

Foreword

Nature, Naturality, Naturalness

Many languages reveal the need to distinguish between two different relations to nature by referring to it with as many related but disparate verbal expressions. Naturality is not nature. Indeed, nature is an unattainable asymptote of any semiosis for which a total adherence to the wild state of reality is evoked, untouched by the determinations of language. There is perhaps no better way to understand the distinction between nature and naturality than to think about the disciplines and thus the networks of thoughts, knowledge and languages that deal with them. The so-called natural sciences do not deal with naturality. They lean into nature. That is, they try to grasp it as it is, and not as it seems, in its being and making, and not in its seeming and appearing. Above all, they are totally disinterested in its supposed having to be, in its deontology. Nature is, and that is enough. However, as the semiotics of the scientific discourse, which has set out to deconstruct the rhetoric of science, well knows, one cannot talk about nature. One can perhaps measure it, quantify it, count it, but the moment one commensurates it, qualifies it, and above all, recounts it, it becomes other than itself, it becomes, that is, a nature translated but also misrepresented by language, by semiosis: an interpreted nature.

Sharpening the gaze of analysis and criticism, then, we have come to realise that nature is semiotised not only in the narrative of scientific dissemination, but also in the very practices supposedly aimed at capturing it in its nakedness. Indeed, semiotics is even more ambitious than linguistics in its attempt to unearth configurations of meaning even beyond verbal language. That water is transcribable as H_2O is certainly a fact of nature, but that this metalanguage and not another was chosen to describe and annotate its internal structure is the result of a stylistic choice as well. Nature, then, exists as subsistence of network of causes and effects that are beyond meaning, but as soon as this network interacts with the human, it detaches itself from the pure objectivity of forces and agencies and unravels, instead, a chain of signs, many of which Peirce's semiotics calls indexical to point out precisely that they are

rooted in reality but distinguished from it by the intervention of that mysterious but foundational process of humanity that is semiosis.

It seemed natural to the German astronomer Simon Marius, who wanted to name the satellites of Jupiter, to do so after the names of Zeus' mistresses; the following scientific literature adopted, it is true, a much more aligid system of ordinal numerals, but in 1975, the International Astronomical Union formed a working group, the 'Task Group for Outer Solar System Nomenclature', to return to naming in the style of Marius, so that we went back to the god's mistresses and, since 2004, having finished with the albeit very numerous mistresses, began with the even more numerous descendants. The anecdote makes one smile, but it can be used to emphasise how, even in the natural, exact and hard sciences, or whatever else you want to call them, numbering nature is not enough; even scientists feel a very strong desire to move from numbers to names, and to speak about nature in the same language with which human beings speak and talk to each other, and, as semioticians know well, are also 'spoken' by nature.

Indeed, language is, at least in its evolutionary both phylogenetic and ontogenetic genesis, a 'fact of nature', yet extraordinarily it turns on itself, speaking of itself, of the nature from which it emerged, often muddying the waters, disguising or simulating its origins and staging fictitious relationships of forces and hierarchies between nature and language. Language (or to be more semiotically general, 'semiosis') emerges from a natural substratum, but then pretends to emancipate itself from it, attributing to itself the same naked reality of nature, presenting the meaning it constructs as being able to find, in enunciation and its products, in the discourse that speaks of nature as well as in the texts it brings about, a nature linguistically reflected, semiotically mirrored, adamant as the object that it means.

As soon as language touches nature, however, it undoes it. The *débrayage* of language in relation to nature, that is, its emergence from a natural substratum to overturn itself and its own naturing nature, immediately gives rise to a 'meta' level that is distinct but also distant from nature itself. When nature makes sense to us humans, that is, always, except when we are completely unaware and unconscious of it, it also makes itself partly language. Naturality, then, is essentially an *embrayage*, the term French structuralist semiotics adopts to refer to those processes of meaning in which a return of language to the unattainable origin of its enunciation is simulated. It, naturality, effuses itself as an effect of meaning generated by any practice that poses and proposes itself as capable of guaranteeing to the human an ascent of the flow of language back to its natural source. It promises, that is, to flatten that 'meta' level that inevitably occurs in semiosis, as if it were possible to conflate it with its primal substratum, and make it possible, therefore, that in nature there is directly meaning without language, that is, according to a 'natural' language, and at the same time that in meaningful language there is immediately nature.

These attempts at *embrayage*, which are and can only be rhetorical constructions, have a long history, beginning with Pliny's attempt to write a 'natural history' of humanity, for example, but also with the very meaning of 'natural languages', which also has a remote genealogy, whereon we cannot dwell here. In short, and in summary, however, what is a 'natural' language, if not a language suggested to have

had a genesis and evolution ‘in contact with nature’, adhering as it were to its lines of development, to the aforementioned network of causes and effects, and thus an evolution distinct from that of ‘artificial’ or rather ‘planned’ languages?

But already the fact that we cannot actually define exactly what a ‘natural language’ is except by contrasting it with an ‘artificial language’ should be suspicious. New ‘invented’ languages were needed so that the already existing ones might be adorned not with a mantle of ‘nature’ but of ‘naturalness’; the rhetoric of natural languages is also a rhetoric, and as such it responds exactly to the aforementioned dynamics of embrayage. On closer inspection, in fact, one realises that many planned, invented, or ‘artificial’ languages evolve with traits, according to dynamics, and with characteristics germane to those of the so-called ‘natural’ languages; and above all, one realises, in this comparison, that many of the elements that prompt one to designate a language as ‘artificial’, and thus as departing from the ‘natural’ ones, are also found in the genesis and development of the latter. One of them is certainly central: individual or circumscribed group intentionality in constructing a language. But can it be said that this element, individual intentionality, plays no role whatsoever in the giving and making of ‘natural languages’? Do not writers change natural language, and with it the nature of language? Do we not also do so a bit ourselves, day by day, through our own speech?

