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Rethinking lexical semantic fields: relevance and local holism

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Abstract: This paper aims to single out some pathologies of current lexical semantics, which suffers from both the *trauma of immanence* and the opposite *anxiety* of rooting all knowledge in the pre-semiotic dimension, or entrusting sense-making entirely to context. To untangle these pitfalls, the dialogue with a phenomenological cognitive semiotics may prove fertile to focus on the lexicon as a *type of storage* and a *type of memory*; that is, a type of accumulated and sedimented knowledge based on the dynamical re-pertinentization of invariants. In particular, the perspective developed by Sonesson shows striking coincidences with De Mauro's semiotic semantics, which already provides a solid foundation for rethinking the notion of lexical field drawing on an "authentic" Humboldtian and Saussurean heritage. Therefore, I will briefly review some principles of lexical structural semantics, with the aim of showing how these notions, once emancipated from the *Saussurean vulgata*, can not only be compatible with a cognitive phenomenological approach, but also facilitate the rehabilitation of a theoretical apparatus still valuable for both (lexical) semantics and semiotics. Although focused on lexical fields, some of the issues addressed can be extended to language and languages, as well as to other types of semiotic systems, to shed light on controversial themes such as the embodiment of signs and the autonomy of linguistics and semantics.

Keywords: lexical field theory; pertinence/relevance; structural semantics; phenomenological cognitive semiotics; encyclopedia

1 Introduction

Upon first encountering Göran Sonesson's work, a striking parallel[1] emerged between his perspective of a phenomenological cognitive semiotics and the semiotic

1 Indeed, Göran Sonesson, whom I wish to remember with gratitude, noted and approvingly endorsed these concordances during the conversations I had the honor of sharing with him.

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and semantic assumptions underlying the lexical-semantic theory that I had previously attempted to outline, rethinking the notion of "lexical field," and drawing on the Humboldtian and Saussurean legacy as reworked by Tullio De Mauro[2] and other eminent structuralist scholars.

As is well known, in recent decades, semiotics and semantics, especially from the cognitive area, typically exhibit an aversion to structural semantics, and they often fail to acknowledge the epistemological and methodological contributions that have shaped twentieth-century semiotic and linguistic research. Although the fundamental concepts underlying cognitive approaches are often derived from these lines of thought, (a vulgate version of) structural semantics is habitually condemned on the basis of two prejudicial stereotypes: the autonomy principle (with a subsequent *trauma of immanence*) and a "disembodied" and/or "acontextual" bent (with a subsequent *anxiety* to root all knowledge in the body and/or in the environment).

The definition of the linguistic unit in terms of *value*[3] (Saussure 1959 [1916]: 114–117) that emerges from the relations between signs within the system to which they belong, apparently indifferent to the life of the speakers (i.e., their body type, non-linguistic cognitive faculties, environment, and social and cultural contexts), is taken as a postulate that hinders an evaluation of the multiple doors that structuralist thinkers have left open to a semantic theory based on more "ecological" principles.

In contrast to this double stereotype, as will be shown, questions concerning the interplay between language and cognition are extensively discussed in European structural semantics. For example, lexical field theory is not only concerned with

2 Tullio De Mauro (b. 1982, d. 2017) was an Italian linguist, glottologist, lexicographer, semiotician, and philosopher of language. However, these labels are reductive of his impressive personality, considering that he was also a public intellectual who played a central role in the Italian debate as an advocate of what he called "Democratic language education." He was the best-known disciple of Antonino Pagliaro, whom he succeeded in 1961 as Professor of Philosophy of Language at the Sapienza University in Rome, where he held the Chair of General Linguistics from 1996, becoming emeritus in 2007. In 1967, he translated and commented on Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* into Italian (De Mauro 2001). Saussure accompanied De Mauro's theoretical reflections on language and languages to the point where he claimed to be unable to distinguish between Saussure's and his own theoretical assumptions. De Mauro's translation and critical apparatus is still considered one of the most profound studies of Saussurean linguistics, with the aim of reconstructing Saussure's "authentic voice." However, De Mauro's thought has gone far beyond the Geneva linguist (whose *Writings on General Linguistics* he also translated into Italian and annotated in 2005), as he has established an ongoing dialogue with a wide range of classical and contemporary philosophers, from Aristotle to Giambattista Vico and Benedetto Croce, to structuralist thinkers such as Louis Hjelmslev, Eugenio Coseriu, and Luis Jorge Prieto, as well as with Wittgenstein, revealing numerous alignments between the *Philosophical Investigations* and an authentic Saussurean approach.

3 I cannot discuss this crucial Saussurean notion in depth here. Interesting suggestions come from Sonesson (2015), who comments on it in light of the semiotic hierarchy proposed by Zlatev (2009).

intralinguistic lexical organization, but also offers a model of lexical competence that might be disengaged from the *Saussurean vulgata*[4] and extended to broader semiotic competence. As will be seen, a semiotic semantics such as the one outlined by De Mauro, albeit in the vein of structuralism, does not contradict basic assumptions about the embodiment of cognition and, in part, of language, nor does it deny, rather it tirelessly emphasizes, the situatedness of semiotic activity.

Still, the effort to define lexical meaning and its cognitive and even pragmatic aspects,[5] as well as to adapt the original complex formulation of lexical field theory to current concerns, requires a considerable investment of energy, since it often involves translating contested notions rooted in the history of linguistic ideas by shifting from one paradigm to another. Moreover, within the field of cognitive semantics, the lack of attention to the history of linguistic ideas as well as the absence of adequate metalinguistic considerations necessitate a more substantial exertion in order to first clarify their epistemological scope.

In this respect, as will be shown, Sonesson's reflections provide a valuable beginning for considering the potential for dialogue between some outcomes of the structural tradition and some current cognitive-phenomenological approaches, both because a phenomenological substratum is already intertwined at least with some branches of structuralism (cf. De Palo 2016, 2022; Sonesson 2021), and also because the Swedish scholar examines the thought of classical authors who developed the basic conceptual tools of semiotics, linguistics, and semantics, in the light of which he frames and critiques current movements. Accordingly, the convergences between a

4 The expression "Saussurean *vulgata*" (Lepschy 1966) refers to a simplistic interpretation of the *Course*, anchored to its final claim that the object of linguistics is the study of *langue* in and for itself, without any reference to the history and life of speakers, nor of course to the biological, cognitive basis and the pre-semiotic world. The Saussure to whom I refer in this work is, instead, the one resulting from the exegetical work conducted, among others, by De Mauro, who returns to us a scholar who incessantly problematizes what the *vulgata* had read as dichotomies (*langue*/*parole*, synchrony/diachrony, syntagmatic/associative, etc.) and who devotes attention to aspects of language and linguistics that are still the object of theoretical and epistemological reflection today.

