THE INTERPRETATION OF MEANING IN SOCIAL SCIENCES
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**THE INTERPRETATION OF MEANING IN SOCIAL SCIENCES**
Abstract

This article presents in a relatively brief but comprehensive way the constitutive elements of an interpretive approach towards social sciences. It explains why interpretive frameworks constitute unavoidable screens that sift our cognitive appropriation of the world, and how metaphors (understood as a distinctive way of achieving insight) can provide their ordering principles. It further explains in what sense social intercourse is a meaning creating process, and why the interpretation of those meanings should be the main purpose of social sciences.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como propósito presentar los elementos constitutivos de una aproximación interpretativa a las ciencias sociales. Empieza explicando por qué los marcos interpretativos constituyen un tamiz ineludible de nuestra apropiación cognitiva del mundo que nos rodea, y cómo las metáforas (entendidas como una forma particular de adquirir conocimientos) pueden proveer los principios que los organizan. Explica además el sentido en el cual la interacción social constituye un proceso de creación de significados, y por qué la interpretación de esos significados debe de ser el propósito fundamental de las ciencias sociales.
Introduction

Statesmen address security concerns based on their understanding of the issues at stake. Such a truism becomes problematic, though, once we realize that no fact or event does inherently pose a threat to a state’s security. Threats can only be identified by silhouetting them against the background of an interpretive framework: only after we know what could count as a security threat can we recognize certain facts or events as particular instances of that general phenomena. Therefore, different frameworks of interpretation will elicit different meanings from the same facts and events, and suggest different courses of action in response to them.

Although it does not address decision making processes, the present article explains how interpretive frameworks are intersubjectively created and why they constitute unavoidable screens that sift our cognitive appropriation of the world.

I. “I See, Therefore I Know”: Perception, Cognition and Language

Facts do not speak for themselves. The infinite (and infinitely changing) sources of sensory stimulus provided by our environment would overwhelm us if we did not have some criteria to help us sort things out. Psychology and biology would tell us that our physiological endowment does part of the job for us, even if we are not aware of it. That, however, only contributes to explain how perception is made possible, not how it is made intelligible: through mere perception we would be exposed to an endless parade of shapes and colors that, per se, would only amount to a senseless flow of sensations.

The notion that facts speak for themselves seems to be the underlying premise of the empiricist approach to human knowledge: “brute facts” inscribe their distinctive imprint in the “tabula rasa” that is our mind through sensory experience, laying down the foundations of our cognitive processes.

This view in turn is based in a correspondence theory of truth that, among other things, assumes the existence of a clear cutting distinction between literal (i.e., corresponding to the facts), and metaphorical (i.e., rhetorical) uses of language. This is why Hobbes believed that the way to suppress deceit in human affairs was to avoid metaphors altogether. However, facts do not literally have a “self” through which they “speak”. Paradoxically, this quintessential empiricist claim comprises two metaphors in a single sentence.

The notion of “universal flux” (usually attributed to Heraclitus), seems to apply here, because not only the world we are trying to grasp but also our body, and, therefore, our sense organs, are in constant motion. That would seem to turn “accurate perception” into an elusive (if not illusory) task. However, perception is made possible by the fact that our visual and nervous systems hold things around us constant through transformations of invariants.

Gregory 1966.
Indeed, even this seemingly innocuous assertion needs to be qualified. We do not “perceive” shapes and colors, stricto sensu. In the same vein, we do not “perceive” objects as such. For an object to emerge as a subject of our knowledge, we need to cognitively construct it.

For that to happen, we need some additional criteria to sort things out, and that is precisely what language provides. For example, when we try to define an object, there are usually two parallel processes taking place in our mind. First, we engage in a search for likeness; we try to find objects to which the one we want to define could be related. However, there can be an endless myriad of objects which resemble the one we are trying to define in many different ways, while remaining different in many other respects. At this stage, once again, we would need some criteria to determine which similarities should be regarded as significant, and which could be dismissed. Such criteria, however, do not inhere in the objects being compared. Rather, they emerge through the process of defining them as instances of particular kinds of objects (e.g., the process of establishing their “genus”).

