Discourse regularities and semiotic predictability: making sense of discursive habits in communication situations

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This year the organizers of the [Tartu Summer School of Semiotics](#) decided to focus their work on "semiotic (un-)predictability" stating that "the paradoxical co-presence of predictability and unpredictability is a fundamental aspect of the dynamics of the semiotic world". As far as discourse is concerned, we believe indeed that the notion of *predictability* is particularly relevant for researchers scrutinizing discursive practices.

While literary scholars knew very early that so-called *genres* could be described by a set of criteria qualifying their constraints on semio-linguistic processes, many scholars now strive to expand their enquiries to non-artistic discursive productions of our daily life. In any given communication situation, speakers always expect a particular discourse *genre* to be enacted and recognized following which they will both adequately produce and interpret the utterances, thus allowing mutual understanding and (collective) actions to be taken. According to Bakhtin (1986: 79) for instance, one of the first scholars to have broadened the analysis of genres beyond the literary sphere, "if speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them, if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be almost impossible".

Consequently, given that particular communication situations are correlated to particular predictable "ways of speaking", discursive *patterns*, or *regularities*, can be detected in a corpus of carefully chosen (oral or written) texts produced in communicative situations judged to be analogous (*e.g.* medical interviews, political debates, teaching classes, etc.), and highlight the necessary constrained creativity of most of our discursive practices (contrary to some artistic productions that may be considered as relative exceptions, among others).

More specifically, we suggest that one type of such regularities is thus related to discourse genres, considered as a set of tacit instructions broadly constraining the form and content of utterances in a given discursive practice, while another type of regularities is related to interdiscourses, understood here as "the totality of discursive unities (belonging to

previous discourses of a same speech genre, or to discourses contemporary to other speech genres, etc.) with which a particular discourse enters in an implicit or explicit relation" (Maingueneau 2009: 77, our translation). For instance, regarding our doctoral dissertation in which we try to make sense of online texts presenting European universities on their website, we consider that those texts instantiate a specific (promotional) discourse genre, actualizing particular "ways of speaking". An example of such (generic) regularities is the syntactic structure of a "prototypical" utterance reproduced in Figure 1.

$$([apposition],)([determiner\ or\ possessive\ pronoun]) \left[nucleus = \begin{cases} \text{"university"} \\ \text{"it"} \\ proper\ noun \end{cases}\right] [verb\ 3rd\ pers.\ sg.,\ present\ tense][predicate].$$

Figure 1. Syntactic structure of a prototypical utterance

This typical syntactic form, apart from being the support of fulfilling intrinsic communicative purposes, has acquired a habitual use in this specific contextualized situation, which makes its utterances recognizable as "promotional" discourse, having to be replicated in its form and content by diverse university enunciators wishing to promote their institutions. Another example of (interdiscursive) regularity is the use of the "excellence" and "quality" in those same texts, instantiating intertextual references with specific political discourses concerning Higher Education in Europe. In this case, we suggest that those expressions, as elements of an isotopy of "competition", also acquired relative habitual status, making sense in a particular sociopolitical context where a certain number of emerging practices in universities (*e.g.* evaluation of research and education, elaborate partnerships with other so-called "prestigious" institutions and enterprises, changing trends in teaching methods, internationalization of recruitment, etc.) bring about the promotion of a competitive state of affairs in academia: universities in the corpus aim at showing they're being the best in their domain, suggesting they have a (hypothetical) role to play on a "competitive" international scene. More semiotic aspects relating to those texts are presented in Gaspard (2015) (*to be published*).

The context of a particular communication situation, and more precisely, the discourse genre and interdiscourses it is necessarily associated with, is thus considered as a determiner of *generic regularities* (when it comes to repeated segments and expressions, frequent syntactic structures, etc.) and *interdiscursive regularities* (when it comes to repeated allusions to other discourses, intertextual iconicity, etc.) that control both the production and interpretation of a given discursive act.

Now, if we come to believe that the goal of discourse analysis is to define, describe and analyze discursive productions, then detecting and explaining observable discursive regularities should be regarded as one of the basic tasks of discursivists. On a more abstract

level, we might say that discourse analysts aim at highlighting and analyzing the *Thirdness* of our discursive practices: that is, according to this "mode of being" characterized by Peirce, showing the rule-like or habit-like aspects at play in the production and interpretation of (oral or written) signs. In so doing, Peirce's concept of *habit* can be fruitful to explain the role and importance of predictability – and the semiotic regularities it generates – associated with any specific context. Regarding the interpretation of sign processes on the one hand, it is by way of contextualized interpretative habits adequate "interpretants" are determined by particular (complexes of) signs. This semiotic determinacy can for instance be locally measured in statistical analyses of (physical, behavioral, linguistic) observable interpretants that are usually mobilized in a given community and for a given communication situation only. Regarding the production of sign processes on the other hand, speakers generate meaning through (complexes of) signs that mainly correspond to semiotic constructs they've been taught or driven to compose by habitual experience, always for given specific situations only.

In this perspective, Peirce's insights (which have never been so lively, given the numerous edited books that still come out regularly) gives us a unifying framework to make sense of empirical observations grounded in specific contexts. So far, and for historical reasons (at least in Continental Europe), discourse analyses have always been attached and influenced by Saussurean post-structuralism. If some bridges were slowly built with so-called "pragmatic" perspectives, notably relying on Wittgenstein's philosophy (and his concepts of "language games" or "form of life", for instance), we believe that Peirce's general theory of signs, particularly his *phenomenological realism*, can make better sense, both philosophically and analytically, of 1) how we both interpret and produce texts of/in our daily life and 2) how predictability and regularities, considered as natural corollaries of crystallized habits, are "fundamental aspect[s] of the dynamics of the semiotic world". Thus, notions such as *interpretant*, *growth of symbol*, *collateral experience*, *common ground*, etc., coupled to the overarching importance of the role of context, are powerful heuristic tools to describe and understand how meaning-making is processed (for an up-to-date evaluation of those notions in the context of rhetoric, see Bergman [2009], for instance).

Overall, we suggest that such a quest for the regularities permeating any discursive process can be one of the many research orientations through which a prediction-based scientific conception of discourse semiotics could be applied. To this end, corpus linguistics and textual semiotics would need to be drawn even more together. But above all, a strong epistemological framework should guide our scientific endeavors and Peirce's philosophy of signs still seems to be the most relevant of all in the semiotic field.

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