5 Within the framework of Saussurean linguistics, the relationship between language and cognition is extremely complex. The fact that, for example, Saussure reiterates that "everything in language is basically psychological" (Saussure 1959 [1916]: 6) opens up the consideration of language as a peculiar cognitive ability and *langue* as a system for classifying reality, to the detriment of its autonomous epistemological status. The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is equally tricky. If in the analytic tradition, pragmatics has until recently been considered the dustbin of semantics, useful for accounting for aspects that are not merely truth-conditional, in the Saussurean and structuralist tradition, the artificiality of a dichotomy between *langue* and *parole* immediately emerges – the critical remarks, reinterpretations and additions made, among others, by Bühler, Benveniste, and Coseriu are, in this light, symptomatic – which led to the thematization of the pragmatic or practical nature of linguistic activity, culminating in the Demaurian principle of *radical pragmaticity*, valid not only for language but for any semiotic system or act of signification (cf. Diodato 2017).

"heretic" (at least with respect to the *vulgata*) structural approach and Sonesson's phenomenological cognitive semiotics suggest a favorable context for a rethinking of lexical field theory.

In order to present my arguments in an orderly fashion, in Section 2, I will briefly illustrate the notion of *pertinence* (relevance) as it matured in structural linguistics, from phonology to Prieto (1975), who, among structuralists, made perhaps the most remarkable extension of Saussurean premises to get to a comprehensive theory of human knowledge (Fadda 2015: 98). Prieto's insights have influenced De Mauro's semiotics, which, for the purposes of this paper, provides a more coherent framework for combining the premises of a Saussurean semiotic semantics (De Mauro 2019: 65) and the phenomenological approach. More space will, therefore, be devoted to his thought, as it is the background against which I have been able to review some of the theoretical limitations of the early lexical field theory. In Section 3, the notion of the lexical field is introduced, with an examination of some aspects of the Humboldtian and Saussurean upbringing from which it developed. It is no coincidence that it is precisely in the work of Coseriu – a proponent of a *Humboldtian structuralism* (Hassler 2015: 21) – that some Humboldtian, Saussurean and Neo-Humboldtian traces gain the necessary coherence to question the nature of linguistic competence from the perspective of a linguistics and a philosophy of language conscious of their own tasks (Coseriu 2019; cf. Diodato 2021, 2022). In Section 4, I will offer a concise discussion of the notion of encyclopedia in order to finally arrive at the perspective of *local holism* underlying the notion of lexical-semantic field. Conclusively, in the last section, I will reframe the previously explored notions with respect to the phenomenological perspective outlined by Sonesson, aiming to demonstrate their mutual consistency, which will be pointed out throughout the paper.

2 Pertinence/relevance

In the field of structural linguistics, the concept of relevance (*pertinence*), which can be traced back to Trubetzkoy, Martinet, Hjelmslev, and Prieto, has been developed primarily in relation to that of *function*. It is a fundamental principle of the Saussurean epistemology, consequent on the claim that *langue* is a "system of classification" (Saussure 1959 [1916]: 120). Accordingly, a linguistic unit is identified on the basis of one or more features (called, precisely, *pertinent traits*) that distinguish it from other units within the same class or system.

This notion of pertinence has served, as is well known, as a theoretical basis of structural phonology. Thus, a phoneme is defined as an abstract linguistic unit (*type*) distinct from its correlative phones (*tokens*), which is classified as such because it possesses at least one feature by which it is opposed to any other phoneme. In a class,

free variations are permitted until they do not affect the functional level. The identification of the phoneme is contingent upon the *commutation principle*: when a change on the plane of the signifier leads to a change on the plane of the signified, two distinct phonemes are found.

The phonological model has been further developed – potentially in excess of Saussure's indications – up to the Hjelmslevian hypothesis of the symmetry of the sign. Even on the plane of content,[6] it is possible to identify minimal elements that the Danish linguist called *content figurae*, displaying a functional value (Hjelmslev 1963 [1943]: 46–47).

Although structural semantics has mostly applied this principle to *langue* as a semiotic object without any ontological commitment,[7] most second-generation cognitivists have equated this method with the so-called *classical theory of categorization*, a model (erroneously) attributed to Aristotle and sometimes Locke, according to which the (pertinent) traits by which a category is identified are abstract, arbitrary, primitive, universal, and (occasionally) innate[8] (Taylor 1995 [1989]: 34–35; cf. also Lakoff 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Taylor 1999).

In particular, the debate has focused on the criticism of the principle of arbitrariness, also misunderstanding the meaning of "abstract" when referring to linguistic and semiotic categories. In brief, in the framework of categorization theory, (radical) arbitrariness has been understood as trivial objectivism,[9] conventionalism[10] or nominalism.[11] Among other idiosyncrasies, this line of criticism has led to a confusion between "theory" (linguistics, semiotics) and "object" (language and

6 Contrary to structuralist over-schematization, De Mauro (1982; 2005: XIX) insists on the asymmetry of the two planes of the sign: while the signifier is articulated in discrete units and is (to some extent) calculable, the content plane is indefinitely extensible and "pluri-planal."

7 Indeed, it is still questioned a distinction between an ontological, methodological, and epistemological structuralism (cf. among many others, De Palo 2016: 252–253; Eco 1968; Piaget 1968).

8 With regard to nativism and universality, these attributes cannot be ascribed to the pertinent traits as conceived in structural linguistics, being issues mostly addressed in generative compositional semantics.

9 The charge of objectivism is the result of a misinterpretation of the notion of arbitrariness. On the one hand, arbitrary traits are believed to adhere to a supposed "objective reality," reflecting the intrinsic characteristics of objects (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980), which is inconsistent with the approaches of Prieto and De Mauro. Further adding to the confusion, arbitrary features are also believed to be "abstract," that is, detached from concrete reality and the experience and corporeality of the subject performing the task of categorization, also in contrast with structuralist approaches (which at worst do not discuss this issue).

10 This interpretation also misunderstands the very scope of Saussure's theory, whose main aim is precisely that of overcoming the trivial conception of language as a "naming-process" or nomenclature (Saussure 1959 [1916]: 65).

11 Supporting this point, Taylor (1999) provocatively suggests that Saussure's radical arbitrariness leads to a linguistic relativism worse than Whorf's.

languages), a distinction upon which any science rests, as remarked, among others, by Coseriu (cf. Diodato 2022: 115–116).

In order to examine some of these contentious issues, I will consider a very broad sense of *pertinence* that structuralist linguists and semioticians have outlined on the basis of the other Saussurean epistemological principle, according to which in linguistics "it is the viewpoint that creates the object" (Saussure 1959 [1916]: 8). Martinet's vivid metaphor illuminates this point: "The weight of the material used in the facade of a building *has repercussions on the structure of this building*, and yet the grain of this material, its external aspect, its aesthetic qualities *insofar as they do not cause a variation in weight are non pertinent from the point of view of the architectural structure*" (Martinet 1965: 292, emphasis mine).