That does not mean though that the content of our perception corresponds neatly to the world out there (i.e., outside our head). In biology, as well as in psychology, perception is understood as an interactive process through which the objects of perception are constructed rather than merely apprehended. Qualities of sensation like color, smell or hardness “are only correlated with physiological processes in the brain (and possibly in the sense organs as well) and are released by certain stimuli deriving from the objects—for example, electromagnetic waves of a certain wavelength. (...) our sense data are no more than indications of characters of the extramental world (...) the objects themselves have no color, hardness, or smell”.

Rensch 1971, p. 21.

For instance, while trying to define the word “empirical”, a certain author claims that “An idea or concept is empirical if it is derived ultimately from the five senses”. As an example of this assertion, he says that “‘Red’ is an empirical concept, but ‘red is a color’ is not empirical: we do not find its truth by looking”.


However, we do not know that something is red just by looking at it. The notion that something might happen to be “red” would elude our understanding if we didn’t have a previous grasp of the concept of “color”, and then, of the notion that “red” constitutes a particular instance of that general concept.

If a logical positivist tries to give an account of ‘thing’ or a formula for a ‘thing’ in terms of mere sense data and their composition, he is looking, and bids us to look, at the previously grasped ‘thing’; the previously grasped ‘thing’ is the standard by which we judge his formula”.


Aristotle believed that those principles of classification derived from actual relations between things in nature. That is why for him a definition was supposed to apprehend the distinctive essence of the object being defined. That is also why he treated the categories arrived at through those principles of classification as “things” existing beyond our perception and understanding of them, and not as mere linguistic conventions. However, as we have seen, certain qualities of sensation that were thought to inhere in the objects being perceived (like color or smell), do depend on our perception (i.e., our apprehension of them through our sense organs), for their existence. Kant would even argue that our knowledge does not conform to the objects being known, but rather that the realm of objects conforms to our way of knowing them, given the a priori nature of the “forms of
Once we establish the category (or categories) to which a particular object belongs, the next logical step in arriving at a definition would be to determine which features distinguish it from other objects belonging to the same category or categories (e.g., its “differentia”).

Therefore, to define an object is to classify it through an interplay of likeness and difference that situates it in an ensemble of relationships with a multiplicity of objects other than itself.

Language can be understood as a classification system that orders our cognitive appropriation of the world in an intelligible manner. Even in Locke’s empiricism, which assumes that there is nothing in the mind that was not previously in the senses, we would not be able to make much sense of the world around us if we could not combine, through language, the simple ideas provided by the senses into complex and abstract ones. Furthermore, it is only through language that ideas can be communicated and, thus, become a meaningful part of human social intercourse.

Therefore, even if we assume that there can be a prelinguistic knowledge of the world, it could not take us very far without language. Unfortunately, the notion that such kind of knowledge is possible seems to be a rather untenable proposition. For Locke, knowledge begins with sense perception: words are the signs of ideas, but ideas in turn are the signs of “things”. In this triad, ideas are self-standing elements vis à vis words, and “things” are self-standing elements vis à vis ideas. In other terms, “things” can exist without us having ideas about them, and ideas about things can exist without us having words to describe them. Nowadays, people who deny the truth of the former premise are usually diagnosed as suffering from some sort of psychotic syndrome. However, it is the latter premise which becomes untenable, and, thus, turns the notion of a knowledge of the world prior to language into an elusive chimera.

To understand why this is the case, let us place ourselves in the position of a researcher trying to understand certain historical events. A reliable account of those events must be, of course, true to the facts of the matter. However, although this piece of advice seems to be self-evident, its meaning is not immediately apparent. The commonly attributed meaning is that, in his or her account of the events, the sensibility” and “categories” that we display in that process. Therefore, the question of whether or not there is a realm of “things in themselves” (or “noumena”) beyond our perception and cognition (which, in a way, was Descartes’ question), becomes a byzantine issue in the context of his understanding of scientific knowledge. At that level, Kant’s question is not whether that realm exists or not, but rather if it can be known as it is, in a pristine state.

"The action of putting things which are not identical into a group or class is so familiar that we forget how sweeping it is. The action depends on recognizing a set of things to be alike when they are not identical (...). Habit makes us think the likeness obvious (...) this ability to order things into likes and unlikes is (...) a human ability; we trace and to some extent inject the likeness, which is by no means planted there by nature for all to see".

