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Meaning as a nonlinear effect: The birth of cool

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Abstract

Saussurean and Chomskyan “conduit” views of meaning in communication, dominant in much of expert and lay linguistic semantics, presuppose a simple, closed and linear system in which outcomes can be predicted and explained in terms of finite sets of rules. Summarizing critical traditions of scholarship, notably those driven by Bateson’s view of systems infused with more recent linguistic-anthropological insights into the ideologically mediated and indexically organized “total linguistic fact”, this paper argues for a view of meaning in terms of complex open systems in which complex units of analysis invite more precise distinctions within “meaning”. Using online viral memes and the metapragmatic qualifier of “cool” as cases in point, we see that the meaning of such memes is better described as a range of “effects”, most of them nonlinear and not predictable on the basis of the features of the sign itself. The effects are generated by the “virality” of the sign, i.e. they reside in the rapid “sharing” practice itself. Such effects suggest a revised and broader notion of nonlinear “perlocution”.

Keywords: meaning, semiotics, social media, memes, complexity, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology; indeterminacy.

Introduction

In spite of several decades of critical work dislodging the notion, the old “conduit metaphor” of meaning still dominates widespread specialist and lay understandings of language and communication. This metaphor, we should recall, sketches language as the conduit through which “meanings” are transmitted from “speaker” to “hearer”. Saussure’s famous description of “*le circuit de la parole*” (the cycle of language usage) as a symmetrical transfer of concepts conventionally correlated to sound patterns in the minds of at least two people (1960: 27-29) is one of its classical *loci*. The hearer will decode the input generated by the speaker on the basis of “a grammatical system that exists virtually in

every brain, or more precisely in the brains of a community of individuals” (30),¹ and will, because of that, understand the meanings produced by the speaker. Such meanings, we can see, are restricted to *linguistic* meanings: meanings generated by the orderly combination of linguistic features within a “language” – grammar, vocabulary and (occasionally) rules of usage captured under the label of “pragmatics”. Many inherited from the Saussurean, and later the Chomskyan linguistic tradition a view in which “well-formed sentences” were the carriers of “pure” meaning – maximally recognizable meanings within a language, that is – while less well-formed sentences (the province of “performance” in the Chomskyan tradition, and *not* the object of linguistics) would produce “noise”, less recognizable and therefore problematic meanings within a language.

Jerrold Katz, whose work belongs to the Chomskyan *Hadith*, thus used “rule description” as shorthand for Chomskyan generative analysis (Katz 1972: 16), which places it in a long history of similar efforts towards (“rationalist”) theories of meaning. Katz dismissed the fact that “speakers often respond appropriately to grammatical and to ill-formed strings of words” as due to a recognition of the fundamental rules of correctness even with ill-formed sentences (14-16), and reduced “meaning” to what is carried by correctly formed sentences, adding that “each human thought is expressible by some sentence of any natural language” – something he called the “principle of effability” (18-19):

“I take it as some empirical evidence for the claim that natural languages are effable that speakers almost always find appropriate sentences to express their thoughts, that difficulties in thinking of a sentence are invariably regarded as a failing on the part of the speaker rather than the language, and that there is nothing to indicate that there is any type of information that cannot be communicated by the sentences of a natural language.” (Katz 1972: 19)

We will have occasion to see that not “any type of information” can be communicated by means of grammatically well-formed and explicitly articulated sentences. Katz proceeds to outline the task of semantic theory – a theory of meaning – in an influential statement:

“To explain how a speaker is able to understand sentences, we must explain how he goes from the meanings of morphemes in specific syntactic relations to each other to the meaning of sentences. We must reconstruct the semantic knowledge an ideal speaker-hearer has of the meanings of the morphemes in his language, the syntax of the sentences, and the compositional function that gives him the meaning of sentences in terms of both of these. This reconstruction attempts to formulate rules that formally reflect the structure of his knowledge

¹ The full French text runs as follows: “*un trésor déposé par la pratique de la parole dans les sujets appartenant à une même communauté, un système grammatical existant virtuellement dans chaque cerveau, ou plus exactement dans les cerveaux d’un ensemble d’individus; car la langue n’est complète dans aucun, elle n’existe parfaitement que dans la masse.*”

by producing semantic representations of sentences from semantic representations of their elementary parts and the syntactic relations between these parts.” (36)

The scope of meaning has been specified: it is the outcome of compositional work by speaker-hearers, based on rule-governed knowledge of morphemes and syntactic patterns of sentences. As soon as speaker-hearers have established the “right” meaning of morphemes and syntactic relations that *should* be present in an uttered sentence, s/he has established its “meaning”.

