Semiotics in an African context: "Science" vs "priest-craft" — "semiology" vs "semiotics"

ARNOLD SHEPPERSON AND KEYAN TOMASELLI

Many of the policy statements made by the metropolitan nations concerning relations with Africa make them dependent on a factor called "development". This concept is an eminently reasonable one given the historically-authoritative corollary concepts of "progress" and "civilization". Consequently, the idea of development incorporates something of the notion of science; this in turn gives rise to the requirement that development agencies speak of their activity in some kind of scientific discourse.

A requirement for discourse on development requires a critique of semiosis. This derives from the double articulation of development, in that it proceeds from two kinds of premises. The first often finds justification in the popular-scientific conception of evolution. This position views development as a form of supplanting: of one unfit form by a more fit other, whether in social, economic or, political (ideological) terms.[1]

In contrast is the equally popular-scientific understanding that sees development as subject to certain laws, usually economic and ideological. When applied to development, these laws are understood universally to result in a specific kind of change. Thus the object of development changes from a given prior (pre-modern) to an expected (predictable) posterior (modern) condition. The latter is always understood to be more amenable to the economic and ideological conditions necessary for smooth relations with the metropolitan centers.

The two kinds of scientific understanding clash with each other by virtue of an internal ideological inconsistency in the Western intellectual heritage: our tradition cannot make up its mind as to where the experiencing subject fits into our self-proclaimed intellectual marker of *Science*. Richard Rorty has pointed out that there is in Western thought a very specific kind of dialogue within which valid knowledge-claims can be made, and that this debate draws its agenda from the judgement we today pass on those who, like the Inquisition's Cardinal Bellarmine, sought to refute Galileo's cosmological claims. For our modern culture, claims that fail to conform to a specific

mode of justification we tend to dismiss as the equivalent of Bellarmine's "priest-craft" (Rorty 1980: 328).

When the victorious order of knowledge — that is to say, the "scientific" order — is faced with worlds predicated on some other kind of world-view, then it opens up for itself two mutually exclusive avenues: either it treats the world-view of the Other as "priest-craft" and consequently something to be vanquished; or it views it as an object of study and manipulation in its own right, which needs to be preserved (conserved) as such.[2] The clash comes about because of the mutual exclusivity of the ways ahead. If the former route is chosen then the latter cannot be pursued because of the Other's being relegated to irrelevance. When the latter way is chosen, the former is not possible because the Other has at least the status of validity as an object of study.

We examine some of the implications of this impasse both in terms of its evolution and of its scientific impact. Of specific interest is the way in which the idea of the Other, within its own physical and social surroundings, can absorb and implement these contradictions. Africans are quintessentially the Other to the historical Same of Europe (Modimbe 1989), and when Africans have absorbed and applied to themselves the categories and methodologies of the European tradition, dire consequences have sometimes resulted.

In part, these negative results had to do with problems that are realized when people forget the original agenda within which an area of study came about: the need to "subdue the earth", central to the methodological dispute between Galileo and the Church, becomes transparent. Put differently, "man" as an object of study becomes exempt from the act of study, and simultaneously subject to the dismemberments associated with analysis.

This is what occurs when the analyst and the analysand coincide in both space and time, with all the baggage of a specific regional history as part of the situation. Generally, one is given some *caveat* about the necessity of taking into account the context, and it is understood that the notion of "context" is as opaque to the analyst as the original agenda of the Enlightenment has become transparent. It seldom gets asked what this "context" is; it has something to do with that which is "with the text", and if one takes this into account then one has obviated some undesirable thing like subjectivity or value judgement.

Initially, "context" had to do with literary pursuits, and it is often suggested that texts can only be read along with the significance of the surroundings within which the reading takes place. The signifying capacity of the environment is interpreted in the terminologies of the means by which the surroundings are capable of being understood. As a result, sociological and historical dimensions to the idea of "context" emerge, which may enlarge the interpretation possible for any given significant object (which notion includes, of course, texts in the strictest sense of the word, like books).

What makes the notion of context insufficient in a logical sense is that any "interpretive context" includes an interpreting subject. The critical intellectual tradition is often, however, at a loss as to how to continue in this line once having recognized its

logical necessity.[3] In other words, the recognition of the validity of contextually derived interpretation still does nothing to tell us how the interpreter fits into the context. It tells us even less about what constitutes a context.

<div align="center">I</div>

Meta-discipline as monolith

The so-called meta-discipline of Semiotics is usually understood to be some sort of monolithic if somewhat confusing body of arcane truths about "signs". That *semiotics* and *semiology* are incommensurably related to the same things is seldom made clear.[4] The basic indicator of the way forward must clearly and distinctly separate these two studies of signification, and also make clear why the two approaches are in a Kuhnian (1970) sense incommensurable.

We distinguish two areas of difference between semiotics and semiology: they emerge from radically different agendas, even though initially they seem to emerge from within a common philosophical tradition. Our use of the term "agenda" carries no conspiratorial baggage: it has to do with the Gramscian "common sense" of the totality of European establishment intellectuals. In *Prison Notebooks* (1971: 324) Antonio Gramsci defines common sense as containing:

> . . . Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over.

