

Prefazione / Preface

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The sign, which is the traditional object of semiotics, stems from a selection. The signifying side of the sign never simply reproduces the signified one but singles out an aspect of it. “Aspect” (from the Latin “*aspicere*”, “to look at”) etymologically designates what appears, what presents itself to the eyes, as well as the way in which this presentation takes place. In English, “aspect” enters the language in the late 14th century as an astrological term, indicating the relative position of the planets as they appear from earth (i.e., how they ‘look at’ one another).

Generally speaking, the aspect in semiotics is everything that pushes reality to turn into signification “in some respect”. The word “respect”, famously chosen by Peirce in his canonical definition of the sign, may be regarded as a cognitive variant of the word “aspect”. If “aspect” is a particular way of looking at things, “respect” is a particular way of thinking of things. The respect is the inward counterpart of the aspect. The aspect is the outward counterpart of the respect. Both, however, refer to the same process: meaning derives from selection, and looking is the model and utmost metaphor of it. Peirce’s distinction between “dynamic object” and “immediate object” could not make sense without involving some form of aspect or respect. Indeed, most interpreters of Peirce describe the immediate object not as some additional object distinct from the dynamic one but merely as some “informationally incomplete facsimile of the dynamic object generated at some interim stage in a chain of signs” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). The fact that this “facsimile” is incomplete is the consequence of the fact that some cognitive and cultural forces shape

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the sign into the result of a series of aspects and respects, highlighting certain qualities of the dynamic object while playing down or simply ignoring some other qualities.

If “aspect” (and, more precisely in Peirce, “respect”) is a general feature of any semiotic dynamic, “aspectuality” is both an object and an area of investigation that has traditionally focused on one particular domain of it (“an aspect of the aspect”, one might say): time. Of all the categories of dynamic objects that undergo their transformation into immediate objects through selection of an aspect, time is the one that most attracted the attention of scholars. Early reflection on verbal language encouraged linguists to maintain that words do not limit themselves to represent the time of reality, distinguishing between what occurs before and what occurs after, but also to represent this time from a particular point of view, as though projecting a ‘verbal eye’ into the linguistic depiction of reality. Already the Indian linguist Yaska (ca. 7th century BCE) dealt with this feature of verbal language, distinguishing actions that are processes (*bhāva*), from those where the action is considered as a completed whole (*mūrta*). The observation that many verbal languages contain mechanisms that enable speakers to represent the time of an action according to different aspects of it has led to the development of a specific area of linguistic study, that of “grammatical aspect”, which considers the aspect as a grammatical category that expresses how an action, event, or state, denoted by a verb, extends over time. Traditionally, scholars distinguish among different aspects depending on how they represent the lasting of a process (durative or punctual), its completion (perfective or imperfective), the stage of it (inchoative, intermediate, terminative), its potential iteration (singular, iterative, cyclical), etc. Although most reflection on the grammatical aspect concerns verbs, scholars have long realized that the qualities of the time of reality can be verbally rendered also through other semantic means, including adverbs or specific lexical choices.

Since its inception, the study of aspectuality was carried on for both theoretical and practical means. On the one hand, it is abstractedly interesting to find out how each language (underlain by a specific linguistic ideology) provides speakers with a series of options as regards the representation of the temporal qualities of reality. On the other hand, it was soon evident to scholars that choice among these

options often results in a rhetorical effect: verbally casting light on a process so as to highlight its initial, terminal, complete, incomplete, etc. character is often a means to lead the receiver and interpreter to specific pragmatic conclusions. To give an example, contemporary online journalism often adopts an aspectuality of emotions that is diametrically different from that of classical ‘paper journalism’; social networks are full of expressions such as “you’ll be outraged when you’ll realize what the politician X said”, inviting the reader to click on the often enticing image attached to the message. Such and similar expressions vehicle and simultaneously provoke a receptive dynamics in which prejudiced emotional reaction to the facts precedes the cognitive awareness of them (readers are led to be outraged before knowing what they are outraged about, somehow relying on the “outrage deposit” that sits in society and that is automatically activated through fiduciary adhesion to the journalist’s proposed interpretive framework).