Thus intended, the pertinence of linguistic units is contingent upon the perspective from which they are observed. Rather than being entities *in and of themselves*, linguistic units (and signs in general) are the result of a particular mode of perceiving and conceptualizing reality. This insight was the foundation upon which Prieto attempted to build his theory of semiotics as a theory of knowledge (showing no little similarity to Peirce's; cf. Fadda 2015: 106). Prieto's words further clarify this notion of pertinence and leave no room for equating the structuralist model with the "infamous" classical model (at least regarding the supposed "objectivity" of the pertinent traits).

As he puts it, "since pertinence never comes from the object, there is no knowledge of material reality that is 'objective' in the sense that it can passively stand before the object and reflect it *as it is* or, in any case, that owes nothing to the object." The operation of pertinentization is never abstract (even though it produces abstract categories or classes); rather, given that "pertinence is determined by a subject who is always a *social subject*, it follows that we cannot have a knowledge of material reality that is *socially neutral*" (Prieto 1975: 149, translation and emphasis mine).

As Sonesson (2018) also observes, the theoretical implications of this deeper sense of pertinence have not yet been fully explored. I believe that this depends on the misunderstanding of the principle of radical arbitrariness, which Sonesson himself views with suspicion, giving some credence to the *vulgata*. By contrast, maintaining that the activity of pertinentization is radically arbitrary does not entail, as will be seen, that it is primarily (if not exclusively) linguistic,[12] nor that it is carried out by a *disembodied langue* and not by flesh-and-blood speakers. So, in order to get to the bottom of the notions of pertinence and radical arbitrariness, it is worth introducing

12 To avoid misunderstanding, note that, according to Prieto (1975), this principle also applies to the natural sciences, which are equally related to *social passions*. In short, no human knowledge is "innocent" because it is ideologically oriented, which is why, according to Fadda (2015: 108), Prieto's approach flows into a theory of institutions and a social ontology.

the basic principles of De Mauro's semiotic and semantic theory, which takes its starting point from an "authentic" Saussure, demonstrating, among other things, that the principle of arbitrariness and the so-called classical model are indeed far apart.

2.1 De Mauro's semiotic semantics

Based on Saussure's insights and unceasing dialogue with scholars from a wide range of disciplines, De Mauro outlines a classification of semiotic codes[13] aiming at showing the peculiar nature of natural-historical languages with a focus on the ways the different codes organize the plane of content. Aware that, at some point, sign and meaning imply each other, and that this mutual implication is one of the most dangerous loops of traditional linguistic theories, De Mauro (1999 [1965]) argues that it is a common experience that human beings, as well as animals and machines, produce and receive signals. Indeed, we are surrounded by a flourishing forest of signals.[14] Each event, physical state or entity *can become* a signal: this does not depend on any kind of inherent feature, but *on the function assigned to that entity by someone*. An event, a physical state, an entity works as signal, and is then a signal, when an agent uses it to relate to something else, according to a relationship which in the Greek philosophy was called *semaínein*, "indicate, make signs" (De Mauro 1982: 6).

The relationship between a signal (expression) and a sense (content) enacts a semiotic process that can follow two directions: 1) a user has a sense in mind and thus produce a signal; 2) a user perceives a signal produced by others, or by himself at other times, and thus attribute a sense to it. Needless to say, both directions require active subjects, as communication is about converging the sender and receiver *as much as possible* toward the same semiotic relationship.

Accordingly, De Mauro contends that the very first principle of semiosis is that the attribution of the function of signal or sense to an entity depends on the *free, i.e., arbitrary, choice of the users* interested in establishing a semiotic relationship (De Mauro 1982: 11). Particularly, semiotic arbitrariness consists in the freedom of selecting the materials to which, time by time, is assigned the function of signal or sense. However, the users' freedom is not absolute since it suffers from restrictions

13 If the notion of code still seems too constricting, the following formulation by Sonesson (2021: 110) can worthily illuminate De Mauro's position: "the addresser and addressee of any situation of communication start out with 'codes' – or, as I would prefer to say, schemes of interpretation – which overlap only in part, struggling to homogenize the system of interpretation as the communication proceeds."

14 Like Sonesson (2018: 23–24), and unlike the supporters of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), De Mauro does not come to a general relevance cognitive principle. For a focus on relevance and irrelevance as ways of shaping experience, see also Strassheim (2018).

due to: (a) the quality and nature of the entities assumed as signal or as sense; (b) the relation between those entities and the quality and nature of the users themselves.

Constraints on arbitrariness depend on a vast array of factors. First, one must consider the conditions of production/reception of a particular entity, which can hinder its capacity of working as a signal or sense for specific users. Accordingly, human beings, animals or machines which are not able to perceive/produce infrared radiation cannot use this *substance* to shape and produce/receive signals or senses. Similarly, "the choice of the auditory-phonic channel to (preferably) produce and perceive the signals of verbal language is, for humans, an arbitrary one: in principle, other channels could replace this preferred one" (De Mauro 1982: 13, translation mine). Ultimately, the choice is arbitrary but to some extent *also* motivated by, among other factors, the possession of a certain kind of body, that is, it is *embodied*.[15]

Nevertheless, having exaggerated the clear-cut caesura between nature and culture, the *vulgata* has bound Saussure's semiotics to a radical culturalist perspective, correctly emphasizing the historical and social nature of *langue*, but erroneously sidelining attention to the natural basis of semiosis.[16]

Rather, upon closer inspection, a *material arbitrariness* is at stake, based on the faculty of language, which functions as a *filtering device*. In fact, while both filtering and relevance consist in "picking up a limited set of features from the totality of the environment," "relevance, strictly speaking, does not exclude anything: it merely places some portions of the environment in the background, ready to serve for other purposes"; filtering, on the contrary, "simply eliminates what cannot pass through the filtering device" (Sonesson 2007: 106).

Alongside the material arbitrariness, *formal arbitrariness* arises from a question (the key question that a sign theory should really answer): "*to what extent can one mind hope to recognize and identify the meaning communicated by another mind*?" (De Mauro 1982: 13–14, translation and emphasis mine).

Given that our universe consists of an infinite number of entities,[17] and that the subject who performs the task of identifying an entity as *that* entity has limited

15 There is no space to discuss in detail the notion of embodiment in relation to De Mauro's semiotic semantics; some general lines are covered in Diodato (2020).

16 How far the nature/culture dichotomy was from his conception is shown by the fact that Saussure defined the *faculté du langage* as an *instinct* biologically located in the body/brain of the speaker, prefiguring what we would call today a neo-culturalist perspective as the one outlined by Tomasello (2021; cf. Gambarara 2012; Diodato 2020).

17 In the light of Schutz's phenomenology, Jan Strassheim suggests that it would be more correct to say that our universe contains infinite ways of carving out entities within it, since not only the relevant characteristics of objects, but also the objects themselves are relative to (inter-)subjective pertinence. This, again, is consistent with the structuralist notion of pertinence as discerned by Prieto and De Mauro.

abilities, such a task cannot require the processing of all characteristics. It follows that an entity is identified only through the examination of those features that *the subject finds relevant and sufficient*, for biological or mechanical reasons, to make a convenient distinction. Hence, identification (i.e., classification, categorization) is the art of approaching a *good and convenient* identification (De Mauro 1982: 15).