This heritage explains the uninhibited emphasis on “fluency” and “correctness” in language teaching and the widespread rejection of “impurity” in language usage – something identified by Silverstein (1979) as a “denotational ideology of language” and as such – *pace* Katz – a phenomenon of considerable historical pedigree (Bauman & Briggs (2003). Language, it is argued, exists *primarily* because it produces denotational meanings, and correctness of language will produce correctness of meaning. When some allowance is made for not-purely-linguistic aspects (see the “pragmatics” above), these aspects are equally defined as to some degree “standardized”; the Gricean “Maxims” (Grice 1975) and the early pragmatic literature on Politeness Theory (a kind of cultural prescriptivism, in fact, critically reviewed in Eelen 2001) provide characteristic examples, but the mechanical and rule-oriented tendencies in Schegloffian conversation analysis can equally be seen in this light (e.g. Schegloff 1988, where he speaks of “syntactical relations between [conversational] acts”, p.131), and various recent branches of computational linguistics also bear such characteristics (e.g. Louwse 2014 provides a survey).

What ties these divergent expert and lay strands together is a shared view of language and communication as a *simple system*, basically made up of an input-conduit-output structure, in which a limited set of (linguistic and pragmatic) variables of input are (minimally) mediated by the conduit and result – linearly – in clear, transparent meanings. Whenever meanings are *not* clear and transparent, it is a result of *divergence* in the system, and it can only be corrected by restoring the convergence in the system: more standardization, more purity. This tendency is inscribed in overt and covert language policies, “monoglot” policies in Silverstein’s (1996) terms, and is often motivated in two ways. One, an instrumental argument: people should “understand” each other; two, a political argument: this “pure” language and the shared (pure, transparent, etc.) meanings it generates define “us” as a “language community” – it creates and defines an identity category, determines the criteria for membership and distributes the entitlements it involves (Silverstein 1998; Agha 2007).

In this paper, I intend to engage with the decades of critical work destabilizing such views and will attempt to provide another synthesis of them, aimed at what we can call “sociolinguistic realism”: “...to explain the meaning of language of language in human life, and not in the abstract, not in the superficial phrases one may encounter in essays and textbooks, but in the concrete, in actual human lives” (Hymes 1972: 41). This synthesis will revolve around a different imagination of the “system”

described earlier. I will argue that we best imagine language and communication as a *complex sociolinguistic* system operating through complex semiotic units – the “total linguistic fact” (Silverstein 1985; also Rampton et al. 2014) – and yielding several different *effects*. The linguistic-denotational meaning is just one of these effects, but a realistic concept of “meaning” should take into account several *nonlinear* aspects as well, simultaneously creating *different* effects. The globally emerging meaning-category of “cool” is a case in point.

On systems, a look at forgotten ideas

We have seen that Saussure sketched communication between individuals as a linear process; he also insisted on the linearity of the linguistic sign itself:

“By contrast with visual signs (...), that can offer simultaneous complications on several dimensions, acoustic signs only have the line of time; their elements present themselves one after the other; they form a chain. This character is immediately clear as soon as one represents them in writing and replaces the temporal sequence by the spatial line of graphic signs.”
(Saussure 1960: 103)

It is this orderly linearity that triggers meaning: language users perform accurate parsing of signs orderly sequenced, one by one and in combination with one another. Meaning is the linear outcome of a simple and closed system of rules and rule-governed production.

There is, as mentioned, a long tradition of critical approaches to this fundamental image of linear meaning production, some extending the idea of grammar (as with Simon Dik’s Functional Grammar and Michael Halliday’s Systemic-Functional Grammar), others the idea of language (as with Roy Harris’s Integrationism). Such approaches share a direction: they start from the view of language and meaning outlined above, and move these notions gradually back towards social, cultural and historical fields, often in attempts to provide a “better” set of linguistic explanations (a better *grammar* in other words). This makes such critiques linguistically understandable, no doubt; but it is good to remind us that there has, for a very long time, also existed another – opposite – direction, from the social, cultural and historical to the linguistic. These are *sociolinguistically* premised critical approaches – they presume a different problematic in which *social* facts demand an explanation that involves language and communication. Goffman, Cicourel and Bourdieu immediately come to mind, but one can also think of the Gumperz-Hymesian ethnographic tradition (and its extensions in contemporary linguistic anthropology). Interestingly, most of the scholars and traditions mentioned here mention the *complexity* hidden in the scholarly artefacts we call “data” (e.g. Cicourel 1967). Whatever people utter in the way of “sentences” only makes sense when put against the complex and highly variable and dynamic interlocking contexts within which it was uttered. Saussure’s and Katz’s simple and linear schemata of grammatical parsing are insufficient.

Much science is forgotten – it disappears after some decades from the mandatory reading lists of courses as well as from the lists of references of published works; useful insights contained in it are no longer taken on board. This is a pity, since often there is no intrinsic reason why good ideas should be dismissed or overlooked: forgotten science is sometimes a very useful thing. In what follows, I will draw on a body of insights, often influenced by the work of Gregory Bateson, in which systems theory was used to explain human communication. These insights have become mainstream in what is widely known as “communication studies” but have left few traces in sociolinguistic and applied-linguistic research.

