Subjectivity and Identity: Semiotics as Psychological Explanation

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Semiotic theorists including Umberto Eco have recently sought to found epistemology on a cognitive interpretation of sign-usage. Other psychological models of ‘identity’ and/or ‘subjectivity’ or of individual ‘subjects’ have also been re-interpreted in general semiotic terms. It is argued that these analyses are frequently reductionist, circular, or merely re-describe the psychological phenomena in question. Many Cultural Studies texts seem to equate subjects with individual persons and so retreat to a vulgar empirical level of psychological analysis. To avoid such naïve pseudo-theorising and pseudo-explanation, it is suggested that carefully formulated distinctions be made between different uses of the terms ‘identity’, ‘subject’, ‘subjectivity’ and the Lacanian concept of what might be called ‘subject-ness’ or ‘subject-ness-in-general’.

The relationships among Semiotics and more established, hermeneutic and social science disciplines remain ill-defined and are frequently antagonistic. This is despite works such as Eco’s (1999) recent excursion into analytical philosophy and various forays into psycho-analysis (following Lacan), as well as recent re-theorisations of questions once the sole province of empirical Psychology (such as questions of individual identity or, even, language development). In the Anglophone academies at least, the older disciplines continue to theorise and apply their various knowledges more or less unperturbed by the suspicion that all these activities are just discursive rehearsals of their own unreflective ignorance. They do not anxiously await enlightenment from the sons and daughters of Saussure. The ‘semiotic turn’ in the humanities has not really altered the epistemological or ontological assumptions of existing disciplines so much as opened up new inter-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary specialisations that sometimes sit rather uneasily beside their older siblings, often failing to communicate with them in productive ways.

The new specialisations, however, are themselves becoming self-reflective about their own disciplinarity (Milner 1999). A sure sign of this is the emergence of ‘text-books’ that summarise the orthodox literature and practices of these subfields that have emerged as the incipient disciplines’ own conversations continually define and re-define them. For example, in Cultural Studies as Williams’ and Hall’s sociological/historical approaches are being rapidly superceded, a kind of semiotic determinism is becoming solidified as the disciplinary substrate in textbooks devoting chapters to topics such as ‘Subjectivity and Identity’ (for example, Barker 1999).
In what follows, I argue that many of the recent summary descriptions of well-known theorists’ approaches to these issues (Foucault, Butler, for instance) are frequently reductionist or at least naively deterministic or so vague as to constitute only verbal, circular analyses. My interest in these theorists and in their proponents is limited to the specifically psychological implications of their claims. In particular, the implicitly causal roles attributed to peoples’ interactions with pre-existing or at least independent discourses or sign-groups. By this, I mean claims in which aspects of psychological phenomena, like conceptualisation, personal identity or subjectivity (in general) are putatively explained by semiological phenomena, or explained as semiological phenomena. Although such accounts are not necessarily reductionist or circular, at least in some historically important examples they can be seen to be inadequate and question-begging.

If cultures consist of ‘texts’, ‘signs’ and ‘discourse’, and people are defined only as cultural entities, then semiotic concepts can be proposed as necessary and sufficient for such traditionally, psychologically defined phenomena as individual ‘identity’, gendered behaviour, or even the old problems that psychologists refer to as ‘concept formation’ or perception by humans. Rather than seeing these as self-referring alternative locutions only, I take such semiological and culturalist accounts to be making claims that are contrary to (and may sometimes contradict) the kinds of empirical accounts of these phenomena found in disciplines like Psychology or Anthropology. Leaving aside the adequacy of the latter approaches, I nevertheless want to caution against too ready and uncritical an acceptance of semiotic accounts (by which I mean, ultimately, explanatory analyses, including empirical descriptions) of such psychological phenomena. I will discuss several examples of recent semiological accounts of what I think it is reasonable to consider to be psychological phenomena, in that they involve human cognition, learning or adaptation to the social or physical environment, or because they postulate notions of human ‘agency’.

Semiotics, Subjectivity and Psychology

In his book, *Kant and the Platypus*, Umberto Eco (1999) seeks to propose no less than an extension of semiotics into epistemology via cognitive psychology. If we believe the dust-jacket of this elegantly produced excursion into Anglophone analytical philosophy, Eco is interested in the question: ‘how much (sic) do our perceptions of things depend on our cognitive ability, and how much on our linguistic resources?’ (Eco 1999). Eco promises an excursion through Kant, Heidegger and Peirce as the classificatory conundrum posed by the shy little monotreme takes centre stage. He is intrigued by the bricolaged eccentricity of the platypus and by the trouble it caused for scientific classification in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Perhaps this is because the discovery of the animal by Europeans follows the inauguration of enlightenment thinking. Eco thinks that the not-so-enlightened British biologists could not ‘see’ the animal as a member of a class, so there arose a semiological problem of how to refer to ‘it’ and to its class.