So understood, in line with Prieto's definition quoted above, *pertinentization* is in no way comparable to what Fillmore (1975) dismisses as a "checklist theory of meaning" (a ghost theory parallel to the classical model of categorization). Moreover, the freedom of choice is not incompatible with a certain degree of iconicity/motivation[18] (cf. Simone 1995). Indeed, the principle of arbitrariness applies to an "amorphous" mass (the "thought-sound," cf. Saussure 1959 [1916]: 112) that yet shows pathways marked by the filtering device, i.e., the faculty of language, consequently arbitrariness (non-motivation) and iconicity (motivation, similarity) are the two poles within which speakers shape signs according to their conditions and needs (cf. Gensini 1995).

Not only does it not deny some deep level of motivation related especially to biocognitive constraints, but Saussurean arbitrariness is not even about the relationship between a "name" and a "thing." Namely, one of the implications of this principle, along with the anti-psychologist assumption, is precisely the acknowledgment of the anti-referentiality of semiotic activity (that, again, does not result in denying that one of the main functions of language is reference).[19]

As De Mauro puts it,

> in order to establish a semiotic relation – that is, to perform a semiotic act and a process of communication – both sender and receiver cannot rely on *hic et nunc* entities but must share and use a semiotic code. Indeed, a semiotic relation, however simple, is never direct or immediate, since it always implies the connection of two forms, i.e., of two systems of classes. (De Mauro 1982: 19, translation mine)

And further:

> where there are no two planes, but only a play, albeit valuable for life, of forms without the task of referring to something else, or where the connection between referent and expression, stimulus and response, is determined by constrained physical or physiological laws,

18 As suggested by Strassheim, whom I thank for the insightful supplement, also from a phenomenological perspective it might be useful to distinguish between different senses of "motivated" and "arbitrary." As he notes, Schutzian pertinence is always to some extent a contextual and individual matter that may loosely follow types "taken for granted until further notice" but escapes strict rules (and in this sense is "arbitrary") but is nevertheless "motivated" – in the Husserlian sense – e.g., by the individual's current goals, biographical background, current knowledge etc. (cf. Strassheim 2016).
19 Accordingly, the referentialist stance that Deacon (1997: 69) attributes to Saussure is not at all tenable.

> phenomena are 'below' the threshold of the semiotic universe, although they come close to it, such as the 'symptom' to escape danger, or some music and dances that, although a-semantic, attune to different individuals, just as other semiotic systems and verbal language do. (De Mauro 2009: 262, translation mine)

Therefore, *biplanarity* (i.e., the connection between two forms, expression and content, belonging to two different systems of classes) is the essence of a sign, although its nature goes much beyond the trivial idea of a mere arbitrary or conventional association.[20] In fact, a sign is not established in relation to a thing, but acquires its value only *within a system*, i.e., in the network of oppositional and differential relations with other coexisting signs. It follows that biplanarity and arbitrariness are two semiotic universals, so that a "semiotic threshold" can be posited (cf. Eco 1976).[21]

Building on these premises and evoking another classic theme of the twentieth-century semiotic debate, De Mauro compares natural-historical languages (including sign languages of deaf communities) to computational systems, listing their common properties, such as morphemic articulation, rule-governed creativity and synonymy. However, he argues, other specific properties of natural-historical languages prevent their assimilation to calculus. Among these, he pays particular attention to creativity and metalinguisticity. The former concerns languages in the three modalities of rule-governed, rule-breaking, and rule-changing creativity. The latter is the *suppositio materialis* of medieval logic – that is, the ability to use signs to refer to other signs of the same code. Formal languages can take on another language as a (powerful) metalanguage, but they cannot "talk about themselves," as historical-natural languages do.[22] Because of these properties, unlike other types of codes, languages fit the great adaptability of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.[23]

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20 And indeed, by rethinking the notion of sign Saussure challenged the traditional Aristotelian view, replacing the triangle with a circle in which the signifier and signified are not simply associated (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*), but fused in the same way as two sides of the same coin (cf. De Mauro 1999 [1965]; Rastier 2015).

21 This "a-semantic" attributed to monoplanal phenomena would need further examination. A distinction between meaning and sign is implicit in De Mauro's work, in terms probably consistent with Sonesson's (2007) approach of limiting the notion of sign to a particular experience of meaning, namely that which makes use of codes.

22 As De Mauro (1982: 161–162, translation mine) puts it: "Already in its everyday and ordinary use, a language acts as a metalanguage of itself. Insofar as it is *homo loquens*, each person is also necessarily capable of being *homo grammaticus* who identifies, orders, analyzes, and explains parts of his own speech."

23 De Mauro argues that what is specific to humans is perhaps their semiotic flexibility, i.e. the ability to create and control a plurality of codes. In this regard, *Homo sapiens sapiens* is rather a *Homo loquens pluriloquus*.

Specifically, semiotic creativity consists of "a readiness to variation in the forms of a system or of a semiotic code which is inherent to the users of that system, and which can be recognized as a property of the system itself" (De Mauro 1982: 98, translation mine). This "permanent disposition [in the hands of the users] to innovate, manipulate and alter the codified forms"[24] (De Mauro 1982: 98, translation mine) makes *vagueness* a natural condition of the sign, investing both the signifier and the signified. In fact, a sign does not demarcate a closed class of signals that correspond exactly to a closed class of senses, but – analogous to Wittgenstein's (1953: §§ 66–67) family resemblances – serves as the instrument of an *allusive activity* (De Mauro 1982: 100); its function is not to signify rigidly and permanently, but to enable speakers to be engaged in a semiotic game aiming to establish a convenient agreement. That is why, unlike the well-known code model, De Mauro's semiotics comes to the conclusion that, given a physiological *semantic indeterminacy* of historical-natural languages, communication does not necessarily imply understanding, and that the latter cannot be evaluated in a binary way (yes/no), since we always understand each other *a little*.[25]

Moreover, by dismissing the question of autonomy as *argumentum ad hominem*,[26] De Mauro (2013) ultimately outlines a science of language that cannot live by linguistics alone.[27] Although different traditions and fields of research focus on a

24 Here is to clarify that, according to De Mauro (2009: 613), creativity, or better creation, is not the opposite of imitation (as Chomsky claims), owing that all the forms of creativity require the ability of identifying and differentiating expression and content and consequently of reproducing and innovating them.

25 Again, in Sonesson's words: A dialogue takes place when each of the subjects adapts his schemes of interpretation somewhat to that of the other; that is, in Piagetian terms, when there is both accommodation and assimilation. This would normally suppose there to be a large share of common ground from the beginning. On the other hand, when addresser and addressee fail to negotiate the parts of the interpretation system that they do not both possess, the resulting concretization will be a deformation. One or both of the subjects will then assimilate the message without accommodating to it. In this sense, both addresser-orientation and addressee-orientation are deformations; but they are normally deformations that are prescribed by the culture (Sonesson 2021: 111).