Bronowsky 1953, pp. 21-22.
researcher must describe things as they really happened. The problem is not only that anywhere we look there are always more "things" happening at once than we could possibly account for, but also, and more importantly, that there is no aprioristic way of telling what counts as a "thing", or, for that matter, as an "event". Moreover, "Events may be sliced thick or thin; a glance may be identified as an isolated event or as an instance of an event. What the unit level is depends on the telling of it".

In other words, there are no preordained "things" or "events" for us to perceive in their pristine nature through our sense organs. Our knowledge of the "things" and "events" that we touch, see, hear, smell, and taste is inextricably mediated by how we describe them through language, i.e., events are only identified under description.

Words, therefore, are not the signs of ideas, but their constitutive elements. And language is not an instrument of thought, but the condition that makes it possible. When "ideas" (understood as a cognitive mediator that links "things" and "words") drop out of the equation, the relationship between "things" and "words" (i.e., between the world and the language we use to describe it), becomes problematic. The world, indeed, exists prior to language (i.e., "things" are still self-standing elements); however, "we can never know that (beyond the fact of its assertion) because the existence of the world is literally inconceivable outside of language and our traditions of interpretation".

Words, as signifiers, do not refer us

7 "There are events of every sort: visits home, heartbreaks, a first kiss, the jump of an electron from one orbital position to another".
Roth 1993, p. 707.

On the other hand, "Since we lack objective criteria of relevance, we have no reason to be more interested in a world-shaking revolution that affects directly or indirectly all men than in the most trifling 'social changes'.
Strauss 1986, p. 20.

Therefore, since the mere choice of a research topic necessarily involves some constraints in terms of "facts" and "events" to be explained, it also implies a judgement concerning the relative relevance of those constraints.

8 Paul Roth 1993, p.707.

"The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, (...) What is denied is not that (...) objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive conditions of emergence".

Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p.108.

9 Ibid.


That is why, "As Richard Rorty has acknowledged, projects like philosophy's traditional desire to see 'how language relates to the world', result in an impossible attempt to step outside our skins—the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism—and compare ourselves with something absolute".
Rorty 1982, p. XIX.
back to a signified "thing", grasped only through sense perception, which then becomes the standard to judge the empirical accuracy of our ideas about it. Language is, rather, a self-contained system, in which the meaning of the words that it comprises is system relative: it emerges through an interplay between signifiers, rather than between signifiers and signifieds.\textsuperscript{11}

The case of a person looking up the meaning of a word in a dictionary is the most common analogy used to illustrate this point. What that person will find is that the word in question is defined by means of other words. In turn, those words will be defined by means of other words, and, in principle, the process can go on ad infinitum.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{II. The rhetorical path towards enlightenment: metaphors as a source of knowledge}

If language can be understood as a classification system, and the meaning of the words that it comprises is system relative, the use of different words to refer to the same thing may lead to different forms of understanding it.\textsuperscript{13} But the use of the same

\textsuperscript{11} It was Ferdinand Saussure who “began to locate the meaning of verbal or phonetic language elements in terms, not of a ‘meaning’ inherent in the individual sign’s relation to its reference, but rather in a pattern of semantic differentiation where the meaning of a word or sound was seen to lie, not in its identification with its real-world reference, but rather in its being distinct from all other words or sounds in the linguistic referential system”.

Corbey and Leerssen 1991, p. X.

\textsuperscript{12} The implications of this prosaic example for a theory of meaning in semantics are by no means inconsequential: if “the signified is not a prior idea but merely other words, which in turn signify other words in an infinite verbal chain”, then, “meaning (as pure idea or fixed referent) is infinitely deferred”.


Aware of the challenge that this infinite regress would pose to his theory “of the signification of words”, Locke admits at first that a definition consists in “the explaining of one word by several others”, but then argues that there had to be words which could not be defined by means of other words, “For if the terms of one definition, were still to be defined by another, where at last should we stop?”(this is an instance of barefoot rather than philosophical empiricism in Locke: he poses the question as if it should be self-evident for his readers that the answer “Nowhere” was not even conceivable).