One such work is Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson (1967). In this book, quite successful at the time and still influential in communication theory, Watzlawick and his associates distinguished between *closed systems*, focused on equilibrium, and *open systems* in which such equilibrium was absent; communication, Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson insisted, should be seen as a complex open system. Closed systems would privilege models of linear causation: A provokes B. The outcome of any process can only be explained in terms of the initial conditions of the system: results (e.g. in simple chemical processes) are explicable from the materials that entered in the process of production. This fundamental imagery was, they argued, a feature of earlier theories of meaning, of which we have seen examples above: a finite set of linguistic forms can only generate – but *will* generate – a specific and determined set of meaning outcomes. Open and complex systems, by contrast, are systems in which the outcome cannot be explained in terms of the initial conditions but demands to be explained as an effect of the system itself, of its complexity. Multiple and diverse factors could generate the same outcome, and vice versa, and it is the features of the system itself – patterns of human communication – that must be examined in order to find the actual explanation for the outcomes.

Watzlawick and his associates were deeply influenced by Gregory Bateson’s work on “schismogenesis” and “feedback”. In *Naven* (1936), Bateson had described how in a community in Papua New Guinea, specific rituals were organized around a form of communicative and behavioral “escalation” which he called schismogenesis. A’s behavior affected B’s, and the effect of A’s behavior on B had in turn effects on A again, again on B, and so forth, in a process of perpetual “looping” of meaning and social effect which Bateson called “feedback”: what our actions do to others influences both their and our own subsequent actions, for reasons not contained *in the actions themselves* but in the social and psychological contextual effects of actions, “feeding back” to change the initial conditions of interaction. Feedback generates “loops” of mutually influencing responsive effects that create behavioral and cognitive escalation, not explicable in terms of single responses to single prompts but in terms of the totality of the interaction pattern. Thus, what starts as a simple and innocuous conversation – “how are things at work?” – could end as a life-changing experience, for reasons not traceable in the nature of the different utterances themselves. Feedback explains how people who start a conversation as each other’s friends can leave that conversation as enemies.

Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson took these insights and applied them to the complex circumstances of families of psychiatric (schizophrenic) patients, arguing that not just the patient had to be treated but the entire family. What was needed for that was a detailed investigation not of single interactions between family members and the psychiatric patient (the “traumatic” focus of e.g. Freud) but of the longitudinal (*systemic*) patterns of communication within the family. This meant, for instance, that individual interactions could have effects well beyond the immediate context and that individual interactions carried the sub-textual load of previous patterns of interactions. A friendly request can sound threatening when uttered in a culture of domestic violence. No immediate trace of this culture will be found in the actual interaction, yet its influence is very much there.² Saussure’s *circuit de la parole*, one could say, but with circuits quite longer than the linear acoustic one of a spoken sentence, and with several more participants than the two usually lined up (the speaker and hearer), *all* of whom are far from “ideal” in the Chomskyan sense.³ Bateson, in his work on “double bind” and schizophrenia, had already made the point that communication – individual moments thereof as well as systems of communication – can be *dysfunctional*, in spite of the fact that formally, they appear to be very much in line with common assumptions and codes of communication (cf. Rieber 1989: 7).

It is as soon as one attempts to address real issues in which larger numbers of participants are involved in *patterns* of communication, that issues of longitudinal development and systemic complexity arise. That is: as soon as one abandons the simple bilateral models of interaction between one ideal speaker-hearer and another, the *sociolinguistic* assumptions described above become inevitable, and one is facing the task of explaining not “meaning” as an outcome of (single) utterances, but several very different “effects” as produced by a *sociolinguistic system* in which *communities* – actual and real ones – appear as actors, rather than single individual language users (let alone “ideal” ones). And “community”, Hymes warned us repeatedly, “is a dynamic, complex and sometimes subtle thing” (1996: 32; cf. also Silverstein 1998; Blommaert & Varis 2013).

In order to get a more precise view of the different effects we should consider, we need to move one step back. We have seen how Watzlawick and his associates focused on families, not individuals, in their analysis; they thus created a specific *unit* of analysis different from that of mainstream linguistics. And several recent developments in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology have

² Note that this refusal to consider such effects as relevant, unless they were explicitly oriented to in conversations, was one of the reasons for Cicourel (1992) to distance himself from Schegloffian conversation analysis. See also Blommaert (2005: chapter 3) for a discussion of “forgotten contexts”.

³ It is striking to see the similarities between the approach outlined here, and Cicourel’s notion of “ecological validity” developed in the same period. Cicourel – equally interested in the psychomedical and institutional contexts addressed by Watzlawick et al. – continuously emphasized the reductionist nature of mainstream (statistical) accounts of social events and processes and emphasized the need to address both locally eventuated and systemic, longitudinal and layered features influencing how actual people experience actual social events and processes and how such experiences convert into real-world effects. For a broadly based discussion of this (now largely forgotten) “school” of communication, see Winkin (1981).

added precision to attempts towards reformulating units of analysis that do justice to the systemic complexity we wish to investigate. To these I can now turn.

