, followed operationally so that the aid-workers efforts obtain a result, thus forming genuine rules of its utterance. Such rules are, for example: that the action starts off from an explicit request from the local community, which avails itself of local knowledge and skills, it avoids dependence on external techniques, knowledge and materials, it does not impose a predetermined solution but can find the right one on the spot (in other words, the project is born or is set up in the field), it is led by an organisation considered legal by its beneficiaries, it is agreed and established by mutual consent, it produces benefits which are distributed equally, its objectives may be changed during its course, it triggers continuous and long lasting processes, and it is part of a programme which is systematic and consistent. In the Valle Alto action these conditions were all present: for example the programme was discussed and agreed in a long series of public meetings between NGO representatives on the spot and community assemblies and local government, the NGO intervened on the Andean community's request for help in formulating an alternative to the first, failed project regarding maize production, the NGO was known (and considered trustworthy) because it had been present recently in a nearby area with another action, the solution was drawn up, by putting together in a new utterance the skills, the opportunities, cultural compatibility and environmental features, but was approved only by an explicit decision of the community's public assembly, a systematic regional development plan existed, local staff and knowledge was used, a subdivision of land was organised both to grow human food (maize, cereals) and forage (alfalfa) setting up a production system which was totally independent from external materials, and long lasting changes, distributed equally among the beneficiaries, were assured (as a whole, around 5.000 people were involved in the new production ventures). A Co-ordination Group, which contained representatives from the NGO, from Cliza and Toco Town Councils, from the distributing co-operative, and from various communities in the two municipalities concerned, became responsible for the project, progressively adapted it to the circumstances, informed the community on its progress in various meetings, and guaranteed its achievement. Such conditions essentially organise two types of basic function, the sharing of tasks and reciprocal acknowledgement between the participants in the enunciation, just like the forms of enunciation identified by Benveniste govern the rules reciprocally allocated and recognised by the participants in conversational exchange.

Notions of enunciation conditions and pragmatic semantics of the utterance help to draw up a general semiotic model which can identify ways of producing sensible actions in the field. They thus belong to a semiotic model for international co-operation, semiotics which is able to intervene in the most typical present day matters. Moreover, this semiotics singles out a theoretical element which is explicitly absent from the general debates about development models, that is, the requisite of creolism. Creolism was described by Lotman (1970) as a conflictual encounter between the codes preset by the author, and the reader's codes: «The

receiver tries to perceive the text following rules which are familiar to him, but with the trial and error method he becomes convinced of the need to create a new code, not yet known to him [...] the writer's language gets deformed, and undergoes mixing with languages which already exist in the reader's conscience: in a way, a new creole language is formed » (Lotman 1970 [1972:33]). Hence creolism is the ability of texts (and actions) to trigger an original meaning, often unexpected, from the meeting between the textual elements materially present, originating from the author's code and their appropriation following their own codes, by the reader or user. The aid actions which have been successful were based on creolism. On one hand it is simply the very process of textual interpretation. The meeting between textual technical conditions prepared by the workers and the beneficiaries' conditions of usage leads to new meanings, that is, innovative and previously unthinkable uses which truly change the local situation, transforming social and economic life: the sense of the operation is determined by the meeting between knowledge, materials and skills made available by the aid workers and knowledge, purposes, and means of application interpreted by the receivers in a suitable way for local usage. On the other hand it is planning the action to merge tools and criteria from different cultural origins, for example, mixing western operational techniques and models brought by outsiders (such as the NGO's), or those gained by internal workers *in loco*, with criteria and principles valid in the place of action. Besides, this is the case of micro-credit, an action which is a model of success invented in 1974 by a Bangladeshi economist, M. Yunus, blending European economic principles (investment, bank credit with interest, business initiative, monetary evaluation of work) with local functional criteria (acceptance of personal responsibility, acceptance of a publicly recognised role, upward social mobility of classes considered irretrievable). The basic creole crossbreed is the replacement of the «guarantee» (meant as a possible redemption by the lending bank, for example by means of a mortgage on personal possessions) with personal trust between lender and receiver, in other words, the cultural notion of value, (commitment to honour the personal trust granted), relevant in the situations where it is applied.

What makes up Creolism is not so much the adaptation of a western technique to a specific situation in impoverished countries, but rather the creation, in the field, of an innovative text (a set of tools planned to be used) combining features of different cultural origin, thus finding functional mechanisms originating differently, independently from the cultural nature of the worker in the field. What counts is not the identity of the working unit, but its invention *in loco* of suitable solutions, provided that the creation of text in the field blends cultural features instead of trying to impose some on the others. In the action in Cliza and Toco in Bolivia, the actual operator is not the Italian NGO, but a joint operations unit, the Co-ordination Group, made up of members of the Italian NGO, Toco and Cliza Town Councils, the production Co-operative ILVA, and the communities involved. So Creolism, an inherent quality of effective actions, is the way of working which unites techniques coming from elsewhere with local aims and tendencies, an attitude which makes the action useful whatever the operator's «biographical» identity, that is, whether he comes from inside or outside the place of action. Cases exist of fusion performed by mixed operative units (such as the Bolivian Co-ordination Group), other cases of culturally «internal» operators who source their tools externally (Yunus in Bangladesh), and cases of mixed operative units sourcing their tools not from the Western world but from other impoverished countries. Some examples are the «night schools» established by Unicef

(on request of the operational groups on the spot, mixed local/European) in the area of El Alto in La Paz in Bolivia, based on the model of night schools invented successfully by UNICEF workers in Bangladesh: schools requested by the local population (with a request which would be unacceptable from a Western point of view) to allow children and teenagers to go to school while working all day. Thus the importance of the operator being 'internal' or 'external' gets so much weaker that it vanishes, replaced by the 'creolistic' skills of the operations group on the spot. This situation is described in semiotics with the difference between Empirical Author and Model Author.