I will return to Eco and the platypus. But first I want to ask what it means to say that ‘our perception of things depend(s) on our cognitive ability’ and how, if at all,
this kind of causal discourse (albeit one that allows *degrees* of dependency) relates to the semiotic question of the relationships that might occur between ‘linguistic resources’ and what he calls ‘perceptions’. At least some ‘perceptions’ (presumably discrete or at least describable), events of a subjective kind, appear to be non-semiotic. In English, we speak of perceptions as unmediated or immediate—they are not present to the perceiver as mediated. Of course, perceptions of material phenomena are mediated (by light waves, sound waves and the nervous system, etc.). But subjectively they are immediate. Eco wants to argue that some or all perceptions are, however, *mediated* by the verbal or other conceptual categories that constitute the natural language of the perceiver. But is the actual perception-event *determined* by what we might like to call the semiotic (including, for example, linguistic) categorisations/distinctions that are habitually used by the perceiver? To answer ‘yes’ to this is to endorse, as a general theory, what we all used to call the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. But this Eco seems happy with, albeit as a revamped Peircean semio-epistemology.

I refrain at this point from judging the usefulness of Eco’s elaborate discussion. Instead, I will go to the other end (so to speak) of the semiotics-as-general-theory continuum, to the question of how (I would instead ask ‘whether’) semiotic theories provide necessary or sufficient analysis of what is currently referred to as ‘subjectivity’. But, to anticipate what I see as a problem with this approach, I will suggest that an incoherent semiotic determinism informs many apparently distinct approaches to theorising ‘the subject’. In many recent theories, the term is still equated with the psychological/biological agent in a conventional way. That is, it is merely a new name for the psychological individual (or even ‘person’).

‘Subjectivity’ can mean ‘the subjective realm’—the realm of all the perception-events and semiotic events (including utterances) to which the personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘we’ are or could be applied. So, reports of one’s dreams, one’s engagement with a film or piece of music, one’s decoding a sentence, and so on, are all ‘subjective’. And, on some of these kinds of accounts, these events (and nothing more) *constitute* ‘the subject’. Following Lacan (and Althusser), cultural and media theorists have also proposed that ‘the subject’ is no more than a ‘semiotic position’, the ‘I-centre’ where the body-image mirrored back from ‘outside’ (from ‘the other’, or through the social other) gives linguistic agency to the subjective realm. The subject is ‘called up’, ‘called into existence through’, addressed as already part of semiosis. As Ruthrof has recently put this, referring to Foucault:

> Foucault draws our attention away from the subject as psychologically complex entity and towards questions such as Who is speaking? Who is qualified to speak? Who receives prestige from speaking? Who is sanctioned by law or tradition to speak? From what site is she or he speaking? From within which kind of institution? (Ruthrof 2000: 197–198)

So, following this line, the decentred, non-psychological (certainly non-biological) concept has been further abstracted to the point where ‘subject-positions’ are postulated. These are said to be constructed through semiosis (and they are usually rather vaguely specified as ‘discursive’). For example, gendered ‘subject positions’
The ensemble of conditions which render possible the emergence of individual and/or collective instances of self-referential existential territories, adjacent or in a delimiting relation to an alterity that is itself subjective. (Guattari 1995: 9)

If we are to take Guattari at his word, he wants ‘subjectivity’ to refer not to any entity and/or to its qualities and the relationships that occur between it and other entities or processes, but to relations and conditions themselves, even though these seem to have no empirical reference or import. Even on a more generous interpretation, he seems to define subjectivity as either individual or collective and inter-subjectively, yet from the ‘outside’. Like Lacan and Foucault, he emphasises ‘alterity’, although in an apparently different role. And as with Lacan, the pronominal or self-referential aspect of the subject-in-general or what might be called ‘subject-hood’ or ‘subject-ness’ is emphasised.

To recapitulate: the subjective realm (including that of humans’ experiences/perceptions or sensations) has been radically re-theorised in semiotic terms via Lacan to the point where individual psychological subjects are merely(?) discursive intersections of semiological processes. This theory is really one of what might be called ‘subject-hood’ (i.e. it postulates the conditions for being a subject-in-general) via processes of subjectivation through language. I believe it is important to distinguish such a concept from terms that refer to the description of particular human subjects or ‘subjectivities’. It is to this use of subject/ivity that I now turn.

**Sensations, Perceptions and Subjectivity**

In both uses of the term ‘subject’ that I have sought to distinguish—what I would term the foundational and the psychological senses, respectively—the issue of what psychologists call ‘perception(s)’ raises serious conceptual problems. These are similar to those that I have argued bedevil Eco insofar as they ostensibly avoid any realist assumptions in their different ways, and interpret perceptions as already semiotic. I want to argue that semiotic models (or, being French, ‘semiological’ models) of individual subjectivities, when not, in any important sense, about subject-hood-in-general, would only be adequate if they were to ‘postulate a non-circular notion of perception (or of perception events)’. That is, a ‘real’ (not semiotically ‘constructed’) realm of perceptual ‘contents’, of aardvarks and platypuses, and so on, to return to Eco.

But, I also argue, such an analysis cannot be provided by what could legitimately be called a semiotic theory, one that is only concerned to explicate signs, signification and sign usage. It must move beyond semiotics. This necessarily means distinguishing ‘semiotics’ (the processes of semiosis understood contextually) from
cognitive psychology, where psychology includes perception of the physical world. In making these arguments, I want explicitly to support a realist epistemology and to argue for the utility of functional and empirical versions of semiotics.