26 Without denying that Saussure had posed the problem of the autonomy of linguistics, for De Mauro 1999 [1965]: 137) this concern stemmed not from a desire to declaim the self-sufficiency of linguistics in and for itself, but from the need to define the object of study (i.e., the concrete linguistic fact) and to keep it safe from psychological, physical or physiological evaluations. Although including processes of a different nature, *langue* consists primarily of the system of signs fixed by the collectivity and present to the mind of the speaker.

27 De Mauro notes, From the humble mimicry with which the virus fools the cell to the most complex mathematical formula, the entire semiotic universe hinges on the appealing function [Bühler] and interaction between users. Not only does the linguistic sign "live in the lives of its speakers" (Pagliaro) … but every sign, every articulation of the semiotic universe, exists and lives according to the capacities, needs and habits of the living beings who use them … Not only the reader, as Umberto Eco said, but every *semantor*, every actor of communication, whether sender or receiver, is always *in fabula* (De Mauro 2008: 67, translation mine).

particular dimension of language, he strongly asserts their equality and theoretical necessity. This also means that semantics cannot be separated from pragmatics, and both cannot be clearly distinguished from syntax: while in computational systems this distinction is necessary to ensure their functioning, natural-historical languages exhibit what he calls a *radical pragmaticity* to the highest degree.[28]

In light of what has been summarized, the initial question – *to what extent can one mind hope to recognize and identify the meaning communicated by another mind* – can be answered: the communication process consists of the effort of two or more individuals meeting along a bridge, avoiding falling, each time, into the river of misunderstanding.

Convergently, Sonesson (2021: 97) notices that "communication, in the sense of semiosis, does not essentially depend on transport and/or recoding. Instead, it consists in the creation of an artefact, with the additional setting of a task of interpretation." Drawing a red thread between the Prague School social perspective, the Tartu model and some tenets of Husserlian phenomenology (cf. Sonesson 2009), he maintains that communication cannot be conceived without *sedimentation* (*accumulation* in Lotman's sense), that is, "the passive mnemonic remnants of earlier semiotic acts, which form the background to the interpretation of any current act" (Sonesson 2021: 97; cf. also Sonesson 1999). Consequently, building on the distinction between *genetic* and *generative phenomenology*, as drawn in Husserl's (Sonesson 2021: 105) later works,[29] he argues that "each act of communication (and of meaning generally) adds to the sedimentation resulting in the pool of knowledge, and each act is also a realization of such a pool of knowledge." In the terminology used so far, the

28 To evaluate the disrupting consequences of the principle of radical pragmaticity, notice that it implies that – taking up the distinction between dictionary and encyclopedia (see § 4) – semantic activity is encyclopedic, while pragmatics is entitled to dictionary-like operations. This perfectly corresponds to Eco's (1984: 85) intent, which has been misunderstood by identifying (perhaps due to the influence of an analytic approach) pragmatics with the encyclopedia and (structural) semantics with the dictionary.

29 Following Sonesson, genetic phenomenology attempts to explore the origin and history of the sedimentation process in any given set of experiences. Every object in our experience has a genetic dimension: it results from the layering, or sedimentation, of the different acts that connect it with its origin in our personal experience, which gives it its validity. Thus, genetic phenomenology studies the genesis of meanings of things within one's own stream of consciousness. The genetic method enables us to plunge into layers of human existence that are pre-reflective, passive and anonymous, though nonetheless active. The term genetic is meant to evoke the idea of the life of an individual from the cradle to the grave. There is also the further dimension of generativity, which pertains to all objects, and which results from the layering, or sedimentation, of the different acts in which they have become known, which may be acts of perception, memory, anticipation, imagination, and so on. Generative phenomenology studies how meaning, as found in our experience, is generated in historical processes of collective experience over time (Sonesson 2021: 104).

act of communication substantiates the interaction between *langage*, *langue,* and *parole* (to be understood from a broad semiotic perspective).

On De Mauro's side, according to what he calls the *third principle of Saussurean linguistics* (De Mauro 1982: 102), languages are subject to permanent changes over time because they originate in the speaking mass. Thereby, by relocating time and the speaking mass within the signs system, De Mauro (2005: IX) restores Saussure's voice (Saussure 2005). Indeed, to those who claimed that Saussure did not develop or hindered the development of a semantic theory, he replies that Saussure's notion of sign produced indeed a *semantization of linguistics*. Here is the core of an authentically Saussurean semantics: language is an instrument for schematizing experience, and languages, as semiotic systems, are indispensable for providing speakers with the abstract structures (i.e., systems of relevancies) that enable them to cope with the speech acts' inevitable idiosyncrasies.

3 Fields

The concept of "field" gained great prominence in last-century linguistics, although it remained ambiguous and loosely delimited. It has been a "migrant notion" (De Palo 2019), with numerous attempts at definition proliferating across several research domains between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The principal philosophical interest of a field approach lies in its contiguity with the concept of totality, that is, "the mereological relation between *the whole and the parts, subject and object, continuum and discrete*, in the frame of the traditional dualism between the supporters of matter and friends of ideas" (De Palo 2019: 201, cf. Cassirer 1923). This is evidenced by the fact that the notion of field crossed a complex path involving the Gestalt school and phenomenology, as well as rising structuralism, where it was naturally related to the notion of "organism," i.e., the broad idea of a "mutual interdependence between functions and structures, with the consequence that any change to any of these parts inevitably affects the others" (De Palo 2019: 201).

On the side of linguistic theories, Ščur (1978: 9) notes that in the early twentieth century the term was used to describe a multitude of distinct phenomena.[30] During that time, the number of disciplines in which it has been employed and the number of definitions it has received have been steadily increasing, corroborating its

30 Among the various definitions and related theories, it is worth mentioning the *tension fields* of the Prague School, which consider syntax to be a constantly shifting play of forces within the sentence; *associative fields* (Bally 1932); *syntagmatic fields* (Porzig 1934); *symbolic field, deictic field* (Bühler 1934); *semantic field, noetic field* (Prieto 1975). Each of these would require a thorough examination, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

"pandemic" nature (Ščur 1978; cf. also Herbermann 1995). Since I cannot examine the full extent of the field concept in linguistics, I will focus on lexical field theory, which most closely followed the Saussurean definition of *langue* along a Humboldtian theoretical line.