Complex units and their effects

Let us first recall what the units of analysis were for someone like Jerrold Katz: sentences, seen as the bearer of almost any human thought, and broken down into their constituent parts and the rules of their syntactic ordering. These units were the units that would lead the linguist towards meaning. As said, several alternative traditions have existed and still exist, and I will draw on one of them: linguistic anthropology.

The development of a research paradigm revolving around “language ideologies” in the 1990s (e.g. Kroskrity, Schieffelin & Woolard 1992) is of particular interest. While bearing some similarities to Bateson’s notion of “metacommunication”, the concept of language ideologies was grounded in a re-reading of Whorf’s work on grammatical categories (Silverstein 1979) and pointed towards (“meta-“) forms of (ideological) beliefs accompanying language usage and conventionally encoded as “indexicality” in the form of signs being deployed in communication. Deployment of such indexically charged signs, then, provoked meaning effects not part of *denotation*, but appearing as a metalevel “pointer” towards interpretation. In Silverstein’s words (1992: 315):

“Now any indexical process, wherein signs point to a presupposed context in which they occur (i.e. have occurred) or to an entailed potential context in which they occur (i.e. will have occurred), depends on some metapragmatic function to achieve a measure of determinacy. It turns out that the crucial position of *ideologies* of semiosis is in constituting such a mediating metapragmatics, giving parties an idea of determinate contextualization for indexicals, presupposable as shared according to interested positions or perspectives to follow upon some social fact like group membership, condition in society, achieved commonality of interests, etc. Ideology construes indexicality. In so doing ideology inevitably biases its metapragmatic “take” so as to create another potential order of effective indexicality that bears what we can appreciate sometimes as a truly ironic relation to the first.”

Two things are effected in this move. One, the connection between a sign and its meaning is no longer singular and linear; it is fragmented, “laminated” and mediated. Two, it is mediated not by the linguistic system – the internalized, context-independent rules of grammar (Katz) and the communally evolved grammar stored in the brain (Saussure) – but by the highly volatile, dynamic and situated factors of social and cultural experience called ideology. Ideologies of semiosis – we now know – are highly dependent on who holds them, when, for what purpose and in which forms of actual deployment (see Kroskrity 2000; Gal & Woolard 2001). Note how Silverstein’s *ideological* reinterpretation of the “double arrow” of indexicality also instantly dislodges two phenomena with a

long history in formal-linguistic and semantic-pragmatic research: presuppositions and inferencing, and rather than objects of formal analysis they now become objects of ethnographic investigation (cf. Gumperz 1982; Rampton, Maybin & Roberts 2014).

All of this means – and I refer back to earlier remarks – that we need to “ecologically validate” (Cicourel) whatever we state about communication, because we have landed ourselves with an entirely different unit of inquiry, the “total linguistic fact”. This unit, I repeat, is non-unified but fractured and layered, and not stable but deeply dependent on contextual (“ecological”) conditions of deployment. In Silverstein’s words,

“[t]he total linguistic fact, the datum for a science of language is irreducibly dialectic in nature. It is an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms, contextualized to situations of interested human use and mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” (1985: 220).

And of this total linguistic fact, we know that it produces at least *two* different kinds of meaning-effects: a *denotational* one grounded in the linguistic-conventional aspects of it, and an *indexical* one, grounded in an entirely different set of social, cultural, historical and political bodies of knowledge and experience. Both aspects, Silverstein emphasizes, are dialectically connected to one another – the indexical aspect of meaning provides a check on the denotational one and vice versa, both co-construct each other in every moment of deployment – which means that isolating one of them for separate treatment is difficult to motivate. Meaning, obviously, has become more complex as a notion. In fact, “meaning” as used by Katz and others is a rather clumsy notion here, since it has been absorbed into a broader range of phenomena we better call “effects”, and using a word explicitly *denotationally* might in itself be an act of *indexical orientation* towards an ideology of semiosis that prefers or imposes such indexical directions (Silverstein’s well-known “denotational ideology, to be precise).

Effects and functions: Lookalike language, virality and “cool”

Effects cannot be detached from another notion, often neglected when talking about meaning: *function*. We can only anticipate specific effects of signs in their actual contexts of deployment when we understand the functions of such signs (Hymes 1996: 45). The same utterance, as we all know, can be deployed seriously, ironically and humorously; the difference between these three forms of deployment is not a linguistic difference – it is the same string of grammatically coherent elements – but is a difference of function: the sign is deployed to *do different things* in the communicative environment where it is deployed. Its effects will depend on how the interlocutors understand this function – a complicated social and cultural issue, as, among others, Goffman (1963) showed so clearly. And whereas Katz, in 1972, could confidently claim that “[t]he basic function of natural language is to serve as vehicles for communication for their speakers” (Katz 1972: 18), where “communication” was understood as the production of denotational meanings through careful and

accurate parsing, we now know that natural languages can have a great deal more functions, many of which appear to bear little denotational weight.