Because Eco seems determined to link ‘perception(s)’ to general theories of subjectivity, and semiotics in turn to theories of cognition (including perception), let me begin with an elementary psychological phenomenon that is at least as puzzling as his beloved duck-billed, warm-blooded, egg-laying, Walt Disney-designed Australian animal. My example is The Moon Illusion. This tricky perceptual illusion is the staple of elementary psychology textbooks on ‘perceptual constancies’—the term used for the way humans see objects by means of factors other than the objects’ projected retinal size, for example. Humans (and I guess other organisms in different ways) perceive/infer a constant physical world from the myriad sensations that could otherwise lead them to deal with every object of cognition as a unique event. (This, of course, is the very concept-formation problem that is posed to Eco by the Australian platypus.)

So, a brief digression to consider why the Moon Illusion is relevant to both semiology and to semiological theories of the subject/subjectivity: the moon appears (at least to people raised in a rectilinearly built, spacious, and horizon-bounded world) to be larger at the horizon than at the zenith. Its perceived size is a function of its proximity to the horizon and to the judged distance of the horizon from the perceiver. (The same is true of the sun when it is clearly outlined, behind smoke, for example.)

Psychological explanations of the illusion do not need to postulate semiological concepts. Instead, psychological theories offer analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions for, or the causes of, the illusion in cognitive/learning or adaptational terms. Second, psychological explanation is restricted to specific body/sensory experiences of humans. In short, any psychological theory of these kinds of illusions presupposes a realist procedure for characterising the conditions for the occurrence of the perception-events in question. A semiological theory is very different and would not appeal to concepts like adaptation, learning, nor distinguish ‘real’ or retinal from ‘perceived’ size of an object. But, semiotics can have lots to say about semiosis in which participants called ‘the moon’ are figured. And of course, about how the apparently enlarged moon is narrativised in different cultural and micro-contexts. But these are not psychological issues and do not involve explanatory accounts of perceptual phenomena. This is not to deny that empirically it is probable that naming the moon (and using the one name for ‘it’ in all its phases and positions relative to the horizon) is psychologically (causally) significant in some of the perceptual phenomena involving the moon. And it is, of course, pointless to object to the use of the word ‘subjective’ as an adjective, however redundantly qualifying ‘perception’. But a visual semiotics that postulated cognitive processes and a learning history that were sufficient and/or necessary for the experience of the illusion would be a psychological theory. It would not simply relate to the meanings produced in particular contexts, to discursive histories, for example. Human’s experiences of perspectival scenes, rectilinear architecture, and so on, are the factors that determine a class of perceptual illusions that includes the moon illusion. There
may be semiotic facts about the moon, but these semiotic facts (assuming we can utter true propositions about semiotics) are not factual in terms of other facts about people’s cognitive capacities and experiences. Of course, this is not to deny that some forms of semiosis are restricted to some kinds of organic systems (including humans) or that we all learn to use ‘signs’, but that has no bearing on the argument in question.

Even allowing that semiotic processes are in some general sense ‘psychological’, the semiotic questions that seem to be raised by psychological phenomena would seem to be best considered in precise functional and contextual ways, as Kress and van Leeuwen do in Reading Images (1996). I will take up how these authors use the concept of subjectivity in the final section of this paper. First, let me return to Eco. As I have claimed, Eco tries to analyse concept formation (the concept of the class of platypuses) both historically (and therefore, contingently) and semiotically (as in: what features define it in the dictionary, biology books or common usage). Hence the arbitrariness of the sign (name) coded for ‘it’. But he also wants to ask what happens subjectively/cognitively when people ‘see’ (and either cannot or can name) the referent: platypus. And, of course, this problem of concept formation and naming of classes versus individuals has a long history in western philosophy and has been taken up empirically by cognitive psychology since at least the 1950s. Eco considers this to be a semiotic question because he thinks it centres on how to represent the class of platypuses and then on the consequential question of how to recognise instances of the class. But, as McGinn (2000) shows, this way of posing the problem leads to confusions: semiotics does not analyse how people classify and then perceive classes of phenomena. It is not about representing in cognition the assumed heteronymy (William James’ ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’) found in the world. It does not need to explain ‘classification-as-representation-as-cognition’, because that approach assumes what McGinn calls ‘the curious idea of reality as an amorphous continuum’ (2000: 62). Eco says:

It would seem that, before a culture has organised it linguistically in the form of content, this continuum is everything and nothing and therefore eludes all determination. (McGinn 2000: 62)

In contrast to Eco, McGinn argues that:

all mental representation (we might also say, all semiosis?) is ‘aspectual’, in the sense that it cannot represent everything about an object but only some aspects of it; but this is quite different from saying that all mental representation involves interpreting one thing as a sign for another. (2000: 63)

This is an important point, because Eco had proposed a semiotic theory as a mental theory insofar as mental representations are the constituents of cognition. He has taken up Peirce’s notion of ‘abductive’ or ‘inferential’ awareness. McGinn shows that ‘cognition in general cannot consist in the interpretation of signs’ (2000: 63), because this would involve an infinite regress and, I would add, would move semiotic theory back into Psychology, from where it escaped relatively recently:

Signs enable us to be aware of other things by means of semiotic interpret-
Although McGinn sees his criticism as implying the impossibility of a general semiotic theory (insofar as the latter would be also an epistemology and a psychology), it does not follow that semiotics is dead. The ‘primacy of semiotics in understanding the mind’ (to use his phrase) has certainly been debunked but, then, semiotics itself has recently sought to avoid such mentalistic postulates. (Except where ‘subjectivity’ is equated with semiotic effects, perhaps, as I will critically discuss later in this paper.)