For Locke, the anchor that prevents that infinite regress from taking place are those simple ideas grasped through sensory perception which are, allegedly, “incapable of being defined” by means of other words, like, for example, the one we refer to with the word “red”. However, the quote taken from Rensch’s book in footnote number two does precisely that: the only thing missing there for a proper definition of the word was an specification of the precise wavelength of the electromagnetic stimulus necessary to produce the sensation usually referred to as the color “red”.

Locke 1975, pp. 5 and 7.

\textsuperscript{13} “our thoughts do not select the words we use; instead, words determine the thoughts we have”.

Landau 1972, p.82.
word in different contexts, or even, due to polisemy, the use of the same word in the same context to refer to the same thing, can produce different understandings of it. This is due to the fact that, although language is a self-contained system, it is not a closed one. Within its framework, new meanings are constantly created to render new things or events intelligible (and to refine or redefine our knowledge of older ones).

Quite often, this process involves the use of old words to refer to new things and events, for “how can we apprehend new relations except by viewing them under old categories?... In trying to visualize the unknown, the imagination must clothe it with attributes analogous to the known”. This is another way of saying that our knowledge of new things and events is intrinsically metaphorical. Whenever its intended use deviates from common usage for the sake of comparison and understanding, a word becomes a metaphor. As such, it highlights those features that it has in common (or might be purported as having in common) with the things and events it is being compared to, while it simultaneously ostracizes their potential differences. It is not only that different metaphors will tend to lead our understanding of the same things and events in different directions, but also that different persons can pick out different common features between the terms of any given metaphor. Through this process, metaphors do not simply elicit a meaning.

14 “For names are finite and so is the sum-total of formulae, while things are infinite in number. Inevitably, then, the same formula and a single name have a number of meanings”.

15 Aristotle; De Sophisticus Elenchus; quoted by Levine 1985, p.20.


In his chronicles of the “New World”, Ameriaco Vespucio provides a neat example of the process of rendering familiar that which was previously unknown through a comparative metaphor. While describing an animal that he finds particularly amusing, he says that “It is a snake with thick legs, big claws, a snake’s face and snout, and a serrated crest that begins on its nose, runs through its back, and ends in the tip of its tail. And then adds, ‘but it has no wings’. It isn’t hard to guess what he was actually referring to: it is the description of an iguana. However, what calls his attention is this detail: that such a snake would have no wings. Why would an iguana have wings? Simply because his description corresponds to the medieval image of a being, not because of its mythological origins any less real for the European imagery at the time, which is the dragon. The only thing missing from the iguana described by Vespucio to turn it into a dragon were the wings”.

17 Since the XVII century, among other things with the rise of empiricism, “the Aristotelian notion of metaphor as deviation from common usage became changed in an unwarranted way to deviation from proper or original usage”.


19 For instance, while talking about “escalation” during an international crisis, “Kahn conceptualized escalation in terms of a ladder, (...). One of the implications of the ladder metaphor is the presumption that it is possible to take small discrete steps; another is the expectation that the direction can be reversed almost at will. Richard Smoke, in a study which examines how war can be controlled, suggests that, in certain respects, the ladder analogy is inappropriate and that it might be more appropriate to see escalation in terms of a slide which is not fully under the control of the actors”.

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that might inhere in whatever is being known, but, rather, they create new meanings. Quite often, they do so by providing a frame of reference through which we interpret different aspects of the things and events that we are trying to understand.

Williams, Goldstein, and Shafritz 1994, p.278.

Max Black, for example, claims that “metaphorical thought is a distinctive way of achieving insight, not to be construed as an ornamental substitute for plain thought”.


Commenting on that claim, Donald McCloskey gives us a hint of the extent to which metaphors pervade our thoughts, since “the very idea of ‘removing’ an ‘ornament’ to ‘reveal’ a ‘plain’ meaning is itself a metaphor”.

McCloskey 1983, p.503.

John Locke himself is an involuntary example of that pervasiveness. In “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” he claims that “all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions and thereby mislead the judgement”. However, in the same essay he claims that the mind is a “white paper” (or “tabula rasa” in the French translation), “furnished” with ideas by our experience of the world; that abstract ideas are the “measures” of name and the “boundaries” of species; that reason orders ideas in “chains”, connecting the “links” at both of its ends through its intermediate “links”; or that the imperfection of words derives from our inability to “penetrate” into their real constitutions (just to mention a few cases).