Figure 1: Lookalike English (Lijiang, China, August 2011). © Jan Blommaert

Consider, for instance, Figure 1, in which we see text printed on a jogging suit; the picture was taken in a town in the Southern Chinese province of Yunnan in 2011. We see alphabetical writing here, and while some bits of what is printed appear to bear resemblances with (and can thus be parsed as) English – “best”, “elephant man”, “the Glark sisters”, “baby” and so forth – other bits appear rather as random juxtapositions of alphabetical signs – “biibe”, “buis”, “faolor”, “bnutering”, “meein” and so on. So the question is: is this language – parsable morphemes in a conventional syntactic pattern? The answer is “no”, and we bump into an old problem of meaning already flagged by Geoffrey Leech in the opening pages of his classic *Semantics* (1974): that it is hard to attribute any form of “meaning” to objects that do not manifestly belong to any actual natural language. Thus, while denotational analyses are obviously out of the question, a sign such as this one would also *not* qualify for that large body of non-denotation meanings that Leech gathered under the rubric “associative meaning”, because it lacks clear categorical membership of “language”. Linguistically, not much is to be said about this example. The thing is, however, that a *sociolinguistic* explanation – what does this sign actually do there, for the people who deploy it? – takes us somewhere else.

A first sociolinguistic observation is straightforward: such signs *exist*. Examples such as that in Figure 1, in actual fact, are extraordinarily easy to find in zones of the world where access to the “language” itself (let us assume that it is “English” in this case) is unevenly distributed (Blommaert 2010, chapter 2). While it bears only very distant connections to “English”, it locally *counts as* English, and bears

the indexical load associated with “English” in a globalized sociolinguistic environment. English, in many places in the world, is an *emblem* of globalization itself and of the values and imagination that come with it: it is “cool”, a source of distinction, and when applied to commodities, it is also more expensive than more average items. The presence of what I called “lookalike language” (Blommaert 2012) turns the jogging suit into a special one, one in which people have made conscious semiotic investments that appear to resonate with intended customers: it is a “cool” jogging suit.

The function of such lookalike language is *emblematic*: a locally valid and recognizable “language” is graphically displayed, bearing, as mentioned, distant connections with an existing prestige language (English); the display is not motivated by the production of *linguistic* meaning – in fact, the actual proficiency of the authors of such signs in normative “English” is low, if not nonexistent. The “total linguistic fact”, one could say, is here hardly “linguistic”. But this locally valid representation of language operates as a powerful *indexical*, heavily “mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” and pointing towards the sets of presupposed features locally associated with “English”. Actual proficiency in normative English would locally undoubtedly be seen as the maximal form of encoding of such indexicals; but by absence of such proficiency, a lookalike variety will still be a powerful socially and culturally readable sign. As mentioned, a great deal of “English” occurring throughout the world appears in shapes such as these ones: as strong emblems invoking a clear and powerful indexical universe, without “linguistic” functions in the strict sense of the term. “Meaning”, here, is a *nonlinear effect*, not (linearly) derived from the intrinsic linguistic properties of the sign but the outcome of a very complex form of indexical appropriation and semiotic recoding, resulting in a rather unexpected form of intense “cool” meaningfulness. English, in such environments, is an unevenly distributed commodity. This means that it is *available* – there is sufficient English around, so to speak – but not *accessible* to all in every form and at any level of mastery. The availability ensures that it can be appropriated; the lack of accessibility ensures that it is appropriated *in this specific way* – as a soup of symbols only locally recognizable (and ratified) as “English”.

I already mentioned “cool” above and will take some space now to elaborate it, for it deserves more attention than it usually receives. In the online world and the popular cultural ideoscapes it has generated worldwide, the term “cool” appears time and again as one of the most frequently used everyday metapragmatic qualifications. Things, people, utterances, accents, looks, events, thoughts and what not are “cool” or not “cool” (“uncool”, “square”, “nerdy” and so forth). This means, if we take it to be a metapragmatic qualifier, that “cool” things *make sense* in specific ways. “Cool” is an indexical category, a meaning phenomenon in other words, with considerable “emic” value; sociolinguistic realism cannot afford to dismiss it.