Other philosophers whom Cultural Studies writers have recently turned to for a model of the role of perception in what seems to be an epistemology include Deleuze. Yet Deleuze seems very confused, proposing what can only be regarded as a red herring, by introducing the question of ‘resemblances’ between perceptions and their causes. This leads to the following sorts of problems: when he discusses what would seem to be the otherwise unproblematic question of the pin-prick, he thinks that a pain is an event that resembles something, and he ends up saying ‘[p]ain resembles the movement of something that would dig into my flesh in concentric circles, an objectile or an event of continuous variation’, yet ‘pain is not a “thing” that resembles a specific object, such as a pin. Neither is it even simply a matter of a fluid representation to the thing as apprehending subject’ (Deleuze, in Murphie 1997: 725).

So, thinking that a particular pain-event is a perception that resembles the movement of something, Deleuze must try to analyse pain as sign-like or, literally, as a sign. Once one collapses sensations into perceptions and then postulates a semiotic basis to all sensation/perception (and goes on to look for representations or for resemblances), one has entered the infinitely regressive spiral that McGinn has shown ensnared Eco. This can be seen if one compares the following statements, following the lead given by Deleuze:

- I perceived a pin.
- I perceived a pin-prick,
- The pin-prick resembled a pin.
- I felt a pin.
- I interpreted the pain as a pin-prick.
- I interpreted the pain as a pin.
- The pain resembled the movement of something like a pin.

Without belabouring the point, phenomenological (subjective) reports and objective reports make clearly different assumptions, but neither class makes sense if one assumes that pain ‘represents’ or ‘resembles’ something else. Semiotic discourse is just inappropriate here. So we may perceive signs, but it does not follow that all perception is sign-based.

I would further argue that conceiving of perception as necessarily sign-based or sign-determined (and ditto cognition more generally) does not even help semiotics to explicate sign use or, more generally, sign production. I take it that semiotics is
concerned with understanding semiosis or meaning-making in its various social contexts. But I am arguing that semiotics need not be concerned with providing all-embracing theories of the ‘mental’, the psychological, the cognitive or the subjective. On the contrary, during the past decades, social semioticians (following Halliday, Hymes, Labov) have produced coherent ‘theory’ that (at least until recently) has avoided what I see as an unnecessary retreat to mentalism and to cognitivism, which I regard as dead-ends for semiotics (including, of course, linguistics). In short, I claim that semiotics does not, and need not, provide the theoretical resources for developing an epistemology. At worst, attempts to do so are likely to be idealist and circular (involving infinite regression); at best, they involve confused anti-realist assumptions of the kind found in naïve approaches to ‘representation’.

Let me consider a possible objection to my argument that perceptions of objects and events are not reducible to sign-processes. It might be asserted that they are, but only phenomenologically. This objection, however, would appear to beg the question. Phenomenological analyses are quite misleading when one examines the complexities of perception generally. For example, an illusion similar to the moon illusion involves seeing as larger a rectangular object of a particular size, when it is apparently further away, because it is set at right angles across converging lines that suggest an horizon. Yet when one seeks to lift the object with one’s fingers, despite its apparent size, one spaces one’s fingers to grip it according to its actual size not its apparent size. Phenomenologically, this difference is not reported by people who make these apparently inconsistent perceptual choices. What we report being aware of is not always a reliable guide to our cognitions, including many of our perceptions.¹

Subject Positions are Not ‘In’ the Subject

Systemic Functional Semiotics (here I will focus on Kress and van Leeuwen’s *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996), which presents a comprehensive visual and multimodal semiotics) does not postulate inner representational signs as cognitions (nor cognition as sign-based). Instead, it construes all semiotic processes as socially functional. This is in contrast to Eco, who fails to reject Peircian mentalistic concepts. As I have argued, Eco therefore looks ‘inside the mind’ for foundational semiological concepts based on representation, whereas Kress and van Leeuwen first look outside the ‘subject’ (the particular individual producing or receiving texts/utterances), as did the basic psycho-analytic and Foucauldian models of subjectivity that I have referred to earlier (although Kress and van Leeuwen propose very different empirical detail from these, themselves different approaches). Indeed, although the same term is used by the various authors, ‘subjectivity’ in psycho-analytical terms and in functional semiotics is implicitly defined in distinctly different ways. In the former, the more appropriate term might be ‘subject-hood’ (or ‘subject-ness-in-general’, as I have called it in the previous section of this paper). In the latter, subjectivity is seen as the psychological hub of the various intersecting or inter-woven multimodal processes in which a physical body/mind is engaged. But Kress and van Leeuwen are not particularly psychologicist. Certainly, they try not to
postulate cognitions or affects (ideas or emotions) as basic to, or prior to, semiosis. All they allow is that people’s social situations make available physical resources that can be brought to realisation through social/cultural semiotic resources (and vice-versa). I take this to mean that at least some intra-psychological and some inter-psychological phenomena are not most usefully theorised as semiotic phenomena as such. Discussing a particular child’s interaction with a teacher, they comment:

The child, in part in response to the representational, semiotic and cognitive resources made available by the teacher, used a series of different representational media (including, of course, ‘internal representations’) in a constantly productive, constantly transformative sequence of semiotic activities which, in turn, transformed his subjectivity. And these activities were not at all confined to the use of language. (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 37)

Functionalist approaches to semiotics clearly postulate psychological/biological conditions on particular processes as well as psycho-physical conditions on the semiotic resources available to ‘subjects’. But they see these only as parameters, boundaries, or as options for and constraints on meaning-making. Kress and van Leeuwen do not attempt to ‘explain’ or to ‘reduce’ semiosis in general (i.e. the realisations available within the Halliday-derived metafunctions, etc.) to cognitive principles or to mental processes like ‘perception’. Functional semiotics generally seeks to avoid both formalism and psychologism.