As the idea applies here, common sense includes not so much the "Stone Age elements" of the accumulated knowledge of a society or class, as it does the elaborated practices of that group of people who subscribe to the notion of a "scientific method".

Semiology and semiotics can be distinguished by establishing how to characterize the different ways in which they were first worked up. In the case of semiology it is necessary to draw attention to the clearly Kantian basis upon and within which de Saussure, who is by common consent the founder of the idea of semiology as the "science of signs", developed his theories.

The significant agenda: The grounding of the sciences of signs

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was faced with the problem of uniting the rationalist common sense of the early Enlightenment with the equally common-sense positions of the empiricist reaction to the philosophy of René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes had entered the debate around the validity of Galileo's conclusions by postulating that

instead of truth (in the form of *certain knowledge*) having its origin in the metaphysical authority of scholastic Aristotelian and neo-platonist philosophies, it was to be ascribed to the methodical and skeptical application of the faculty of human understanding. The logic of Descartes's skepticism forced a dichotomy of soul and body which has become the standard undergraduate philosophy topic of the mind-body problem.

Descartes's solution to the problem of certain knowledge was that this could be achieved by disciplined application of those developed capacities possible on the basis of characteristically human "innate ideas". These were to be seen as ideas "of" entities like God, causation, relation, and other categorical concepts. Empiricism, in reaction to this, drew on the idea that what Galileo had *seen* was the causal antecedent of his ideas. John Locke, David Berkeley, and David Hume wrestled with the logic of connecting the material truth of reality with the mind's potential for making true statements as well as false (superstitious, metaphysical) ones.

The matter of coherence, however, remained. If minds were, as Gilbert Ryle so pungently put it, "just pieces of not-clockwork" that accompany Galilean clockwork bodies, then it is valid to ask how it is that delimitable mechanical data (light, sound, impacts, and so on) become mental ideas, thoughts, impressions, sensory qualities, or some similar construct (Ryle 1963: 21). Kant proposed to engage this by reformalizing the mind-matter dualism. This he did by positing a real material world which is *noumenal*, in tandem with which there is a world of intelligible mental objects which are *phenomenal*, and knowable purely as phenomena and nothing else.

The noumenal world is real, but because it is non-mental it is unknowable: claims made about this world are the result of the activity of "the understanding", or mind, and all that the mind can know is the result of its active application of built-in categories in the process of *judgement*. Categories are the logical tables upon which phenomena, however these may be generated, are ordered according to logic. Logic, in turn, is *universal* and the guarantor of truth; its universality is also the ground of ethics and science. People either make judgements on matters as they are relevant to these, or they express opinion: the former is to be seen as a truth-claim, the latter as being of a lower order.

The difference between semiology and semiotics derives from the differences between the starting points of Saussure and Peirce respectively. The critique by Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge of the semiotic enterprise rehearses the reduction that Saussure applied in reaching the sign relation of signifier and signified. The way this was done indicates how the dichotomy of phenomenon and noumenon was accepted as being prior to signification for this theory, and that the ultimate aim of the linguistic basis for semiology was to reassert the categorial basis of Kant's phenomenalism. Peirce, in contrast, began restating the systematic constitution of reality by rejecting the dualism of phenomena and noumena for an irreducibly *triadic* ground.

Semiotics, therefore, finds its origins in the attempt to *replace* Kant's systematic philosophy, and not in the projects possible within it. Although Peirce began by accepting a sort of "unknowable" material reality, he accepted that this reality could not

be utterly divorced from experience. Consequently, he realized that signs, as the relation between reality and experience, also had to be conceived of as fitting into the threefold schema of his philosophy. It is our contention, then, that Peirce's work is more relevant than that which has emerged from the European tradition after Kant.

The wood and the trees: Semiology

The European approach to the "Doctrine of Signs" concentrates on the "inner" or "subjective" aspect of signification within the classical Western dichotomy of the Subjective and the Objective. Indeed, the very basis of Saussure's *General Course in Linguistics* is the common-sense (at least in European terms) dichotomy of Word (*signifier*) and Object (*signified*). The tendency was to naturalize the structure of difference, proposed as an hypothesis in Saussure's work, into a formal "map" onto the grid of which all signs relate in one-to-one correspondence with specific reference points. In these theories, every sign consists of a signifier and a signified in arbitrary dyadic relationships that signify by virtue of their difference from other such pairs.

Saussure's logic imprisons us in a world of linguistic structures. The mess and confusion found in everyday life must, to use Husserl's term, be "bracketed out" because they obscure the clarity of the structure. This is ultimately realized in the "unpicking" or "deconstruction" of the structures. Thus, if semiology is itself just such a structure, then trying to "see through" it leaves nothing to which reference can be made, except possibly some prior structure in a potential infinite regress.