3.1 Lexical field theory

Lexical field theorists Jost Trier and Leo Weisgerber are included among the so-called neo-Humboldtians. It was nascent Saussurean linguistics, though, that provided a solid foundation for Weisgerber's (1926, 1927) theory, from which Trier (1931, 1934) drew inspiration for the development of the concept of lexical field (*Wortfeld*). In a broader sense, it can be said that their approach reveals some trends in the shift from Saussurism to structuralism, encompassing the main themes of twentieth century linguistic semantics, whose fragility was mainly related to the urgency of having to choose between the investigation of *langue* as an autonomous synchronic system (*ergon*) and the fluctuations of *parole* (*energeia*).[31]

Indeed, independently of the Saussurean exegesis that would erupt in the following decades and the critical debates related to the early reception of the *Cours*, the notion of lexical field stemmed from Trier's empirical research, who sought to conceive a method for the analysis of lexical change. Drawing on earlier lexical research, corroborated by Weisgerber's Humboldtian and Saussurean approach, he concluded that one cannot analyze the history of a word in isolation, without considering that the single sign is always defined in relation to other coexisting signs. He introduced, thus, a principle of structural diachrony (in his terms, "comparative statics"), contributing to the post-Saussurean debate on the distinction between the synchronic and diachronic methods, specifically questioning an intransigent interpretation according to which synchrony deals with the system, while diachrony concerns single elements (cf. Saussure 2001: 424, n. 167). According to Trier, therefore, the semantic change of a word cannot be studied "atomistically," since it affects the restructuring of an entire field.

Beyond the empirical issue that inspired him, Trier extended his insight also to the mental lexicon, which, according to him, consists of lexical fields shaping a semantic sphere.[32] Unfortunately, he left the notions of lexical field, conceptual

31 For further study, see Diodato (2019a, 2019b).

32 No spoken word is isolated in the conscience of the speaker and listener, contrary to what could be inferred from the fact that it is phonetically delimited. In each spoken word its antonym echoes … Next to and above each word, a wealth of other words, more or less conceptually related to it, appears …. Together with the spoken one, all these words constitute an articulated whole, a structure, that can be called the lexical field or linguistic field of signs (Trier 1931: 1, translation mine).

field and semantic sphere poorly defined, or at any rate traced back to a conception of language as an all-encompassing *image of reality* (*Weltbild*, cf. Weisgerber 1954 [1950]). Because of the overemphasis on the Humboldtian conception of language as a worldview, lexical field theory is habitually included among those advocating strong linguistic relativism or even determinism (Diodato 2019b).

However, consistent with a strong conception of *langue*, of which a field is merely a (hyper)structured subsystem, the idea of the lexicon as a mosaic of fields drastically closes the door that Saussure had left open to account for the speaker's freedom to associate words according to idiosyncratic principles. In fact, reworking the *langue/parole* distinction, lexical field theorists are forced to admit that, while the *parole* is based on associative relations that tend to be free, the *langue* encodes some of them, building (syntagmatic and paradigmatic) lexical fields. In short, both Trier and Wiesgerber adopted a strong, albeit contradictory, conception of *langue*, far removed from the "authentic" (weaker) Saussurean conception.

To better elucidate the tension between the two versions, one could simplify by stating that, in a strong sense, the semantic-conceptual level depends entirely on the lexical structuring. For the lexical field theorists, there are no concepts *before and outside* language. In other words, *lexicalization coincides with conceptualization*, so the latter would not be possible without the radically arbitrary carving out of language on the two planes of phonic and semantic substances. In contrast, in the weak sense that De Mauro traces back to Saussure's authentic voice, the lexical and conceptual levels overlap but remain independent; in fact, language constantly struggles to give linguistic form to concepts selected as pertinent by a specific linguistic community. The strong version leads to linguistic relativism or even determinism, equating *langue* with a crystallized structure that determines what is sayable, therefore thinkable. The weak version, on the contrary, ascribes a cognitive role to language(s), but considers lexicalization as a dynamic and socio-historical process that interferes with, but remains distinct from conceptualization. Such an approach does not deny that there may be non-semiotized content, present in the mind in a pre-semiotic or pre-conceptual format, nor that some sophisticated cognitive processes proceed without the semiotic mediation of language.[33] Notably, such a weak version does not repudiate the principle of radical arbitrariness, but, as already mentioned, highlights its limits by questioning the "amorphousness" of thought-sound.

33 Namely, this would be consistent with a Vygotskian perspective.

Regrettably, the development of a notion of field along these weaker lines has been hampered because, during the height of the debate,[34] the main focus was on denouncing the conception of language advocated by its founding fathers, whose thinking was, moreover, extremely biased by the ideological pressures of the historical climate in which they lived (Diodato 2019b). Not surprisingly, most of the criticism was not directed at the notion of the field itself (i.e., at the idea that the lexicon is structured in dense zones, in which words are defined in relation to one another, cf. Gipper and Schwarz 1966), but numerous scholars vehemently rejected a hypostatized notion of *langue* (Ullman 1951; cf. also Geeraerts 2010). Accordingly, the debate invested, again, the intertwining of *langue* and *parole*, synchrony and diachrony, syntagmatic and associative/paradigmatic, with the aim of dismantling what the Saussurean *vulgata* had assessed as dichotomies.

In order to bridge the notion of field into the tracks of the current debate it is therefore necessary to take it out of its original context to make it sustainable as a lexical model, as scholars inspired by the structural paradigm, such as Coseriu (1964) and Lyons (1969 [1963]), have attempted. The effort to conceive the lexicon as a structure – a *system of systems*, as Coseriu (1968) would later more accurately put it – hinges upon the notion of sign, understood both as a *psychic entity* (mental, although not psychological) and as a product of the collective subjectivity that creates and establishes the *langue*. A lexical field approach, therefore, revolves around the conundrum of conceiving the lexicon as well as lexical competence in relation to both its internal (sign as a mental representation) and external dimensions (sign as a public fact, i.e., normed independently of the will of the individual speaker). These two aspects of the "meaning of sign," which correspond to two equally indispensable points of view for lexical analysis, return, as we shall see below, in Kittay's definition of lexical fields as both *narrow content* and *wide content*.

Another incidental question is related to the "dictionarial" nature of fields which, being constructed only in relation to linguistic knowledge, leave aside the encyclopedic dimension of lexical experience. The question then becomes: is a dictionary-type lexical semantics possible, or does lexical competence invest a pool of knowledge that is not only linguistic, which would necessarily require an encyclopedic approach?

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34 To summarize the intensity of the dispute, suffice it to say that in the years of the greatest rise of structural semantics a strange paradox materialized: to structuralists more inclined to maintain the symmetry of the sign and the opportunity to investigate the lexicon with the phonological model (i.e., componential analysis), the Neo-Humboldtian notion of field appeared too loose and vague, while to the scholars more sensitive to the intertwining of the semantic and pragmatic dimensions it seemed too restricted to *langue as ergon*, completely excluding the experience of *parole* (cf. Diodato 2019a).

Well, as will be attempted to explain in the next section, while a dictionary lexical semantics may be inadequate, an encyclopedic lexical semantics is simply impossible.

4 From encyclopedia to local holism: fields and frames

Generally exemplified by the dichotomy between dictionary and encyclopedia suggested by Eco (1984), structural semantics is based on the belief that a purely linguistic dimension of meaning can be discriminated, i.e., that a dictionary-type model is adequate for lexical analysis, and that, likewise, an autonomous lexical competence can be isolated within a broader communicative competence (this idea implies a kind of modularity of communicative competence, an intriguing issue that, however, must be left out of this essay).