However, even ‘functional’ semiotititians have recently occasionally resorted to a somewhat ambiguous notion of subjectivity (‘the subject’, or particular ‘subject-positions’) when writing about empirical phenomena. Consider, again from Kress and van Leeuwen, some typical examples. It will be noted that these authors emphasise that the interpersonal metafunction, discussed in terms of ‘... the relations between the image and the viewer, relations which are always affective relations, relations of identification and its opposite’, is by definition ‘psychological’ in the commonsense meaning of that term (1996: 265; emphasis added). However, this may be just to say that the interpersonal is interpersonal. They feel no obligation to postulate a metalistic or motivational (we would now say ‘desire’ based) theory as the foundation for, or the expressive content of, these interactions. Yet, Reading Images does consistently invoke notions of the subject and of ‘subjectivity’: the authors thematise this term and nominate it as topic at various places in their introductory chapters:

The subjectivity of the reader is here formed in, and implied by, the hierarchic organisation of the mode of (scientific) writing. It is a subjectivity which treats language naturally as the medium of information, the medium of truth, and of truth transmitted relatively transparently in the syntax of the writing; and it is a subjectivity habituated to sustained, concentrated analysis, attention, reflection. (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 38)
And later:

The subjectivity of the reader is formed in a mix of semiotic modes in which the visual is clearly dominant. It is a subjectivity which relies on the visual rather than on the verbal [...] It is also a subjectivity habituated to the more ready apprehension of the transparently presented visual. (1996: 38–39)

In these and in other ways, Kress and van Leeuwen seem to see ‘subjectivity’ as an ‘entity’ affected by context/text relations, and conclude: ‘different potential for meaning-making may imply different potentials for the formation of subjectivities’. Yet, ‘individuals use a range of representational modes ... each affecting the formation of their subjectivity’ (1996: 39; emphasis added).

Clearly, individuals, readers and subjects are not intended to be synonymous. Yet all are postulated as the agent of, and/or the object (affected entity) of, semiotic modes, of texts or, the authors imply, of discourse(s). This notion—the subject as an effect of semiosis—re-states a central Foucauldian idea. However, in Kress and van Leeuwen, the individual subject seems also to exist prior to, and to be the agent of, semiosis. So in this sense, he/she (it?) is a psychological entity like any other; indeed, one capable of ‘identification’ in Kress and van Leeuwen’s approach. The anti-humanist reductionism of Lacan/Foucault sits uneasily with functional semiotics in these examples, precisely because the social psychological assumptions of (empirical) semiotics allow subjects to act as agents, not merely to be the effects of semiosis.

I do not want to argue that this is incoherent, but it does point to the inconsistencies that can arise from the use of a term as a synonym for ‘speaker/hearer-in-relationship-to-text’ and of the same term to refer to an entity that is independent of that relation: as a person, an agent, or a psychologically unique identity. Kress and van Leeuwen are, strictly speaking, I believe, only licensed to postulate ‘subject-positions’ as implied by texts. Psychological subjects (people who ‘use’ semiosis but are not all and only semiotic phenomenal) need to be distinguished from the positions in verbal/visual (or other) texts that are implied for ‘them’ (cf. imply ‘them’). The latter are so-called ‘subject-positions’. As their discussion stands, Kress and van Leeuwen imply that subjects are all and only semiotic—which, if my earlier argument is accepted, is inconsistent with a more conventional concept of a psychological subject, one subject to perceptual illusions or to conceptual confusions about when an animal is or is not a platypus.

To equate what I have called the psychological agent sense of the term ‘subject’ with the semiotically produced ‘subject’ is to reduce the former to the latter and to confuse two uses of the term that I have been discussing. It is ironic that such a reductionist conflation may constitute a kind of determinisitc and closed theorisation reminiscent of the 1950s to 1960s behaviouristic reductionism typified by psychological ‘learning theorists’ such as B. F. Skinner (1973). Skinner saw the organism as essentially ‘empty’, its behaviour (not its ‘mental’ life, which he saw as epiphenomenal) the result of learning contingencies (those responses, including verbal or gestural, that are reinforced by pleasurable associations and those punished
by painful contiguous events) making up the individual’s ‘identity’. If the subject is merely a screen on which cultural signs are projected, then it cannot also be thought of as an ‘ego’, a ‘self’, or as an agent, without invoking additional psychological concepts.

I do not see how these terminological consequences can be avoided. Unless, of course, one does wish, like Skinner, and perhaps Foucault, to reject the psychological/humanistic agency that commonsense assumes. As Kress and van Leeuwen seem to want to do, one could retain the terms ‘subjectivity’/‘subject’ by removing them from the theoretical register of one’s semiotic theory and then by consistently speaking only of ‘subject-positions’ (although Cultural Studies writing sometimes rather clumsily speaks of ‘positionality’ in the abstract, with similarly idealist implications).