Semiology slips easily into a near-solipsistic world wherein practitioners tend to "live" their theories. Thus, at a lecture delivered at New York University in 1978, a dying Roland Barthes turned his (by then) post-structuralist brand of semiology against himself. He had found a barren theoretical prison, his head separate from his body, but with each nevertheless dependent upon the other.[5] This kind of listless existence of unstable signs, continuously mutating and transforming in unpredictable and surprising ways, seemingly independent of material processes, provides the shifting sands of post-structural thinking. In this mode of making sense, meanings are continuously overturning and being overturned. The fading self that was Barthes signified the curse of post-structural semiology because, as Marshall Blonsky observed, it is "a language with little responsibility towards the real" (1985: xv). It becomes a pure idealism or superstructuralism.

The wood, the trees, and the timber: Semiotics

What set Peirce apart from the "average" philosophers of his time, was his insistence that science and knowledge are *habits* that people develop, and that these are part of a time-bound process (see Fitzgerald 1966: 23). Some highly valuable theoretical aspects

163

to Peirce make his "Semeiotic" indispensable to those who take seriously the project of changing the world. Firstly, signs are shown to have significance only in triadic interrelationships with mind and habits. Secondly, signs themselves have a multiply triadic nature that corresponds to the interrelations of significance.

The triadic interrelation of significance in Semiotic theory enables theorists to begin moving away from the dichotomies that seem to dog the ways of thinking that Europeans have foisted onto the world over the last four centuries (if not longer). The nature of the sign in Peirce is such that we can relate social entities, be they individual or collective, to discourse on the one hand and to practice on the other, in a quite coherent way. *Since the semiotic relationship is triadic, a given situation can be analyzed in considerably more complex and creative ways than can be done otherwise. One has the means to look at the simultaneous relations between, say, a sign and the habit it engenders in practice; between the practice and the signifying subject; and between the subject and the system of signification.*

For us, two types of triads are of primary interest. The first is the one that classifies sign types or signs in themselves: the *qualisign*, the *sinsign*, and the *legisign*. The second trichotomy, that of icon, index, and symbol, deals with the way signs are recognized. The sign-types point to the kind of act of signification that is taking place; sign-levels (second trichotomy) concern the actual significance present at a given point in the activity of signification with regard to their relation to Objects. The role and place of the signifying subject in the context is provided for by the crucial notion of the *interpretant*, which is the effect produced by a sign in the interpreter.

It is not necessary to go into all the kinds of interpretants Peirce identified, since what is primarily of interest is their final association with *habit*: a sign can be said to signify completely when there is an *ultimate interpretant* in the form of habit-change or habit formation. Signification that results in the mere exercise of an already existing habit, or in no habit coming into play at all, Peirce calls an example of *degenerate signification*. This does not attach to anybody's moral worth: it only means that the sign in question "fails to act at all three levels of sign-type. At its most effective, an interpretant necessarily gives rise to new signs or to new uses of signs.

It has become something of a cliché that Peirce saw signs as being *always* Iconic, Indexical, and Symbolic. Both Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes tried to save European semiology by adopting this classificatory system. At the end of the day, however, their exclusion of the historical nature of the signifying subject from the process and practice of signification made their efforts a rearguard action rather than a recovery.

Peirce's penchant for division into threes had partly to do with the original nature of his project to reconstruct Kant's "Architectonic" philosophy. Indeed, Weiss and Burks (1945) have shown how Peirce's system leaves one with a total of sixty-six different sorts of sign. The aspect of *activity* that accompanies a subject's use of signs makes the triple link the minimum necessary for understanding, since if a sign is to *mean* then there also has to be at very least somebody signifying *and* something that is signified.

Peirce's division of the sign into icon, index, and symbol presupposed a signifying subject with a history and context of signification that could be linked to a history of such contexts. At the same time, though, the prior division of signs *as signs* into qualisign, sinsign, and legisign allowed for the process whereby the signifying subject developed experience into a communicable entity. Each of these sign-types more or less corresponds to those levels of comprehension said to be characteristically human: the qualisign has to do with the immediately presented surroundings of the subject (or *phaneron*, to use Peirce's term); the sinsign with that which can be separated out from the overall context as being different from whatever else can be so separated; and legisigns are concerned with the relations that might obtain between what has been separated out.

For a concrete example of how the first trichotomy works, we can look at the semiotics of the delivery of this paper. To begin with, it operates at the level of sign types in that as qualisign it is an academic paper delivered in direct speech within the confines of a conference venue. It is not being read in a study, or in the train on the way to work, or as part of an undergraduate project. As a consequence, it is going to generate signs that are not associated with these other locations and activities. As a sinsign, the paper is not the itch in one's nose, or the conference program in one's briefcase, or the comments one could think about in response to the paper. Finally, as legisign it is about the internal relations of the general semiotic endeavor and also about the relations of this endeavor to other social, political, and economic practice.