John Locke 1975.

Perhaps the best example in Locke of how deeply metaphors can permeate our thoughts while we are oblivious to their presence is the fact that, in the preceding paragraph, the inclusion of “ideas” among those words placed in quotation marks seemed unnecessary. This occurs when Locke says that the way we understand “light” as a phenomenon is an example of a simple idea, when the word “idea” derives etymologically from the Greek “eide”, which means precisely “light”. Strictly speaking, the word “idea” is a “dead” metaphor (i.e., a word whose metaphorical origins have been forgotten and, thus, acquires a literal meaning). Metaphorical extensions derived from “light” and referred to human understanding are still fairly obvious, however, in our daily use of words like “clarify”, “illustrate” or “illuminate”.

Contemporary economic theory provides some of the most amusing examples of dead metaphors. For instance, when Nobel prize winner Gary Becker claims that children can represent “durable consumer goods” for their parents, the metaphor is clear enough to be shocking. However, it is not so obvious that the standard representation of markets as the interaction of supply and demand curves evolving within Cartesian coordinates in a geometric plane is a grandiose metaphorical construction introduced into economics by physicists like Jevons and Walras.

Philip Mirowski 1991.

Take the inveterate example of the organic metaphors used since ancient times to describe human society. “If society is seen in terms of the biological metaphor of a living organism, certain features are typically attributed to it. It is thought to persist through time, and consequently the importance of maintaining tradition is stressed. Since it has grown rather than being constructed, it ought not to be subjected to sudden and drastic changes, for drastic change may weaken or destroy it. The parts of an organism are mutually dependent, and indeed their identity depends on there being members of one organism rather than another. This implication is characteristically extended not just to the institutions of society but to the individual persons who have their being in it”.

III. Social Intercourse as a Meaning Creating Process

The question of meaning, in turn, is not only the key to our understanding of language, but of social intercourse in general. As seen, “brute facts” do not provide an objective blueprint for their definition. Neither do they provide an objective criteria with which to assess their significance in our understanding of social phenomena. While trying to understand social intercourse, it is not “facts” per se which matter (e.g., dates and events), but rather the meaning attached to them by the people involved in the process.

If the subjective meaning attached to his or her actions by any given individual did not take into account what those actions may mean to others as well as their expected response to them, those actions would not be, strictly speaking, “social”. For that individual, those actions will appear to have an inner logic (arising from his or her own thoughts, beliefs, feelings and desires); however, the responses that they may provoke will appear to him or her as a random sequence of events. Short of such solipsistic behavior, the meaning of events, like the meaning of words, emerges through their interplay within a particular social context. Individuals do not, through a cumulative experience, map certain patterns of interaction to which their behavior will tend to conform. We do not expect others to behave in a certain way in response to certain actions that we take simply because they have previously done so. On the one hand, we base our expectations on the assumption that others have a subjective life, just as we do (i.e., their own set of thoughts, beliefs, feelings and desires). On the other hand, we also assume that, through our interaction with them we can, albeit indirectly, have access to their subjective world, and vice versa. Therefore, we come to expect a certain behavior from them in response to our actions because we assume that there is a common understanding of what motivates each one of us to act in a certain way.

20 “universal agreement within a community about any ‘established’ ‘fact’ (...) takes the statement out of the realm of the historical and places it in that of the chronicle. (...) It is meaning that is missing from zero degree historical facts like the date of Washington’s birth”.

For example, for a people to share a history does not entail “just knowing what dates and events are significant —Ulstermen and Irish Catholics do that— but agreeing on what they mean”.

However, the significance of dates and events is not a given that precedes the action of endowing them with meaning, as the quote might seem to suggest. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say, for example, that the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 is equally significant for Ulstermen and Irish Catholics precisely because it has been deeply meaningful for both communities in its consequences, although the meaning they attribute to it is not the same.