**Identity and/as Subjectivity**

In the recent Cultural Studies literature, most blatantly in undergraduate textbooks, similar conceptual confusions abound. Here the studious attempt to avoid the verb ‘to cause’, and to re-phrase deterministic psychological assumptions generally, has given rise to similarly reductionist and/or question-begging avoidance of the implications of the notion that semiotics constitutes a psychological theory of the ‘subject’ (or of what is often given as synonymous, ‘identity’). In the following, I consider briefly the theoretical and empirical adequacy of two typical summary accounts of the ‘social production’ of what is termed either ‘subjectivity’ or ‘identity’. The first example comes from Barker’s *Television, Globalisation and Cultural Identities* (1999); the second from Schirato & Yell, *Communication and Cultural Literacy: An Introduction* (2000).

With the apparent aim of avoiding ‘essentialism’ when addressing the question ‘what is a woman? [sic]’, Barker proposes that ‘identities based on sex and gender are socially produced descriptions with which we identify and not universal categories of nature or metaphysics’ (1999: 86), and that one relevant factor in the circulation of such ‘descriptions’ is television culture: ‘The representations of gender which television produces and circulates are themselves constitutive of gender as a cultural identity’ (Barker 1999: 86). Note that Barker gives a crude causal account of ‘identity’ that involves people identifying with ‘descriptions’, although why one person would identify with one set of descriptions and not others is not stated. Presumably that would either require a psychological hypothesis or it would involve the circular notion that the identity-defining needs of some identities cause them to identify with some appropriately rewarding descriptions found in their particular culture. Yet, Barker seems to want to avoid postulating actual persons who ‘have’ such identities. Hence, the identities are themselves only circulating ‘descriptions’. So who are the ‘we’ that are involved in this rather bloodless process?

At the same time, Barker seems to want to avoid any deterministic implications altogether, so he slips into the equation of ‘identity’ with (perhaps predictably) what he labels ‘subjectivity’. The problem with this is that, unlike Foucault, he wants this move to allow what he calls (human?) ‘agency’. The author needs such agency to
avoid the implications of the ‘socially produced descriptions’ (above) actually determining, in a circular way, whether we ‘identify’ with them. He fails to ask why ‘we’ (presumably already constituted or identifying and identified ‘subjects’) should choose (or be forced by circumstance to ‘choose’) one gendered description over all the others circulating in the culture. Hence this account begs the question of just how identity is formed in actual persons.

To try to move out of this circle, Barker invokes a rather indeterministic, even contradictory notion: ‘Over all, what is being argued for ... is the, in principle, infinite plasticity of human sexuality and gender ...’ (1999: 91). Barker cites Judith Butler to confirm that, infinitely plastic or not, ‘sexed’ as well as gendered subjectivities are determined by particular social practices. Butler has described various kinds of such ‘regulatory’ practices, but not the psychological or physiological processes that internalise these in actual bodies. Yet, like Barker, Butler can be understood as arguing that certain practices, rehearsed by, or interpellating, real bodies, have real empirical effects, although she would probably not use that term. Barker also wants to avoid the idealist assumption that ‘everything is discourse’, and therefore claims that ‘discourse and the materiality of bodies are indissoluble’ (1999: 94), although that hardly seems to help his theorising.

In such an account, the failure to distinguish sufficient conditions (causal factors) from necessary conditions, each related to precisely defined effects, leads to further confusions about subjectivity and/or identity, so Barker is forced to introduce a more agent-like term. He states: ‘Indeed, the very idea of an intentional, sexed actor is a discursive production of performativity itself’ (Barker 1999: 94). But by this point, the conceptual field has become very muddy indeed. Now the cause and the effect, as well as the analytical distinctions on which they depend, collapse into what is probably a nightmare for the undergraduate reader. Barker again quotes Butler: ‘thus, gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect that very subject it appears to express’ (Butler 1991: 24). It is not clear whether Barker believes that ‘gender’ constitutes or otherwise causes ‘gendered subjects’, but then it is unclear how to interpret the empirical import of such an apparently circular and vague claim. Of course, Butler adds a psycho-analytic dimension to her analysis but this centres on ‘identification’ anyway, so we are back with Barker’s initial problem.

While Barker effectively begs the question concerning the contingent empirical relationships that could hold between discourse and subjectivity, or ‘descriptions/representations’ and identities, Schirato & Yell (2000) hint at a psychologically relevant, motivational feature of the processes already discussed. They offer ‘desire’ as the driver of action within the semiotically determined (or at least partially constituted) subject.