The second trichotomy becomes instantiated for the audience as a consequence of the sign-types rehearsed above. Iconically it is encountered as the spoken word, although this could be different if one has already read a copy of it. Indexically, it refers to Peircean usages and not to those associated with, say, Greimas, Volosinov, or Eco. Symbolically, it is in the English language and both instantiates and questions the rules with which symbols are used to make sense. The intended interpretant is, of course, that everyone would leave the conference and set about restating pragmatism in semiotic rather than Peirce's apolitical ethical terms; on the other hand, this is not the road to Damascus and the best one can hope for is that there will be a lively instantiation of academic conference practice later during question time.

In the light of Peirce's triadic conception, it becomes possible to read some recent philosophy more creatively. In the semiological tradition we thus find Foucault's (1974) archeology of the order of the Same and the Other drawing on the relation of signifier and signified as the historical absorption into the European discourse of Descartes's dualism of mind and matter. Over time this has led to the institutionalization of the dichotomy of the human and natural sciences, in terms of which the human subject, as pointed out earlier, becomes an object of double signification. The pragmatic component of European society's development during the period examined by Foucault cannot, in these terms, be accounted for unless it becomes subjected to a separate analysis.

Foucault was aware of this, and subsequent work in his *oeuvre* attempts to apply the idea of the social institution as material signifier with the intellectual order (psychiatry,

medicine, penal law) as institutional signified. In the end, however, the theme bogs down in pessimism, because the possibility of substantive change into a different order of signification is excluded by the analytically ahistorical nature of the arbitrary relationship of signifier to signified. Put differently, Foucault is giving his reader a brilliant elucidation of her or his location in the social and epistemological order, but offers no course of action to reconstitute that order in a way that the reader becomes significant within it.

In contrast, Peircean semiotics begins from the essence of the human pragmatic relation with nature. Signification has substance in practice, that is to say, within the common habits that evolve and change as practices become elaborated in time. If we reread Foucault with this in mind, then we can relate the evolution of the order of knowledge to the perfection of that family of techniques which distinguish European practice from other forms. In the most important aspect of this process, the inherently pragmatic nature of signification forces the characterization of knowledge out of the anti-realist tradition that has accompanied the Kantian project into an approach that makes what we signify real in terms of what we do.

This also means that what Foucault was trying to overcome, the separation of fact from beliefs about facts, does not actually occur in the semiotic way of seeing the world: the presence of the subject as part of the sign relationship conditions just what will be significant in a particular juncture. These historically discrete moments of signification are related to the idea of experience, and Peirce realized that in the empirical tradition this concept was problematic. To avoid the Berkeleyan trap of pure subjective experience ("to be is to be perceived"), he had to reconceptualize the idea of the phenomenon.

In the end, the more ontologically complete idea of the phaneron replaced that of the phenomenon, which Peirce considered conceptually limited. The phaneron is a kind of super-sign which contains the conditions for signification given the presence of a subject. Any situation in space and time can contain a great many simultaneous phanera, but while this number is indefinitely large it is not infinitely so. By virtue of the connection between a sign and a habit in the formation of the interpretant, any phaneron will be defined by the pragmatic capacities of the signifying subject present at the time of the phaneron's realization.

The necessity for praxis is what makes the phaneron the ideal vehicle within which to conceptualize the idea of a context, since the difficulty associated with the real situation of crucial contexts generating conflicting actions is hard to theorize in the usual textual environment. Thus, as long as there is an insistence on all parties in a single juncture having to signify in an identical manner, as Rorty suggests is the case in the "epistemological" tradition of the West, then the need for uniformity of subjectivities will persist. This uniformity, in turn, can only be conceived of where subjectivity is a disembodied non-material ghost in the machine, not subject to the concrete constraints of the real world within which signs are both generated and propagated.

Before discussing how to apply this reading of Peirce in the African situation, it should be pointed out that not all philosophical work done in respect of signification draws on the possibility that signs could be generated in a world that does not contain objects. Peirce made it clear that semiotic relationships ought to hold for all manner of beings which conceivably might use signs; but he did not broach the possibility that signs might refer to something other than entities which ultimately exist in objective form. We draw attention to this because one of the most telling criticisms of the objective nature of Western thought, that of W.V.O. Quine, is central to the way in which the significance of African experiences is described.

In his essay "Speaking of objects", Quine drew attention to the shortcomings of certain theories of meaning that rely too much on ostention, or pointing-out of objects.[6] What would be the case, he asked, if a person familiar with European languages were faced with translating a language that is radically different because it has no grammar for dealing with "undissociated common sense" objects? The outcome, he suggests, is that unless by the luckiest of guesses such a person grasps this immediately, there would be an indeterminacy of radical translation precisely as a result of the tendency for Europeans to experience a world of discrete things. This situation is germane because it is arguably the case that African languages — at least the so-called Bantu Group of languages — describe a world consisting of more than objects.

Producing Africa: Rethinking the context of semiotics

V.Y. Mudimbe's study (1989) shows the inadequacy of formal semiotics-cum-semiology and also points to the necessity for referring back to Peirce's inclusion of practice in signification. Here, the archeology of the meaning of the signifier, "Africa", is unearthed for those who have colonized, converted, and studied it. One of Mudimbe's central themes is the emergence of a different world spoken by the languages of a large portion of Africa's people. As evidence for this, he cites the work of the Belgian missionary Frans Tempels: beginning in the 1920s and carrying on for several decades, a picture of an ontology based on interacting forces and not on concrete objects emerged.