The power of “cool” becomes apparent when we address one of the most puzzling contemporary sociolinguistic phenomena: *virality*. Virality stands for forms of online dissemination of signs that are

extraordinary both in terms of speed and in terms of scope. Such signs (“memes” in online register) go viral in a matter of hours, and in that short span attract sometimes millions of users. The South-Korean music video “Gangnam Style”, for instance, scored over *two billion* “hits” on YouTube and did so between July 2012 (when it was posted) and August 2014 (when I checked it) – an average of more than two million “hits” per day. Another highly successful meme, the so-called “Lolcats” (images of cats with funny captions in a self-created “pidgin” English called “Lolspeak”), became so widely used that some of its aficionados started translating the Bible in “Lolspeak” in 2007 – a job they completed in 2010. The Lolcat Bible can since be consulted online and purchased as a hardcopy book.⁴

The extraordinary “viral” spread of memes is a phenomenon of new online communication; it is not driven by any degree of a priori, ratified and codified stability in the interpretation or understanding of the sign itself. Memes, in other words, do not require clear, transparent and shared meanings before they go viral; they go viral regardless and acquire, little by little and never uncontested, a shared and sharable *function*. Figure 2 provides an illustration of a successful meme: “Bitch please”.

The meme is composed of an image and the caption “Bitch please”, a slang phrase. The image in the “standard” meme is a picture of the Chinese basketball star Yao Ming – a still, in fact, of a televised press conference in which Yao Ming burst into laughter. To this image, then, the caption “Bitch please” is added. Note that the choice of the image – entirely unremarkable in itself – as well as the collocation of image and caption appear entirely arbitrary, and *have no “etymological” meaning for users of the meme*. Many users do not know that the face is Yao Ming’s, fewer would be aware of the slang origins of the caption phrase, and very few people indeed appear to wonder about the reasons why the picture and the caption “belong” together.

As to function, the dozen or so male Belgian teenagers I asked to clarify the use of the meme disagreed. Some would claim they would use the meme generally, whenever they wanted to express an equivalent of “are you kidding?” or “bullshit” in online communication. Others were more specific, arguing that “bitch please” expressed disbelief pleasantly and ironically – a less categorical function than the one attributed by their friends. One explained that “bitch please” is tantamount to calling someone “bitch”, while another added to this that it should only be used addressing girls – a gendered interpretation. As to origins and etymology (and through that, possible “rules” of use), none of them wondered about where it came from.

⁴ See http://www.lolcatbible.com/index.php?title=Main_Page



Figure 2: “Bitch please” meme. Google Images, downloaded September 1, 2014.

One can see that this openness in function attribution defies codification – and is in fact different from the attempts towards codification on media such as “Urban Dictionary”⁵ It is very much an “open” sign (or a “shifter”), be it one that operates within a certain bandwidth of meaning: it is always a pragmatic and metapragmatic dismissal and disqualification of a precedent statement by someone else, while its degrees of nastiness and actual range of deployment can vary significantly. But “correctness”, to be sure, is hardly an issue. This lack of precision with regard to the exact origins and “meaning” of the meme, however, do not prevent it from being productive. It is even hyper-productive: large numbers of creative revisions of the meme exist, exploiting the recognizability of both the image of Yao Ming’s face (Figure 3) and of the caption (Figure 4). Observe how Figure 4 shows another feature of this “ideology of semiosis”: *mashup*, the capacity to blend different existing memes into new ones – here a mashup of “Lolcats” and “Bitch Please”.

⁵ See <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Bitch%20Please>. This definition is of the expression “Bitch please” and points towards origins in urban prostitution and connotations of impending violence. None of these aspects of meaning were available to the teenagers I questioned.



Figure 3: Mona Lisa “Bitch please”. Google Images, downloaded September 1, 2014.



Figure 4: Lolcat “Bitch Please”. Google Images, downloaded September 1, 2014.

What my teenage interlocutors agreed upon was that the use of such memes is “cool”. Memes are used – that is: they are sent around, “liked”, “retweeted” and “shared” at high speed and in large numbers – because the use of memes is “cool”, and people who use them are “cool” as well. “Cool” appears here to have a *double* semiotic effect: a pragmatic-metapragmatic effect as well as an identity effect. I shall return to this point later. Here we notice that “cool” communication is the function of memes – or at least, one of the higher-order functions, possibly allowing more specific ones, such as the ones described by my interlocutors for “Bitch Please”.

Of course, with memes such as the ones documented here, we bump again into Leech's problem: it's not really "language" (the memes essentially exist as images-plus-captions), and statements on "meaning" are therefore highly precarious if not impossible. The thing is, however, that we are facing a "total linguistic fact" here, a *multimodal total semiotic* fact to be more precise, and that such complex semiotic objects appear as parts of everyday communication patterns in immense volumes around the world. The thing is also, that regardless of the absence of clear and linear "meaning" as an outcome of careful linguistic-grammatical parsing, people using these signs appear to have some practical sense of function, and that their deployment of such signs has effects: it is "cool". The specific semiotic resource of the meme is "loaded", so to speak, with indexicals – a broad and not too precise set of indexicals, but one which allows targeted and deliberate communication for effect. Here too, the eventual "meaning" of the use of memes is nonlinear: it cannot be predicted from the meaning structure inscribed in the specific component parts of the sign.