21 In a process that would resemble the construction of a behaviorist stimulus-response sequence.

22 To say that there are some embedded assumptions underlying the social behavior of any given individual does not necessarily imply that (s)he has a conscious understanding of them. We can
In this sense, we can say that the process of social interaction is intersubjective in nature. But here the prefix "inter" seems to bridge the gap between two or more preexisting entities; i.e., the interaction between individuals might be social, but their respective subjectivities are not constituted through that interaction. If this is the case, then meaning is not created, but only conveyed through social interaction. And we take into account the meaning that our behavior might have for others only to the extent that, by action or omission, they could prevent us from achieving our goals. Unlike a solipsistic individual, we do recognize the existence of other beings with a subjective life. Like him, though, we have every reason to ignore them while they remain irrelevant for our purposes.

This is identical to the image of human society depicted by neoclassical economics and its main offspring, rational choice theory. If, in such a world, subjectivity is exogenous to social interaction, then it should follow that "reflexive predictions" (like self-fulfilled prophecies) concerning people’s preferences do not have a place within the realm of human behavior. And yet, paradoxically, the larger the audience that is persuaded of the truth of that argument, the closer we seem to be to the world that it describes:

Frank, Gilovich and Regan (1993) found that students who have been majoring in economics are less likely to cooperate in the prisoner’s dilemma than other students. Also, they were much more prone to abscond on undertakings to cooperate and they were the most pessimistic about the prospects that others would cooperate. As a result, the group of economists secured a significantly lower level of pay-offs than the rest. Frank also showed that this is not the result of self-selection (i.e., the less cooperative by nature choosing economics subjects), but of the experience of studying economics. (...) In short, the experiment is a testament to internalize and perform on a daily basis the roles assigned to us by settled rules of social behavior without ever giving them a thought.

As if we could, to put it in Kierkegaard’s terms, embark ourselves (whatever our “self” might happen to be), in a soul-searching, introspective journey, through which a “subjective truth” would eventually be reached.

If we dispense with the rhetoric, we can find traces of this line of thought in commonsensical expressions like “find yourself” and “be yourself”, the assumption being that there is already a self for you to be, if you could only find it.

The idea that what we are (or what we could be) is due to some natural endowment rather than to an open ended (and never ending) process of becoming (as well as the notion of agency associated with that view), has a long standing lineage within the liberal tradition of thought, which goes all the way from XVII century contractarianism to game theory.

In this context, that means that for each and every individual his or her set of preferences and their ordering, as well as his or her condition as an instrumentally rational self-interested being, are not only given and prior to social interaction, but also remain unaffected by it.
the potential power of any theory to shape the world that we live in by influencing the way that people think of themselves.\textsuperscript{25}

If certain actions happen to have the same meaning for almost everyone within a given community, it is not because of an outstanding coincidence among the members of an otherwise heterogeneous collection of idiosyncratic individuals, but rather because those meanings are constituted by the community itself through the interaction of its members. This is also an intersubjective process, but one in which subjective identity is not prior to interaction within a social framework, but rather a consequence of it.

Another way to put it would be to think of identity formation as a process of self-definition. Like the definition of a word, the definition of a subjective identity is achieved through an interplay of likeness and difference that situates it in an ensemble of relationships with the subjective identity of other individuals. Therefore, it is not only relational in nature, but is also subject to change. In Clifford Geertz’s words, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”\textsuperscript{26}.

\textbf{IV. Interpreting meaning in social intercourse}

If social interaction is an intrinsically meaningful process,\textsuperscript{27} then we must, in order to understand it, somehow grasp the meaning attached to it by the individuals