Much confusion surrounds Tempels's use of the word "philosophy" in describing this world of "being", but in subsequent decades a whole body of active philosophical debate has centered on the significance of this. In short, there is a real indeterminacy of radical translation at the root of the historical relationship of Europe and Africa, and it had been overlooked by all except a priest. The irony of this is unmistakable, but it is of some importance that after centuries of evangelizing, colonizing, and (most recently) anthropological analysis, that it was left to a representative of the vanquished order of "priest-craft" to discover that something different might underlie what Africans had experienced in the exchange.

To return to our opening statement, that if the idea of development is to have significance in the context of its application, then a critique of semiosis is called for. To

begin, the idea of the phaneron as the possibility for generating a constrained but indefinite plurality of signs would have to be reconceptualized to allow for the presence of a radical translation being present at some stage of the contextual history. The phaneron of signification in Africa, then, necessarily includes some degree of indeterminacy in the way expected interpretants will be generated. This would be the case because, if Tempels was right, there will be always one subject seeing a whole undissociated "common sense" object, and at least one other experiencing a dynamic relation of force.

Many Africans, especially those who, like Frantz Fanon or Amilcar Cabral, tried to conceive a modern solution to the problem of colonial succession, have come up against this situation in their dealing with the relationship between the political center and the peasant fringe of the colonial arrangement. In general, it becomes an unfinished task if one applies the categories of European ways of understanding peasant thought to what may or may not have been going on for oral-based African societies.

In support of this, we can reread Mudimbe's interpretation of activities in that part of African society which is between the colonial or anthropological categories of primitivity and modernity. People in this "zone of marginality" (from Samir Amin) will embrace a set of religious beliefs that, when taken seriously by theologians in an attempt to facilitate ecumenical objectives, lead to sometimes severe crises at the center of the Church. This was the case with Tempels, whose engagement with the world of his parishioners led to calls for his excommunication. The point is that without a sympathetic intellectual approach to what these classes of people might experience, there is no way of telling whether a program affecting them is intelligible to *them*. This situation is something of a limiting case, in that for the most part the people in question have a history of getting by irrespective of how the requirements of the political center (before or after decolonization) have changed in translation. The same is true of the historical transformation of the local language as a result of decades or centuries of interaction with Europeans.

However, because things have somehow gone ahead in this type of situation, it does not follow that at the level of signification there is any unanimity of interpretants beyond the commands for "toting that barge or lifting that bale". Indeed, this has often been the only requirement in most of-the interactions between Africans and colonists. When we are asked what is the semiotic content of such an event, very little can be said beyond perhaps the obvious fact that the European Same has not engaged with the African Other.

Such a reply is essentially trivial, in that as long as the order of knowledge as laid out by Foucault is taken as the last word on the matter, then there is no way forward that is ethically acceptable. Two such ways out of the general condition of indeterminacy propose themselves: on the one hand, the order of knowledge can be inverted so that Africa becomes the Same to the European-Western Other; or one can import some existing paradigm that purports to subordinate both Same and Other to a new order. The first inversion option is sometimes discussed as the "Afrocentric Idea",

while the second generally involves proposing the establishment of some variation on a Marxist theme. The Afrocentric Idea can be found in one configuration or another in the work of Julius Nyerere, Molefi Kente Asante, or Kwame Nkrumah, amongst others. The Marxist option informs writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo, Paulin Hountondji, and Fanon and Cabral.

In the Afrocentric approach, nothing radically new is taking place conceptually, since the process involves little more than an inversion of categories within the same logical framework. From the point of view of ethics, all this amounts to is saying that the dominant boot should be on the Other foot, and all problems are thereafter solved. In the Marxist case, more serious conceptual and ontological problems arise, because the essential historical precondition for a Marxist analysis is the existence of a large and well-organized industrial working class.

In conceptual terms, problems stem from colonization itself: where the colonial imperative was based on missionary requirements of civilization and conversion, the tendency was to follow through this need in a pastoral or agricultural setting. Where a real industrial thrust occurred, as in South Africa and to a lesser degree in Zambia and Zimbabwe, the tendency was to employ African labor on as low a level of manual work as possible while protecting skilled and semi-skilled positions for expatriates or whites. Thus the emergence of any kind of informed indigenous working class has often followed late in the history of the various states of independent Africa.[7]

Both lines of thought fleetingly looked at here exist in some form or other in the common-sense discourse of latter-day Africa, and consequently are likely to be part of the *context* of everyday significance. At the same time, however, there is always going to be the trace of non-colonial language, practice, and signification. Put differently, people in the marginal zone are going to experience a world which is different in various ways from that administered from neo-colonial state centers. This is of course almost trivially true, in that the foundations of democracy in the Western sense analytically include the right to difference of opinion. What we are suggesting, however, is that for the African case there is an added dimension which transcends simple opinion: the reality addressed by policy and affairs of state is concretely different to that addressed by the everyday life of the average Western person.