Its meaning appears to emerge from *the act of sharing* itself: it is "phatic", if you wish, and acquires functional efficacy because of the specific communication patterns that exist in the online communities in which it circulates (Miller 2008; Varis & Blommaert 2014). This means that memes operate almost exclusively in a reflexive pragmatic-and-metapragmatic, *performance* mode, in which the act of sharing – sharing *whatever* – generates the effect of "cool". The meaning-effects of such memes, consequently, are *maximally* mediated by the system of "sharing" communication within such communities and by the semiotic ideologies organizing these practices. Let me emphasize this: "meaning" here is *maximally* mediated by volatile and unstable cultures of use, not *minimally* mediated as suggested by Saussure, Katz and others; the outcome of mediation is here not "noise" – slight distortions of "correct" meaning – but it is, in actual practice, the *entire* meaning of the sign. And the actual effects are "stochastic", i.e. not determined by the characteristics of the input sign and almost accidental, as the genesis of memes illustrates. It is precisely the *random* nature of memes, the fact that viral memes do not seem to have a clear and transparent content motive for their selection and success, that makes memes "cool". As soon as people attempt to construct memes intentionally – there are several "meme generators" and "make your own meme" systems available online – they are "uncool". Thus, as soon as people attempt to turn the random meme into a willfully constructed, "linear" and transparent sign (in the way, therefore, that people construct "meaning" through "sentences" in the traditional semantic theories), the meme loses its potential for semiotic effect. The complex units of which memes are one instance defy simple description and allow no "correct" parsing.

Perlocution revisited

So what do we do with "cool" as a category of semiotic effects? "Cool" as a meaning category? Using Hymes' ethnographic vocabulary we could recognize "cool" as a "key", a term "introduced to provide

for the tone, manner, or spirit in which an act is done” (1972: 62). In other recent work, we have qualified this particular “key” often created by “phatic” forms of communication, as “convivial” (Blommaert 2013; Varis & Blommaert 2014): it organizes a social-structural level of low-key but inoffensive engagements greatly contributing to what is called “social cohesion”, and crucial (as Goffman 1963 described so accurately) to maintain a level of permanent social involvement with that category of non-friends-non-enemies Goffman called “acquaintances”. The seeming insignificance of “phatic” interactions in terms of explicitly communicated “contents” does not prevent such forms of interaction from acquiring and ensuring tremendous social functions: for many people the statement “he doesn’t even say hi to me anymore” articulates a profound sense of social conflict or *malaise* leading to the dissolving of existing and valuable social bonds between people. The “key” of communication, to cut a long story short, is absolutely vital in social relations, and one can only deplore the lack of attention to the phenomena we gather under the label “key”. The key of “cool”, for instance, directs and organizes a very large set of social practices on- and offline and creates the kinds of unstable, volatile collectivities we encounter on social media (Varis 2014 provides a general discussion).

But while such a “key” describes a rather general atmosphere in which communication takes place, “cool” is also an actual *effect* of communication. It is, in Speech Act theoretical terms, a “perlocutionary act”. Here is what John L. Austin had to say on perlocutionary acts:

“There is yet a further sense (...) in which to perform a locutionary act, and therein an illocutionary act, may also be to perform an act of another kind. Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them; and we may then say, thinking of this, that the speaker has performed an act in the nomenclature of which reference is made either (...) only obliquely, or even (...) not at all, to the performance of the locutionary or illocutionary act. We shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a ‘perlocutionary’ act, and the act performed (...) a ‘perlocution’”. (Austin 1962: 101)

Austin included things such as “being persuaded” and “being convinced” as forms of perlocution, distinguishing them from “illocutionary” acts such as “promising”, “asking” and so forth – in which the effect is inscribed in the “force” of the speech acts (of promising, asking, etc.). John Searle (1969) later greatly refined the description of “illocutionary” speech acts and their “force”. And note that for both, the notion of “force” – what specific speech acts *can* do – had to be carefully distinguished from the more traditional language-philosophical semantic notion of “sense and reference” (i.e. the concept of denotational meaning, see e.g. Austin 1962: 100). Observe also that both Austin and Searle expressed significant discomfort with the “perlocutionary” effects, and consequently focused on

illocutions (e.g. Austin 1962: 103: “Our interest in these lectures is essentially to fasten on the second, illocutionary act, and contrast it to the other two” [i.e. locutions and perlocutions, JB]).