Schirato and Yell argue that culture such as popular magazines (they discuss Dolly) provides what might be called scripts through which people rehearse/perform their ‘subjectivities’ (and, like Barker, they also invoke Butler). But they allow both the ‘misperformance’ and the ‘overperformance’ of such culturally significant roles as ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ (Schirato & Yell 2000: 101). So, it is difficult to decide whether such performances are merely necessary or are sufficient for the constitution of gendered identity. This is because to claim that someone can
overperform an identity presumes that it is definable normatively and that it is not itself causal of the person’s behaviour. To put this crudely, what entity or what identity would be postulated as doing the over-performing or the mis-performing of identity-defining scripts (Barker’s ‘descriptions’)? Schirato and Yell say: ‘... people don’t just conform to the ideas and imperatives coming out of the media, advertising and government’ (2000: 103), and they allow that it is ‘people’ who perform and, thus, they cannot, by definition, be synonymous with ‘subjectivities’ as such. Yet Schirato and Yell also claim that ‘subjects’ are ‘able to pick and choose, and incorporate, different aspects of subjectivity in order to commoditise themselves’ (sic). So in their analysis, ‘people’ are and are not equated with ‘subjects’, and the latter are sometimes at least capable of agency (of ‘acting ... in order to ... ’). The authors go on to claim that subjects are always ‘... split because they are partly constituted out of repressed or unconscious desire’ (2000: 105), although that only seems to compound their difficulties.

The terminological inconsistencies and equivocations instanced might be interpreted as evidence that the deterministic, empirical account of subject/identity ‘formation’, built only on semiotic (or ‘discursive’) interpellation and/or performance, is incoherent. Such an account may merely appear to be convincing because: (a) it invokes only general causal factors that are then circularly defined or not defined at all (this goes for the explanans as well as the explanandum); and/or (b) it merely defines its concepts so vaguely that they cover all contingencies: ‘infinitely plastic’ identities are explained by infinitely flexible concepts. Hence, subjects are seen as agents and yet as constituted by (caused by?) ‘descriptions’ in the culture; subjects are spoken of as ‘embodied’, but the factors (conditions, limits, sensory-motor constraints, etc.) that bodies bring to the process of subjectivity formation are ignored in favour of ‘signs’, ‘culture’ or ‘discourses’. Even when psychoanalysis (why not other psychological theory?) is invoked, it is usually of the most linguistic kind. So ‘desire’ (in a very general sense), rather than more bio-social concepts like ‘drive’, is preferred.

These equivocal and vague analyses, to put my position most strongly, seem to have arisen to cover the lack of an adequate, causal account of subjectivity and of particular aspects (such as gendered aspects) of identity or identities (by which I mean individual people’s identities). But surely such an account would need to be partly bio-social and empirical, looking at contingent variables that affect the individual in addition to the signs that it happens to meet on its journey through particular culture(s). It would need to be non-circular as well, and therefore to postulate precise, observable processes and biological mechanisms sufficient to found the narratives that constitute the ‘subjective’ particularities of different people. Such an approach need not be ‘essentialist’. These are the kinds of things psychologists have traditionally studied. Seeing ‘subjects’ as some kind of tabula rasa onto which the culture writes its meanings is both too simplistically ‘strong’ (it predicts a passive, narrow range of clones) and is, in its own way, ‘reductionist’, with subjective qualities now reducible to the bodies’ culture rather than to the organisms’ particular biography. So not only is the Cultural Studies orthodox account of ‘subjectivity/ies’ theoretically muddled, to the extent that it postulates empirical
factors in the ‘constitution’ of such identity, it is, arguably, also one-dimensional and reductionist. In apparently seeking to displace empirical psychology by semiotic yet constitutive accounts of identity, such models have fallen into the methodological quagmire that they had hoped to sail across on the winged boats of idealism. Far from displacing a Grand Theory or two, they have proposed a purely verbal account of such magical generality that it would fit (after the event) any and every phenomenon that could go by the name of ‘identity/ies’.

It is not my aim in the present paper to provide alternative analyses of identity or subjectivity. It should be clear from the presented discussion that this would mean presenting various focused, empirically supported, psychological theories. Instead, I have restricted my critique to some recent approaches, which have most obviously reduced what I see as psychological, causal accounts of aspects of cognition or identity to vaguely semiotic interpretations. Of course, my cautionary points do not imply that the cited theorists are generally misguided. That would be a stronger claim and require different argument. But, to suggest what kinds of concepts would be necessary for an adequate explanatory account of such psychological complexities, let me at least briefly indicate some alternative approaches and concepts. Eagleton (1996) defends a modified ‘essentialism’, and cuts through semiotic reductionism (although he does not call it by that name) by arguing that humans are more than sign-determined (a view that he terms ‘culturalism’). ‘[C]ulturalism is quite as much a form of reductionism as biologism’, he asserts (Eagleton 1996: 74), arguing that humans must be thought of as having a ‘nature’. This founding assumption is consistent with Hirsch, who concludes his study of physical and psychological identity by also criticising conventionalist accounts: ‘[t]he alternative to conventionalism … consists in the following hypothesis: We conceive of the self as we do because this is a kind of psychological necessity … it is basic to human nature … It is a more or less specialized and irreducible fact about our nature that we think of the self as we do’ (1982: 302).