What makes this situation awkward to conceive in ordinary intellectual frames is that they are oriented relative to the ideas of subject and object *as the basis of European languages*. If Alexis Kagame is right, and there is a plurality of ontological referents in African language based on the notion of *ntu*, then the standard signifying grids will fail to engage fully with whatever *démarches* may emanate from the classes not directly connected to the state. It follows, although not entirely obviously, that there are creative possibilities for cultural and semiotic interventions which may be missed by all sections of contemporary African society, not to mention the relevant sections of Western society.

We suggest that the study of signification in Africa be drawn from a successor semiotic that proceeds from the Peircean system. Specifically, this will need to

169

recognize that in situations such as those found in Africa, factors complicating ordinary common-sense notions of how to characterize a context will appear. Peirce's idea of a phaneron is the only existing conceptual starting point within which it is possible to accommodate the indeterminacy of translation that exists within Africa (and, for that matter, between Africa and the industrial North).

The phaneron is an expansion of the classical and modern versions of the phenomenon. As Peirce put it:

> My "phenomenon" for which I must invent a new word is very near . . . "pure experience" but not quite since I do not exclude time and also speak of only one "phenomenon"[8]. . . [B]y the *phaneron* I mean the collective total of all that is in any or in any sense present to the mind, regardless of whether it corresponds to any real thing or not.[9]

What this means is that the concrete encounter of a subject in a phaneron includes the likelihood that what is experienced will include the accumulated consequences of previous differences of experience encountered by others in a similar or precedent situation. The difference that is relevant here is literally one of ontology: the history as constructed by one section of society will refer to a world not the same as that constructed by someone from another part.

To make this clear, we draw on the position that a Quinean ontological relativity exists in any African encounter, and that this relativity is the primary causal factor in the incapacity of development agencies to apply their projects. In Peircean terms, the failure of development is the index of a more general incapacity to appreciate the reality of African people's experience. More to the point, we suggest that this index is transparent to those Africans who occupy positions of intellectual influence with respect to the development process.

As Mudimbe observes, African scholars like Hountondji, Smet, and Crahay are truly awesome intellectuals in the European milieu: they have degrees from the most prestigious of European universities, and many are the product of rigorous Jesuit training — they have become acculturated to the European *gnosis*. Our own project consists in reconciling this concept of *gnosis* as the underlying sensible basis of intelligible language with the pragmatic reality of signification in a world singularly devoid of successful signs with regard to its relationship with the world at large.

II

To clarify what African *gnosis* entails, we can relate the idea of the phaneron to the phenomenological investigation of science made by Michael Whiteman (1967), a philosopher from Cape Town. Whiteman applies a Husserlian method to the theoretical basis of Western science, and comes to the conclusion that the basis for all intelligibility

in this family of activities is the *praxis* (for want of a better word) upon which Euclidean geometry is based. What this entails is the necessity for symbolic thought to relate coherently through interconnected levels to some convergent practical activity.

Whiteman identifies the essential necessity for closure that accompanies the construction of straight lines, circles, parallel lines, and other classical shapes. These in turn are most readily intelligible as they relate to the absolute grids of space and time inherited from the Newtonian cosmological model. At the most basic level is the transparent *a priori* existence of a constructed distance-measuring device. Thus even when making measures of time, some marker which measures space is presupposed that will serve to divide the x-axis of a cartesian grid upon which a geometrical representation of time can exist. The relation of thought to practice so-revealed serves to expand and clarify the basis for a reconstructed Peircean semiotics.

Whiteman's thesis suggests the necessarily pragmatic basis for symbolic activity. This is not always a direct connection for any given situation, but the essential basic connection is relevant here for understanding the way Western people actively experience the world. A common-sense link to a single limited geometrical practice exists. Even the formation of a system of symbolic logic ultimately rests on the deductive discourse of linear proof argument: when, for example, a mathematician constructs a logical system apparently divorced from reality, it becomes intelligible by virtue of how well it can be made to apply to one or other system of number. Number systems, in turn, relate at the most common-sense level to simple actions applicable to measuring devices.

The implication is that the West's distinctive intellectual markers of science and philosophy refer most stringently to a singular pragmatic basis. This basis, if the construction of a measuring rod is its initial act, is therefore one of *cutting* to a fixed arbitrary position of length. *It excludes non-convergent activities that involve repetitions of single or plural acts.* This brings us to our third point of departure for a reconstructed semiotics, which is the clear link in Peirce between signification and practice (see Fitzgerald 1966). If we were to investigate non-European systems of signification, would it turn out to be the case that these devolve onto a different basic practice, or onto a plurality of them?

One point that can be elaborated is that the division of the natural from the human, life and social sciences in the cartesian paradigm, is capable of being seen as predicated on the susceptibility of a limited number of fields to be successfully formalized around technologies that "cut". The remaining areas may be said to resist reduction to the same levels of intelligibility exactly because the technologies necessary for them reduce to something different. What this difference is, and what form its geometry will take, is not yet clear, although hints are emerging from the natural sciences which may prove useful. As a closing position, then, we will relate these hints to the positions outlined above, and speak about how they reconstitute the phaneron and, consequently, semiotics.