Indeed what counts in aid actions in the field is not the entity which intervenes as an individual or an organisation with a historical or judicial identity (an external NGO with the identity it has in its own homeland, an international organisation, a specialist born and operative in the country of the action, a national NGO...) but the action's Model Author, or rather an operational strategy entered upon in the field to be an effective operator, that is, the operative unit on the spot with its strategic decisions. This is what the action Co-ordination Group in Clizia and Toco does, where the biographical and cultural identity of the members no longer count, but rather its skill in interpreting local situations and needs, in order to formulate the most suitable action. Model Author or rather Model Operator of the actions, is thus the operational unit which thinks in order to organise sensible actions (which are able to transform life conditions) and effective ones (suitable for the specific circumstances) : that's to say, a way of thinking to organise actions which are sensible in the local environment. Symmetrically, Empirical Reader is the indistinct entirety of the population whom the action is aimed at, Model Reader is the actively involved users, or rather those who interpret the utterance using its preset mechanisms, having obtained a sense deemed appropriate from it, and getting effects and results — that portion of the population taking part in the activities, having gathered a fruitful meaning. It is thus a way to act, in order to usefully and sensibly activate the preset mechanisms, concretely providing it with value.

Moreover, even in international aid illegal or deviant uses of the text can happen, interpretations which are thus incompatible with or contradictory to the text's basic 'truth', namely its aim to permanently improve life conditions. To identify the text's deviant interpretations, those which could certainly be said to be forbidden (whilst being possible in the vastness of interpretations, even if they are different from those expected by the author), in semiotics some limiting conditions to the textual reading have been provided (Eco 1990, 1992): material objectivity of the text letter, economic criteria, the community's collective assent, coherence with the text's historical origins. These find an equivalent in control criteria for the creation of actions in the aid sector:

a) material objectivity of the text letter: the use allowed for a device or a trend is the one technically entrusted to the instrument. If someone who is granted money in micro-credit to start up an activity instead lends it to others at a higher rate of interest, this upsets the text letter condition (the loan is intended for starting up a personal activity);

b) economic criteria: the use of preset means which reach the established target more directly is preferable to uses which increase the number of intermediary steps, or to methods

which complicate the overall functionality, making their practicality fruitless (the introduction of motorised farm machinery in an area which is difficult or expensive to reach with energy supplies or spare parts, slows the work down and causes a risk of losing harvests);

c) collective assent from the linguistic community on the text's meaning: general assent in a community about the value of a type of action, on its compatibility with materials, staff, and environmental conditions, and on its consistency with the desired development targets, form a standard certifying the meaning's suitability to the given specific situation;

d) consistency with the historical and cultural environment where the text originates from: the action fulfils objectives with coherent features, for example with the ethical and idealistic motivation of voluntary organisations or with the concrete targets of the mixed operative unit (Model Author), among which is justice. If it favours, even by mistake, some sections of the population to the detriment of others or if it benefits local managers or politicians, it is not coherent with its motivation (conversely, from associations whose mission is religious or ideological proselytism thanks to the action's success, one would expect activities designed to attract converts, in contradiction to the impartial universality inherent in the principle of civil progress).

These criteria impose constraints to the interpretative applicability of preset mechanisms in the field, checking if the interpretations of the text are using the preset mechanisms in a functional way or if they betray them, involuntarily or even on purpose, just like the limits to textual interpretation establish impassable limits to the meaning attributable to the text. Who is, then, the supervisor who holds the power to approve or modify the action? Likewise, an absolute 'legitimiser' of the sense of texts does not exist, so for this reason different critical interpretations are compared, and nor does an international universal body exist to control aid actions, and it is still this which is the problem which gives rise to conflicts on which policies to follow. In fact the solution is the same one as we see in literary history: a consolidated general opinion, expressed in historical and literary theory texts, becomes fixed and is passed on, becoming a tradition. At the same time, the ultimate judge of what happens in impoverished countries is only Public Opinion, which sums up the view of facts of the time and contemporary social culture. Thus we can entrust the role of ultimate judge of how well international aid is conducted to public opinion. Semiotics thus offers international aid a semiotic model which can be used by the workers to plan its actions in a meaningful and valuable way. The requirement of creolism implies the presence of the users' voice in the Model Operator, and thus includes within it criticism of development models based on parameters (like PIL and monetary income) which colonially impose economic, social, productive and cultural models. The semiotic model's parameter is not productive or financial growth but evaluation of the relationship between economy and human wellbeing in the terms chosen by the users, and in the formulation of this model we thus find the contribution of semiotics to the current debate on development models.

(English Translation by Charles Dod)

TEXTS QUOTED

Benveniste, Émile (1966): *Problèmes de linguistique générale I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

Eco, Umberto (1990): *I limiti dell'interpretazione*, Bompiani, Milano.

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