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Hargreaves and Varoufakis 1995, p.241.
\item The article they refer to is: 
Frank , Gilovich and Regan, 1993.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Quoted by Herwitt 1989, p.19.
\item George H. Mead illustrates this point through an analogy drawn from baseball: Every player in a team must adopt the role of all the other players in the field when (s)he must decide how to act in a particular situation. His or her actions are defined by how others are expected to behave given their relative positions within the game. Those other players become the “generalized other” vis a’ vis which (s)he defines his or her particular role.
\item The same process takes place at a community level. Every individual is immersed in a network of interpersonal relations with other members of the community, performing a variety of roles relative to them. The individual self is seen to emerge as a consequence of the gradual and hierarchical integration of those different roles in a relatively unified personal identity.
\item George Herbert Mead; Mind, Self and Society; University of Chicago Press; Chicago; 1934.
\item Contemporary authors working within traditions of thought closely related to Mead’s symbolic interactionism, like Erving Goffman, would go so far as saying that “the self is nothing without the social framework of roles on which it is hung. (...) Take away the actor’s role, (...) and there is nothing left -no core of being, no essence, no thing at all”.
\item Herwitt 1989, p.15.
\item \textsuperscript{27} I.e., if “people continually interpret the meaning of others’ actions, attempting to learn the significance of what others are doing in order to formulate their own conduct (...) acting in their world as they conceive it and on the basis of the meanings that they have learned and that they bring to it”.
\end{itemize}
involved. In turn, the process of “retrieving” those meanings, in order to render the subject matter intelligible, constitutes an act of interpretation. Our need to render certain meanings intelligible stems from our initial perceptions of these meanings as alien. Indeed, it is usually their relative strangeness which first attracted our attention. In that case, the act of interpreting, just as the use of a metaphor, is an attempt to make sense of something which currently eludes our understanding. However, precisely because meanings are being constantly created and recreated through socially bound human intercourse (i.e., they do not inhere in the things or events we strive to understand), their interpretation is an open-ended process. Furthermore, interpretation itself is a meaning-creating social process. This explains why meanings are not “retrieved” through interpretation, strictu sensu: they are not a collection of ancient archaeological remains, buried in sand, just waiting to be discovered.

Indeed, a researcher’s interpretation of meaning in social intercourse is a creative process in yet another way: in order to render events intelligible, (s)he creates stories where none previously existed. This is due to the nature of the subject matter (i.e., life in society). At any given moment in time, there is always something happening somewhere. In fact, there is usually an infinity of things happening everywhere. Human language is unable to make sense, or even describe, all these happenings in their simultaneity. Therefore, we resort to narrative forms in order to account for at least some of these events, in some places, within a certain time

\[\text{Ibid., pp. 19-20.}\]

This is not a practice that places the researcher in a privileged position vis à vis the individuals whose interaction is put under scrutiny, since human understanding in general is inextricably indebted to interpretation. We become aware of the need to interpret things and events only when something interferes with what might otherwise appear to be a spontaneous process of understanding. “In the absence of such mental roadblocks, we tend to be no more conscious of our interpretive activity than cats or birds can be supposed to realize that they engage in the institutional ‘rhetoric’ and ‘hermeneutics’ underlying their courtship behavior”.

That is more often the case with inferential interpretation. “Take the hunter’s interpretation of a footprint or of a large black cloud as indicating that a deer has crossed his path or that a storm is coming. His interpretation is based on the assumption of a factual connection between an unintended nonverbal sign and what that sign means as a clue for past or future events”.

John Maynard Keynes once said that those who think that they can dispense with theory in the process of understanding economic phenomena are usually under the intellectual spell of some dead economist’s theory. In a similar fashion, we could say that we usually assume that we can do without interpretation only after we have “taken for granted a particular line of interpretation”.

\[\text{Hernadi 1987, pp. 265-266.}\]

This is what is usually called the “reflexivity” problem in the epistemology of social sciences: “human beings, the objects of study, come to take up points of view towards their own activities which are influenced, however indirectly, by the results of social scientific investigations, and which therefore in some sense retrospectively invalidate these investigations (which made no provision for the ‘appropriation’ of their results by their subjects)”.

\[\text{D’Agostino 1992.}\]

\[\text{11}\]
frame, in an intelligible manner. As implied before, those choices already constitute an act of interpretation.

By identifying and selecting some fragments from an endless flow of otherwise unrelated events, a narrative knits a story as a relatively seamless web through a process of "emplotment". In that process, events acquire meaning through their relationship as differentiated constitutive elements of a plot structure. As such, their relevance to understanding the issues at stake derives from their relative position within the plot that unfolds when we read the story.

V. Science (hard and soft)

Since it interweaves behavior and meaning in a tapestry of rule-regulated patterns, it has been suggested that social intercourse can be understood as a text analogue. In turn, the interpretation of meaning in social intercourse can be considered a form of text exegesis, actions that both produce and convey meaning within a social context. 