Beginning with an attempt to formalize weather prediction during the 1960s, there has emerged a geometry that *becomes* the more one repeats it. At the same time,

however often it gets repeated, no outcome is ever identical with previous outcomes: they are similar, but always different in detail. This geometry also involves a form of *self-similarity across scales*, that is to say, any figure it generates is similar at the largest scale, the smallest, and at intermediate scales. Most important for what we are trying to establish, these figures evolve as a consequence of the iteration of extremely simple non-linear functions, and it is this that tends to fly in the face of received wisdom.

Firstly, the complexity of the figures that emerge in this geometry is totally at odds with the simplicity of the functions concerned: very simple causes may have indefinitely complex outcomes. Secondly, the applications of this geometry to the natural sciences has indicated that there is a tendency to self-organization in the special class of chemical reactions that occur in solutions far from equilibrium. What is central here is that living and signifying systems have in common the property of self-organization: they are also never in equilibrium. Indeed, it is one of the truisms of linguistic philosophy (and the post-structuralist reaction to it) that there is no possibility of new sentences never being generated in a natural language.

Finally, the iterative nature of the systems concerned indicate that many social practices might be describable in terms of this geometry. These practices would involve cooking, reproduction, ritual, seasonal activity, routine, or just plain everyday life. Where this form of intelligibility is most valuable, however, is in the fact that it never operates with precision: it delimits human ignorance about the systems it describes, all the while picturing them accurately. Put differently, it shows us what the overall shape it is that we're in, but is silent on how to escape it if we don't like what we see.

In the case of African experience, this is not necessarily a bad thing because if the situation, in which there is an identifiable difference of signification separating the experiences of Africans from those of the West, really does obtain, then it is clear that there has been a long history of iterations of this difference. We further suggest that the shape of African life today is the outcome of the included signs of all parties to this history: the phaneron of everyday life includes among the signs possible within it a divergent collection of outcomes, experienced in radically different ways, but each intelligible in its own sphere of interpretation.

To collect all this together, it is sufficient to point out that while the phaneron of a development situation is technically neutral in that its interpretants (as habits formed, changed or realized) are constrained to it, the consequences of the exercising of the habits in question are what are going to be of interest. The major relevance of this is that when one looks at a context as a phaneron, then it contains intelligible signifiers about the future and as a result cannot be understood to be value-free. Contexts, in other words, contain *oughts* in the form of what outcomes can be predicated on the basis of the signs in them.

This points to a further property of the context-as-phaneron: it contains a rhetoric. People are persuaded by the context to signify (act) one way and not another. Our project aims to narrow the gap between what the same concrete context delivers as consequences, while avoiding the temptation to reduce these to something which simply

repeats the differences of the past. The role of semiotics here is to draw on existing research into the ontological facet of African language studies, exploiting not just the work of ethnological philosophers like Alexis Kagame but also the interventions of critics like Hountondji and synthesizers like Ntumbe Tshiamalenga or Frantz Crahay.

Further, there are existing debates in African theology — such as that which took place between Vanneste and Crahay — to which the semiotician can turn in order to gain some further insight into how phanera can be elaborated in Africa. The point of all this is to underline the breadth of the essentially philosophical basis for semiotics, as opposed to the more narrowly derived linguistic origins of semiology. To push the point further, the non-dualistic origins of Peircean semiotics represents a conscious effort to move away from the dilemmas that accompany Western formalism, and when faced off against the multiply significant ontologies addressed by African languages, provides a platform upon or from which the field can become relevant in a real situation.

It is the existence of just such a real situation in the development experience which makes us aware of the power of Peirce's semiotics as a tool for pragmatic employment. Africans have become accustomed to seeing well-meaning development scientists, engineers, and sociologists traipsing across their fields and squatter camps. They have become equally accustomed to seeing all these efforts fail abjectly. If what we have been putting over is correct, then there is no reason to believe that future efforts will succeed any better. What we hope will take place is a shift in the ground of the West's common sense, which will loosen the hegemonic grip of cartesian objectivity on the activity of intercultural engagement.

In the type of situation we have in mind, the notion of the phaneron will help to clear away the common perception of the African context as something to be read alongside a development report. This, we suggest, will be achieved once the development encounter is seen as something significant in its own right. Also, it needs to be seen as not subject to being sliced up to fit the preconceived theories derived from the specific experience of Europe's industrial revolution. It is thus crucial that the generalities inferred from Europe's history should become subject to the critique of their own mode of signifying, and we claim that Peirce was an original and radical critic of this.

If we accept that Peirce's phaneroscopy (that is to say the science of phanera) does enlarge and add focus to the idea of "context", then there is work to be done in conceptualizing the nature of the signs generated from situations in which radical differences in signification are present. It has been our experience that the conflicts that have riven our local communities represent a form of social practice which might profitably be studied as being related to the interpretants constrained by a very specific kind of phaneron. The role of semiotics, as it can be helpful in these circumstances, is to enhance the research that can be done in coming to grips with the whole environment that includes the violence.