This structuralist tenet has been accompanied by a long-standing epistemological debate, which has explored its limitations while highlighting its methodological necessity.[35] Conversely, while not elaborating on Eco's distinction, but rejecting a Chomskyan-like demarcation between syntactic, semantic and pragmatic competence, cognitive semanticists have challenged this principle in the name of a *non-autonomy* of language (and linguistics). Instead of fields, they have advocated the notion of *frame* precisely because it appears more appropriate to capture the encyclopedic dimension of meaning.[36] However, in most of its uses, the notion of frame is allied with a conceptual reductionism that treats language as nomenclature. Although cognitive theories give different weight to this attitude, it is generally argued that concepts are structured through embodied and inherently experiential

35 For example, Coseriu (1968; cf. Diodato 2021, 2022), while adopting a field approach based on componential analysis, built his theory of lexematic structures on the basis of the distinction between historical and functional language. On the other hand, he did not deny the existence of extralinguistic categories, but pointed out that it is precisely language that shapes external reality and conceptual categories. His approach starts from the fact that, as an instrument of representation, a language can produce only discrete grammatical and lexical distinctions, which are always, so to speak, inadequate with respect to the continuum of experience. Consequently, he believes it is necessary to distinguish between two issues: the vagueness of lexical categories and the evidence that linguistic categories work by abstracting from concrete phenomena a set of features relevant for distinguishing one entity from others.

36 Nevertheless, like field, frame has also become a pandemic term; in fact, various definitions circulate, more or less distant from the intentions of Fillmore, whose approach (which not coincidentally starts from the comparison with the notion of field; cf. Fillmore 1985) shows a greater theoretical sensitivity.

processes, while language represents, if anything, the tip of the iceberg of conceptualization processes, reducing the cognitive function of natural-historical languages to zero.

On a more critical theoretical front and against the background of Eco's distinction, Violi (2015: 89) assesses the "state of the art" of lexical semantics arguing that it "seems to be trapped in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, it seems natural to associate lexical items with stable meanings; on the other hand, whenever one tries to describe these meanings in a generalized and principled form there seems to be no viable way out." Indeed, given the sign's oscillation between the poles of determinacy and indeterminacy, "semantic models seem always either too rich and constrictive, or too poor and simplistic" (Violi 2015: 89).

As has been mentioned, lexical field theory has been judged as one of the richest and most constrictive semantic models.[37] In fact, being entirely and exhaustively structured as mosaics, fields have been interpreted as abstract, dead, artificial constructs, unable to capture the living structuring of the lexicon, which more closely resembles a loose and flexible cobweb. However, that lexical systems are (sufficiently) stable both synchronically and diachronically is incontrovertible evidence for speakers, to the point that claiming that fields are too constrictive to capture the indeterminacy of meaning and its contextual variability does not entail going to the opposite extreme, that is, the conclusion that lexicon shows no systematic organization. Speakers, as De Mauro (1999 [1965]: 18) suggests, have the intuitive certainty that the *hic et nunc* determination of meaning requires not only the ability to grasp significant contextual clues, but also to rely on a *sedimented semiotic system* that allows them to move through the encyclopedia. If the Neo-Humboldtian conception seemed to lead to the impossibility of explaining lexical competence in ordinary cases where speakers do not have knowledge of the whole field and its structure (*holism problem*), the *local holism hypothesis* (Kittay and Lehrer 1992) may prove to be a decisive step in the direction of a theory of lexicon that considers the structure of fields as loose and context-sensitive as much as stable enough to allow mutual understanding.

One might, however, observe that a certain degree of richness and constrictiveness is necessary for synchronic or diachronic lexical analysis, unless one admits that there exists an inalterable semantic core (comparable to a "literal meaning") behind the variability of communicative practices. If, on the other hand, it is disclosed that the meaning of a word is determined by an agent in the encounter

37 In this regard, I partially disagree with Violi. As has been noted, lexical field theory attempts to address the problem of (in)determinacy of lexical structures in a way that differs from the approach of componential semantics. To use Aitchison's (1987) distinction, lexical field theory employs the *cobweb viewpoint* (i.e., words are holistic units linked together in a net), not the *atomic-globule viewpoint* (i.e., words are aggregates of atoms of meaning, and semantic relationships are identified by sharing these minimal traits).

between code and praxis, then the hypothesis of a core meaning merely falls. Borrowing Bühler (1934)'s terminology, a linguistic sign always occurs in a *deictic field*, assuming one determined meaning and not another, because speakers share the same code (that is, symbolic field). Consequently, when, due to a competence deficit or any other contextual or other interference, a pertinent meaning cannot be identified, it is always the common ground of *langue* that allows speakers to jump the ditch, thanks to the resource of metalinguisticity.

Commenting on the encyclopedic drift of current lexical semantics, Violi correctly notes that the Encyclopedia – which Eco himself intended as a "semiotic postulate" – is not, and cannot be, a lexical model. What the notion originally emphasizes is that "lexical meanings may be connected to a highly complex knowledge background" (Violi 2015: 89). If a dictionarial model might work for the description of single texts, the encyclopedia must be correctly understood as a model to demonstrate that sign meaning is adaptable according to specific uses. In line with De Mauro's principle of the sign's indeterminacy, encyclopedia refers to "a general semantic potential of words" that "cannot be fully described, but only locally reconstructed" (Violi 2015: 89–90). Here is the task of lexical semantics: to reconstruct the Encyclopedia locally, finding models to counterbalance the richness and constrictiveness of some structural (and even cognitive) methods and the looseness of most pragmatic approaches.

In an attempt to rethink lexical fields precisely to arrive at such a counterbalance, Kittay assumes a structural definition (indeed, largely borrowed from Lyons):[38] "Semantic fields are clusterings of lexicalized concepts. Moreover, semantic fields do not only group together semantically close terms, *they also encode the differentiations that individuate concepts and terms*" (Kittay and Lehrer 1992: 229–230, emphasis mine). The author addresses the question of the nature of fields not in terms of dictionary or encyclopedic models, but in relation to the debate between internalism and externalism: are fields individual constructs, therefore located in the speaker's head, or structures provided by the language, therefore located somewhere outside the head? According to her, "the answer is Yes! and No!" (Kittay and Lehrer 1992: 245).

On the one hand "to understand a language each member of the language community must have some grasp of the semantic fields to which terms in the sentences of the utters/hearers belong – as well as the understanding that the field is so articulated for other members of the linguistic community," so that content must

38 To confirm the non-homogeneous status of structural lexical semantics, Lyons (1969 [1963]) is more interested in an "operational" definition of meaning. Based on the idea that semantics must not be burdened by ontological commitments, he rejects a conception of meaning as mental content, affirming that this cannot be assumed as the object of lexical semantics. As a result, his notion of fields is based both on the (contextually guided) compositional analysis and on the identification of semantic relations among words, given a specific text.

be understood as *wide content.* On the other hand, one cannot deny that "the available distinctions in the fields – the contrasts and affinities that mark out relations among terms and concepts – are individualistically available," meaning that content must be also *narrowly* understood (Kittay and Lehrer 1992: 245).