The centrality of aspects and respects in the definition itself of the sign, both in Peirce’s and Saussure’s tradition, the accumulation of insights on verbal aspects in the history of grammar, and the study of aspectuality in structural linguistics have given rise, in contemporary semiotics, to a specific interest for aspectual dynamics. This interest has manifested itself on two different but intertwined levels. On a more specific level, semiotics, and especially the Greimassian school, has focused on the narrative implications of aspectuality. In the Greimassian model — substantially in keeping with the previous and parallel linguistic literature — aspectuality is an over-determination of “temporalization”, that is, the construction, through enunciation, of the temporal framework in which the action of narration is situated and imaginarily takes place. Indeed, while in most Indo-European languages temporalization consists in the narrative projection of a present, a past, or a future, aspectualization specifies such projection by focusing on a specific aspect of it. To give an example, in Italian as well as in other Romance languages, sport journalists characteristically do not relate soccer actions (which have already occurred in the past, and are therefore complete) through perfective verbal forms (“al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore ha passato il pallone”, “at the thirtieth minute of the first half, the player passed (or “has passed”) the ball”), but through bizarrely adopting imperfective

verbal forms (“al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore passava il pallone”; “at the thirtieth minute of the first half, the player would pass the ball”). The pragmatic effect of this aspectual distortion consists in transmitting to receivers the feeling that the soccer action, albeit by definition complete, is still going on under their eyes as if in slow motion, empowering, hence, the evocative ability of the journalist’s discourse.

It is precisely in order to account for these rhetorical effects that Greimassian semiotics developed a systematic study of narrative aspectualization. At the same time, in accordance with Saussure’s ambition to conceive semiology as a generalization of linguistics, Greimassian semioticians have also explored the second level of investigation on aspectuality, considering whether the analytical framework elaborated so as to explain temporal aspectuality could be generalized in order to explicate also non-temporal forms of aspectuality, such as ‘spatial aspectuality’, for instance. In the Greimassian school, such generalization of the study of temporal aspectuality took place mainly through the introduction of the so called “observer actant”. As is well known, the Greimassian school conceives meaning as essentially stemming from cultural oppositions that find their expression in narrative forms. Relying on previous intuitions by Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and others, Greimas analyzed narratives as structures characteristically composed by a certain number of narrative roles or “actants” (subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent). Thus, meaning in society circulates through stories in which the correspondent value, embodied in an object, is pursued by a subject encouraged by a sender and sanctioned by a receiver, supported by an helper and contrasted by an opponent (this latter often being at the service of the parallel but inverse narrative program of an anti-subject). Subsequent followers of the Greimassian school, however, and in particular Jacques Fontanille, realized that, so as to fully account for this narrative structure, a further actant should be introduced in it, a sort of ‘abstract eye’ that observes the action of the story by focusing on a particular aspect of it. Changing the perspective of this “observer actant”, the rhetorical meaning of a narrative can be substantially altered.

In an epoch in which both global and local representations of time and space seem to undergo a dramatic shifting, *Lexia*, the international journal for semiotics published by CIRCE, the Center for Interdisci-

plinary Research on Communication at the University of Turin, Italy, devotes a monographic issue to the semiotics of aspectuality. The essays contained in the present volume deal with either (or both) of the two levels mentioned above: on the one hand, articles inquire into the specific semiotics of temporal aspectuality, focusing on the way in which the various kinds of present or past discourse represent and rhetorically shape the receiver's interpretation of action in time. On the other hand, articles seek to extend the semiotic framework for the study of temporal aspectuality into different and broader domains, concerning the aspectuality of space or that of non-verbal languages. The traditional division between theoretical and analytical approach has been adopted, in this monographic issue, so as to create two broad sections of essays. The themes they deal with include: the history of reflection on aspectuality in linguistics and/or semiotics; relations, similarities, and differences between the linguistic and the semiotic analysis of aspectuality; the notions of "respect" and "dynamic/immediate object" in C.S.S. Peirce; the analytical framework of temporal and non-temporal aspectuality in the Greimassian school of semiotics; the notion of "observer actant"; the rhetoric of aspectuality in old and/or new media; aspectuality in non-verbal discourses (music, visual communication, gestural languages, etc.); aspectual ideologies in cultural semiotics, focusing on the prevalence of such or such 'aspectual regime' in specific societies and cultures; specific aspectual 'figures': beginnings, conclusions, reiterations, completions, incompleteness, durations, instantaneity, etc.; specific moral or religious connotations of aspectual representations (genesis, apocalypse, rebirth, eternal return, catastrophe, etc.).

Several of the essays included in the volume were first presented in the advanced doctoral seminar of semiotics "Meetings on Meaning" ("Incontri sul Senso"), directed by the present author at the University of Turin in the academic year 2016/2017. All essays in the collection, however, underwent double blind peer reviewing.

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