More specifically, Griffiths (1997) proposes, as essential to understanding human psychology, a realist concept of emotion. Freud proposed a biological substrate to be differentiated into culturally distinct patterns of temperament and emotion, and, among other dynamic causal processes, postulated ‘identification’ with others as partly determinate of personality differences. Unlike Butler, however, Freudian theory emphasised the ‘ego-defensive’ functions of identification and the rewards and anxieties in which it is enmeshed in particular cases. Historically, of course, psychologists have seen the ‘ego’ as a complex and determining system, rather than as a screen onto which cultural signs are projected, and have analysed individual ‘personalities’ (now a rather quaintly archaic term) as a function of motives, needs, learned modes of response (conditioned by pleasure/pain) and essentially, of course, as embodied, memory-based and dynamically interactive with cultural contingencies. Theories of personal differences may have been too ‘biological’ for some postmodernists (hence Zizek (1993) offers a more sign-figured ego or ‘I-subject’), but all psychologists have, at least, had to face up to the impossibility of explaining identities as though modelled on the one concept of identity. They have not clutched at glib or circular notions such as ‘difference’ or ‘subjectivity’ as convenient sim-
plifications of causal factors involved in psychological explanation. If a human identity functions more like a city than a screen, more like an eco-system than a computer program, then the messy concepts of drives and habits, of memory and emotions, of needs and attitudes, and many more may be needed to understand why people are as they are, and why their cultures take the forms they do: ‘we are not “cultural” rather than “natural” creatures, but cultural creatures by virtue of our natures, which is to say by virtue of the sorts of bodies we have and the kinds of world to which they belong’ (Eagleton 1996: 72–73).

Identities, by definition, persist in some sense through time, although continuously changing and, perhaps, settling into ‘stages’ periodically. Identities have a kind of ‘career’ (to quote Hirsch) as spatio-temporally discrete and continuing entities. Psychological entities adapt to circumstances, learn and remember, functioning interactively with environmental/cultural contingencies. Psychological identities are centred on the respective subjective records of these careers of bodies-in-culture. Not surprisingly, then, psychologists have proposed differing kinds of explanations for such (id)entities and for their defining behavioural differences. Bell & Staines (2001) discuss the principal classes of psychological explanation, cautioning against circular and reductionist ‘explanations’. They list ‘folk-narrative’, genetic (evolutionary), functional, teleological, componental, dispositional, connectionist, and other types of explanation for various psychological phenomena. Ironically, the kinds of semiotic reductionism that I have criticised in this paper arose as implicit critiques of psychological determinism and essentialism (particularly biologism). Yet they have frequently failed to appreciate both the complexities of psychological phenomena and the virtue of empirically circumscribed analysis and explanation based on detailed descriptions of explananda (the phenomena to be explained) and explanans (the putatively explanatory proposals), which are the stuff of academic psychology.

Conclusions

My argument is that, both methodologically and empirically, ‘subjectivity’ is not a necessary substantive concept for an adequate semiotics. As a corollary, semiotic accounts of individual ‘subjectivities’ are empirically inadequate and frequently circular, although this is not to deny the psychological value of what I have termed the ‘foundational’ concept of ‘subject-ness-in-general’ or ‘subject-hood’, pre-supposed in a person’s ability to use the first-person pronoun in discourse (following Lacan). This concept is necessary to help to makes sense of human/social agency and person-hood within the semiotic realm (i.e. as implied by successful semiotic encounters). But this does not also imply that any particular psychological or socially meaningful qualities should arbitrarily be attributed to subjects (persons or people to be more precise) solely on the bases of people’s apparent engagement with ‘discourses’ or texts at particular moments. Although we may claim that a semiotic event ‘addresses’ or ‘interpellates’ subjects, this is either a truism about semiosis or it is an empirical question (i.e. people may or may not respond to the address by positioning their subject-ness-in-general within it, so to speak). On the contrary, if we are only using the word ‘subject’ to mean ‘particular psychological
entity’, we have moved out of the realm of semiotics, beyond pragmatics even, into either commonsense psychology or ‘depth’ psychology. And here it would be preferable to acknowledge that we are dealing with psychological questions rather than, or as well as, semiotic questions. However, as an alternative to psychological theory, semiotics may offer only reductive, simplistic explanatory potential, and may even be quite vacuous or circular in many contexts.

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**Note**

[1] Another unlikely example of the return to psychology is presented in van Dijk’s (1993) ‘Principles of critical discourse analysis’. Despite his ostensibly functionalist or pragmatic approach, he attempts to retain the psychological subject as ‘agent’ involved in semiosis to explain how cognition ‘mediates’ between ‘discourse’ and ‘communication’. I will not belabour the point, but this seems quite wrong-headed, for van Dijk can only propose circularly hypostatised (and vague) ‘social cognitions which mediate between micro- and macro-levels of society (sic)’ or appeal to ‘knowledge scripts’ by which to explain (sic) or to ‘link’, to use his word, social, power or ‘dominance’ to particular kinds of ‘discourse’. But the former are only observable as the latter, so this wishful psychologising leads to the postulation of non-semiotic ‘attitudes’ and ‘cognitive structures’, which are seen as real, explanatory entities, even though these can be given no independent evidentiary support. So, in effect, they are merely re-statements of the problem rather than explanatory concepts with precise descriptive or predictive power beyond those of the social semiotics that they seem designed to displace.

If further examples of my point are needed, one might consider the confusions that would arise from using the term ‘subjectivity’ in the context of bilingualism. Would it follow that, if subjectivity is semiologically determined, and if one uses two or more ‘languages’, one is a ‘split’ or dual subject? Obviously, to be bilingual is not to be two Lacanian or Butler-style subjects. As soon as one tries to make empirical sense of the models I have been criticising, they become literally incoherent or are obviously false.

So, although ‘subjectivity’ is continually ‘rehearsed’ through language and cultural conversation, it cannot usefully be thought of as reducible to such semiotic events.

**References**


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