We begin to see, however, that meaning categories such as “cool” pose specific problems. While Austin and Searle successfully analyzed illocutions in terms of *rules* producing (ideally) clear and linear outcomes, perlocutions are characterized precisely by their unpredictable character. Thus, to return to Austin’s examples, people can produce a perfect “promise” in illocutionary terms – their utterance will bear all the typical features of a “promise”; but that promise can (perlocutionary) persuade the interlocutor, or it can fail to persuade him/her, due to factors that are not contained in the illocutionary force of the speech act. These factors, as we know, were described by Austin as *felicity conditions* for the successful production of performative acts (1962: 14-15), and “if we sin against any one (or more) of these six rules, our performative utterance will be (in one way or another) unhappy” (Austin 1962: 15). Thus, if we utter our promise correctly according to the illocutionary code, we can still fail to persuade our interlocutor because the felicity conditions under which we should have uttered it have not been satisfied. And such *infelicities* are much more numerous than the six felicity conditions listed by Austin – more things can go wrong rather than right, and the default mode of speech act production is in all likelihood partly right and partly wrong.

Once more, we encounter, of course, the underlying imagery of simple rule-governed (i.e. closed) and linear systems here, to describe – when Austin and Searle catch a glimpse of the perlocutionary world – phenomena characterized by a great deal of unpredictability and indeterminacy (certainly when we read Speech Act theory and its insistence on rules as a language-ideological phenomenon in its own right). In fact, we see that actual and really occurring performance is dismissed in favor of the presumed underlying stable and generative set of rules – and we cannot fail to notice similarities with the Saussurean preference for “langue” and the Chomskyan preference for “competence”. While a presumed latent and immanent capacity for meaning can be described in terms of a finite set of general rules, the mess of real, situated and contextualized performance defies such exercises. As soon as we address meaning “in the concrete, in actual human lives” (Hymes 1972: 41), we are facing a complex and open system in which nonlinear effects are – no pun intended – the rule.

Such nonlinear effects do not just include the perlocutions of Speech Act theory, “done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them” in Austin’s terms. They also include a very broad range of *unintended* effects. “Cool”, we have seen, is both a “perlocution” in the sense that it indexically “loads” the signs it is qualified by – we find certain signs “cool”. But it is also an *identity* effect: those who produce “cool” stuff are “cool” people as well. And identity ascriptions are not typically produced by the sender of cool stuff but by his/her audience. It is an effect of uptake by others, and in that sense entirely out of reach of the purposeful sender, conditioned by a very different range of factors than those (proleptically) governing the construction of signs, distributed over a

potentially large set of actors (as on social media platforms), and effective in time and space frames that are also unpredictable. An unfriendly remark made at the dinner table can be turned into evidence in a divorce case years later, and a Facebook status update reporting the consumption of liberal quantities of alcohol and marihuana at last night's party can become conclusive grounds for future employers not to hire the subject who posted these initially innocuous remarks. Phenomena such as the long chains of re-entextualizations that construct a "tradition" along with its "members" who – perlocutionarily – "believe" what is contained in the tradition, are "persuaded" by it and "adhere" to it (e.g. Silverstein & Urban 1996) give much to think about in this sense. The "total linguistic fact", when dispersed over collectives of users and extended periods of enactment and performance, becomes increasingly unstable and marked by extended sequences of "unintended" uptake and function allocation.

But also the complexity of "simple" communicative events tends to be underestimated. "Falling in love" is a well-known social and cultural phenomenon, and it is inevitably a *communicative effect*. People fall in love when they interact with each other directly – boy meets girl – or indirectly – teenagers falling in love with distant celebrities. Yet, dating sites on the web notwithstanding, very few of the actual communicative events that lead to falling in love are *purposefully* directed to that effect; in fact, that effect is often experienced as a surprise, a mystery even, as something that just "came about" almost by accident, an unplanned by-product of meetings often focused on entirely different things – it is, thus, not a typical perlocutionary effect in the sense of Austin but reminiscent, rather, of the patterns of escalation Bateson called schismogenesis. "Hating" someone, "having a soft spot" for him/her, or "detesting" him/her, are similarly effects for which little hard evidence will emerge from a careful study of the communicative scripts that led to that effect. And these effects are also not usually confined to the space of the single, momentary encounter: when they are there, effects such as "loving" or "hating" someone become the key in which a potentially very long series of encounters can develop, a contextual condition that governs (and can qualify or cancel) the rules of engagement afterwards. It *makes meaning* as soon as it is in place, and these meanings clearly do not fit the rationalist project of linguistic semantics.

We can now begin to address a broader category of perlocutionary effects, extended so as to cover unintended and far more complex effects, as nonlinear and therefore unstable and unscriptable indexical effects, heavily mediated by the system of communication itself and not explicable in terms of input conditions or "noise" caused by the conduit of the sign-systems we use but emerging stochastically out of a complex interplay of participants, contexts and sociocultural ideologies of semiosis noticeable in the process. These forms of meanings, it seems to me, are of great importance if we wish to understand how actual people make their actual social lives meaningful. A sociolinguistics of effect might become a cool project in which much remains to be discovered.

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