The resulting hypothesis of *local holism* (Kittay and Lehrer 1992: 242) can be read, in short, as the attempt to find a place for lexical semantics *somewhere between* the individual mind and the external world. Local holism thus converges on a weak notion of *langue* such as that which emerges from the reflections of De Mauro and Sonesson.

This view challenges both radical externalism or contextualism, which leads to the evaporation of the notion of code (or "scheme of interpretation"), and a hypostatization of *langue*, which downplays the connection between semiotic activities and external reality, between language and history, between language and the subjects without whom it would have no life.

Consistent with the above, a weak conception of *langue*/code calls into question the very possibility that the encyclopedia can represent a model for both lexical analysis and lexical competence. In fact, while the encyclopedia contains the general semantic potential of signs, the communicative act also requires an (at least provisional) formalization, i.e., an ability to delimit and articulate the lexical field on the basis of the norms sedimented in the community. Ultimately, lexical competence bears on the ability to continuously shift from narrow to wide content, i.e., from in-head to out-of-head contents. If, out of context, a word refers to the intricate cobweb of virtual relations with other words, in context – that is, in ordinary communication processes – the shear of the dictionary comes into play. As Sonesson (2021: 117) puts it, "the concrete situation serves to prune the wild wood of the encyclopedia into the semblance of a Porphyrian tree."

5 A phenomenological lexical semantics?

Faced with the alternatives of internalism and externalism and of dictionary and encyclopedia, current cognitive lexical semantics complains of three discomforts.

The first might be called the *trauma of immanence* that cognitivists attribute to the alleged subordination of structural models to a classical theory of categorization. The broad structuralist debate which I have sketched shows how unjustified this trauma is, since the models of lexical analysis proposed by structural semantics (and the notion of field, specifically) start precisely from a conception of linguistic activity as *energeia*, in order to pinpoint a method of analyzing language *also* as product (*ergon*). The idea that the meaning of a word depends on intrasystemic relations is accompanied, as already argued, by an incessant epistemological reflection on its

own limits, given the interaction between *langage*, *langue* and *parole* when moving from the descriptions of linguistic products to the lexical competence of the individual speaker. As De Mauro argues, maintaining a weak conception of *langue*, the play of signs is not confined to the inanimate linguistic system: the *langue vivante* is deeply rooted in the historical community and ultimately in the individual mind, which is shaped by its social situatedness and biological substratum.

The second discomfort consists of the *anxiety* to treat language as *parole*, that is, language as a plurality of weakly or unstructured linguistic acts, entrusting the determination of meaning (almost) entirely to contextual factors.[39] This radical externalist, pragmatic, or enactivist drift risks sweeping away the semiotic dimension underlying the processes of categorization and communication (cf. Diodato 2020). Precisely with regard to contextualist drifts, Violi (2015: 92) correctly notes that the notion of context itself would require foundational work. A kind of "black hole" for lexical semantics, "context" can range from the simple linguistic environment (*cotext*) to the virtually infinite set of all the elements that can affect utterances; consequently, a lexical semantics that relies too much on it implies that the semantic potential of a word can be confined only or predominantly outside of language. Furthermore, in cognitive trends there is also a risk of conceptualizing context, which would lead to the same dead ends as traditional lexical semantics (cf. Diodato 2024), bridled by the difficulty of discerning between *what is known* and *what is about to be known* in the current linguistic act or *will be known* in the linguistic acts to come.

The anxiety to treat language as *parole* must be distinguished from a third inclination of cognitive linguistics and semantics to root all types of knowledge, even the cultural-historical knowledge typically encoded in language(s) through the two filters of lexicon and grammar, in the pre-semiotic dimension, or even in the labyrinth of neural structures. In this regard, cognitive semiotics, as a "transdisciplinary field focusing on the multifaceted phenomenon of meaning" (Zlatev 2015: 1,043), can provide a basis on which to rework the limitations of both structural semantics (too much *langue,* or codes in general) and cognitive semantics (little or no codes), without throwing the baby out with the bathwater (cf. Sonesson 2007).

In support of what has been argued so far, Sonesson's rethinking of the notion of relevance may offer the thread to stitch up a notion of lexical field within the framework of a weak conception of *langue* that nonetheless does not give in to the

39 Incidentally, the relationship between semantics and pragmatics is another issue on which the structuralist debate could help shed light, reexamining, for example, the theories that have emerged from the examination of the Saussurean *langue/parole* distinction – consider, for example, Gardiner's notion of linguistic act, Bühler's theory of language, Benveniste's theory of enunciation or Coseriu's linguistics of the text, which especially would deserve proper attention.

impossibility of identifying lexical structures, albeit recognizing their inextricable relationship, on the one hand, with bio-cognitive bases and, on the other, with context (from the *hic et nunc* communicative situation to the socio-cultural background).

Shaping a cognitive semiotic framework that critically intersects basic assumptions of structural semantics with phenomenology, Sonesson proposes a notion of relevance – or better, "systems of relevancies" – drawn from "the phenomenological tradition stemming from Schütz and Gurwitsch, including its antecedents in Husserl's works" (Sonesson 2018: 22).

With questions similar to those answered by De Mauro in the wake of Saussure, he then asks whether systems of relevancies: (1) imply (a1) that the creation of meaning is always situated in a particular context or (b1) that a system of relevance is embedded in the typical structure of the world, which is normally taken for granted; (2) (a2) are the result of the operations of an innate mental module or (b2) presuppose a socially distributed type of cognition; (3) (a3) play a role in the representation of something new, or whether (b3) the main contribution of these systems is to create the background of knowledge in which something new can emerge.

Consistent with the arguments above, these questions can be (at least provisionally) answered as follows: as lexical structures that encode experiences pertinent to human societies, given the bodily and cognitive constraints of the users (De Mauro's *material arbitrariness*), fields formalize a *system of relevancies* (De Mauro's *formal arbitrariness*) rooted in the typical structure of the taken-for-granted world. As their structure is susceptible to semantic indeterminacy, that is, indefinitely extensible or restrictable, fields regulate the creation of meaning as situated in a particular context. More in general, they plausibly represent ultimate outcome of a kind of social-distributed cognition, which is not restricted to the operations of an innate mental module. Ultimately, as their structure is embedded in *langue*, they play a role in both reinforcing the norms for the use/application of words as well as in offering the conditions for the breaking of norms, allowing for linguistic change (cf. Blomberg and Zlatev 2021: 43). Lexical fields are, then, not mummified mosaics of words, but "structures of the Lifeworld … as part and parcel of the Homeworld" (Sonesson 2018: 48).

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