In the main portion of the paper, we argue that this environment is a kind of phaneron which includes an indeterminacy of radical translation, and we conclude by

stating that the conflicts in question stem from a history of this indeterminacy being denied or ignored. What has tended to happen in the past has been that people have analyzed the situation in terms of the existence of class divisions like those posited by economic theory. In these cases, it is assumed that what is lacking is an ethical or political understanding based on matters of ownership, control and distribution which are capable of being understood by all the parties involved, because these concepts are accepted as being universally intelligible.

The consistent failure of these interventions to resolve the violent nature of post-colonial society supports the contention that the assumed intelligibility of concepts needs to be questioned. When a development project is mooted, there is reason to believe that the people who are supposed to benefit from it will not be able to appreciate it precisely because what is pragmatically involved fails to fit into the world spoken by their languages. As a result, we recommend that the semiotic aspect of the interactive process of development take account of what we outlined above, because, even if we have not got it all correct, we believe that what we have found to date does begin to address at least the significant aspect of it.

A final point that needs to be made is that semiology, while essentially a different practice to semiotics (as we see it, anyway), does remain a highly effective tool within the narrow phaneron of the cartesian-newtonian paradigm. One has only to review Barthes's *Mythologies* to appreciate the applicability of the method to its own intellectual family. What this paper tries to suggest is that outside the family a more general approach is needed, one that does not by virtue of its definition force certain reductions onto the outside topic.

Notes

1. See how the term becomes associated with racism in specific contexts, in Tomaselli & Tomaselli 1983.
2. See, e.g., Gordon 1984.
3. See Sless & Tomaselli (1986), and Tomaselli, K.G. et al. (1988). These studies explicitly locate the researchers *inside* the context they are researching.
4. For further discussion see Tomaselli, K.G. & Shepperson A. (1991).
5. See Jameson (1972) for an account of the prison-like stranglehold that structuralism places on the intellectual enterprise.
6. See Quine (1969); in this collection of essays, there are several pieces which examine the idea of radical translation, and which essentially build an the ground cleared in "Speaking of objects".
7. In this regard, it is worthwhile reading the work of the Marxist economist Ben Turok, who has traced the case histories of the working classes of several countries; he is not altogether optimistic about the success of classical Marxist or Leninist applications.
8. C.S. Peirce, letter to William James in October 1904; refer to *Collected Papers* 8.301.
9. Peirce, 1.284.

References

Blonsky, Marshall (1985). *On Signs*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cabral, A. (1979). The role of culture in the liberation struggle. In *Communication and Class Struggle 1: Capitalism, Colonialism*, A. Mattelart and S. Siegelaub (eds.). New York: International General.

Crahay, F. (n.d.). Le décollage conceptuel: Conditions d'une philosophie bantoue. *Diogène* 52, 61-84.

Fanon, F. (1982). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Fitzgerald, John (1966). *Peirce's Theory of Signs as Foundation for Pragmatism*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.

Foucault, Michel (1974). *The Order of Things*. London: Routledge.

Gordon (1984). Conserving the Bushmen to extinction in Southern Africa. Paper given at First World Conference on Culture Parks.

Gramsci, Antonio (1971). *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Hountondji, P. (1983). *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Jameson, Fredric (1972). *The Prison House of Language*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kagame, A. (1956). *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être*. Bruxelles.

Kuhn, T. (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mudimbe, V.Y. (1989). *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1987). *Decolonising the Mind*. London: James Currey.

Nkrumah, K. (1964). *Consciencism*. London: Heinemann.

Nyerere, J.K. (1962). *Les fondements du socialisme Africain*.

Peirce, C.S. (1960-66). *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Quine, W.V.O. (1969). *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rorty, R. (1980). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ryle, G. (1963). *The Concept of Mind*. Harmondsworth: Peregrine.

Sless and Tomaselli, D. (1986). *In Search of Semiotics*. London: Croom Helm.

Smet, A.J. (1977). Qu'est-ce que la philosophie africaine. *La Philosophie Africaine* 1, 33-68.

Tomaselli, K.G. and Shepperson, A. (1991). Popularising semiotics. *Communication Research Trends* 11 (1/2).

Tomaselli, K.G. and Tomaselli, R.E. (1983). The economics of racism. *Critical Arts* 2 (3), 1-5.

Tomaselli, K.G. et al. (1988). Community and class struggle: Problems in methodology. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 12 (2), 11-25.

Tshiamelenga, N. (1973). La vision Ntu de l'homme: Essai de philosophie linguistique et anthropologique. *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 14, 175-197.

Weiss, P. and Burks, A. (1945). Peirce's sixty-six signs. *Journal of Philosophy* 42, 383-388.

Whiteman, Michael (1967). *Philosophy of Space and Time and the Inner Constitution of Nature: A Phenomenological Study*. London: Macmillan.