Removing intentionality, or even agency, from the scene, the dialectic between langue and parole as postulated by Saussure and deepened by Benveniste would have no subsistence or meaning. We humans construct our ‘natural languages’ day after day, albeit according to measures of scale often far greater than those implicit in ‘artificial’ language formations. And after all, then, if languages were really the product of a neutral and unintentional agency, of a pure collective intelligence, why would we have so many plural ‘natural languages’ and not just one? Instead, we must again reiterate that languages are natural in the sense of naturalness, and not in that of nature, and that conversely languages are artificial in the sense of artificiality, and not necessarily in that of artifice. This form of thinking becomes increasingly useful and urgent today, as we are developing forms of artificial intelligence whose processes more and more resemble those which, in the development of natural intelligence, have been imputed, precisely, to an unintentional matrix, to an emergent agency. It is possible that, in the long run, even artificial intelligence, beyond a certain level of internal complexity, will begin to enunciate its own naturalness. But even then, it will be necessary to do the work of semioticians, and to remember how much artificiality there is in our own intelligence, or how much it owes to the linguistic, semiotic and cultural crucible in which it coagulates.

It is precisely in relation to this panorama of very broad horizons that the ‘critique’ proposed by Simona Stano has the taste and boldness of the philosophical gestures of other epochs, those that set out to discuss very general systems and to unveil deep laws of human action. Well, if one were to summarise in one line the entire book that is humbly presented here—a complex book, the fruit of research and study over many years, of incessant reworking and extraordinary concentration around a very clear thread, but unravelled through a very wide range of interests—indeed, if one were to summarise or at least announce this which is evidently the fruit of

the indefatigable work of at least a decade of study, it could be said that Simona Stano describes, interprets, but above all makes us understand the fine mechanisms of that embrayage through which language and semiosis present their own nature as a naturality indistinct from nature itself, as a plane of language in which semiosis and natural reality, nature and meaning, are proposed and even touted as perfectly matching. This rhetoric—and Simona Stano demonstrates this perfectly in a series of explorations and probes that insist on her favourite territories, those of food, health and body discourses—is essentially ‘adjectival’, in the sense that, as we move from philosophical interdefinitions to the practices and especially the predicates of discourse, there is no longer any distinction between nature, whose adjectivisation is ‘the natural’, and naturality, whose adjectivisation also corresponds to ‘the natural’. As Simona Stano perfectly demonstrates, ‘natural’ food is not so in the sense of nature, but in the sense of ‘naturality’, yet in the rhetoric of adjectivisation, one and the other converge to make us adhere to the idea that yes, between the fruit that grows in the Amazon rainforest, unseen by any human, and that which a cherished ‘natural’ restaurant serves us plated according to the gastronomic aesthetics of the moment, there is no distinction at all.

Therefore, they do make one smile, were one not irritated by their cunning but somewhat crude self-promotional intent, the ‘against nature’ arguments, as they fail to distinguish between nature and naturality and, ultimately, present rhetorics of unmasking that are just as rhetorical as those they aim to expose. Much more difficult, though perhaps farther from the spotlight, is the work of those who, like this fine book by Simona Stano, patiently weigh the discourses of nature and naturality, unravelling their innermost gears, without ever adopting paternalistic or moralistic attitudes, but instead doing proper semiotics, which is not, as many contemporary Solons believe, the art of unmasking, but that of dissecting. It is an anatomy of meaning, not its etiquette.

The lexicon that gravitates around nature, however, like Jupiter’s many satellite mistresses, offers us not only the unattainable nature and its enunciated enunciation of naturality but also a third term, which in many languages is untranslatable, but which, fortunately, is present in both Italian (the language in which I think) and English (the language in which I write). This third word is ‘naturalness’, ‘naturalezza’. It is no accident that, in Italian, ‘naturalezza’ rhymes with ‘beauty’, ‘bellezza’. Naturalness is a naturality that has made it. It is not only an elegant embrayage, a successful enunciation, but also an attitude that has something childlike about it. It is no accident that in many languages it is rendered by the synonym ‘spontaneity’. The Italians of the Renaissance also called it ‘sprezzatura’, a term with a thousand historical and semiotic implications, which unfortunately we cannot pursue here.

In naturalness, we do not deny the naturality of our meaning, but offer it to the world as if it were a fruit. In naturalness, we imitate nature sublimely. All sublime art is natural not in the sense of unattainable nature, nor in the sense of rhetorical naturality, but in the sense of a naturalness in which ancient myths hint there is like a shadow of the breath of creation. This distinction, too, is lost in adjectivisation, and we say that an exalted dancer moves his body with natural elegance; and yet philosophy and semiotics invite us to explicate the concepts behind the adjectives,

to grasp that the natural elegance of an arabesque is not in the nature of the dancer's body (or at least not only in it) and is not even in its supposed naturality. How clumsy, in fact, a dancer would seem to us if he were to strive to appear 'natural'. 'Try to appear natural!' is indeed a phrase that could be added to the schizophrenic and schizogenic ones studied by the pragmatics of human communication. On the contrary, the dancer who makes us dream is natural in the sense of naturalness, and he makes us dream because, through the immense efforts that are not only his own as an individual dancer but also those of a whole history of dance that suddenly takes on body and nature in a calf, in a leap and in a pirouette, we catch not the elusive nature, nor the image of it that proposes to us a clumsy and often sly rhetoric of transparency, but a breath of creation and beauty, a gesture that, in artifice, whispers in our ears the nature of our best nature.

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