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30 "Narratives are stories, a telling that something happened. A narrative explanation, presumably, presents an account of the linkages among events as a process leading to the outcome one seeks to explain".
Paul A. Roth 1993, p.701.

"Continuity is embodied in the mythic path of narrative, which 'explains' by its very sequential course, even when it merely reports".

31 Referring specifically to historical narratives, Hayden White defines this concept in the following terms: "By emplotment I mean simply the encodation of facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures".
Hayden White 1965, p. 397.

A narrative "is an inescapable means of contextualizing the discontinuous fragments (...) into a fully bound, framed representation".

32 "No historical event is intrinsically tragic; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view or from within the context of a structured set of events of which it is an element enjoying a privileged place(...) The same set of events can serve as components of a story that is tragic or comic, as the case may be, depending on the historian's choice of the plot structure that he considers most appropriate for ordering events of that kind so as to make them into a comprehensive story".

33 "In an essay on the 'mythical' nature of historiography, Lévi-Strauss remarks on the astonishment that a visitor from another planet would feel if confronted by the thousands of histories written about the French Revolution. For in those works, "the authors do not always use the same incidents; when they do, the incidents are revealed in different lights. And yet these are variations which have to do with the same country, the same period, and the same events -events whose reality is scattered across every level of a multilayered structure".
Lévi-Strauss; Overture to Le Cru et le Cuit. Quoted in White 1992, p.401.

34 Ricoeur 1990.
framework can be understood as the functional equivalents of linguistic signs within a semiological system. These actions, then, can be treated according to the rules which linguistics applies to the system of signs underlying language: “it is always possible to abstract systems from processes and to relate these systems...to units which are merely defined by their opposition to other units of the same system”.35

Perhaps Claude Lévi-Strauss’ works within the field of structural anthropology are the best example of social inquiry developed along these lines. His aim was to reveal the symbolic systems of binary oppositions which constitute the common matrix of certain social practices in different cultures. Lévi-Strauss, like the tradition of linguistic structuralism he draws upon, assumes that the contingency of the oppositions through which the units of a system are defined can be limited by the closure of the system. This is why certain oppositions appear to have a foundational status,36 and this is also the basis for the claim that there are universal structures underlying certain social practices across time and space.37

However, both of these claims can be questioned on the same grounds. Take the example of the exchange of women through the institution of marriage as a practice that both constitutes and reproduces the system of kinship. On the one hand, women become the means by which the differences between clans are established and reproduced. On the other hand, the exchange of women is also the means by which the common identity of those clans as patriarchal units of kinship is asserted and perpetuated.

This identity in difference rests on another opposition not accounted for (in fact, not even mentioned) by Lévi-Strauss: “the ‘difference’ established between men and the women who effect the differentiation between men eludes the dialectic altogether”.38 Thus, the system closure that allows Lévi-Strauss to endow certain

To say that social intercourse can be understood in ways that resemble the interpretation of a text seems to defy our common sense. However, by the same token, to say that social sciences are positive disciplines implies that there are no fundamental differences between the way in which a sociologist understands human behavior and the way in which an entomologist understands the behavior of insects. The reason why one metaphor appears to be suspicious while the other sounds intuitively plausible is that, while literary criticism is supposed to deal primarily with fictional narrative, the modern age has granted natural sciences a privileged claim over the production of true knowledge. In Durkheim’s terms, science “is the highest grade of knowledge and there is nothing beyond it”.

Quoted by Levine 1985, p.6.
Ricoeur 1990, p.95.
For example, the opposition between raw and cooked concerning eating habits derives its symbolic power by analogy with the opposition between nature and culture.
Claude Lévi-Strauss 1969 A.
Like the one defining the rules of exchange that are supposed to produce and reproduce systems of kinship wherever they happen to emerge.
Claude Lévi-Strauss 1969 B.
oppositions with a foundational status and to assert the universal nature of certain cultural structures is achieved by presupposing a particular answer to an underlying question that is, nonetheless, neither raised nor addressed: "what kind of differentiating mechanism distributes gender functions in this way?". This, in turn, is the general thrust of the poststructuralist critique of structuralism: the potentially endless displacement of meaning and reference produced by the interplay of signs in a linguistic system is usually brought to a halt by the accepting of certain premises which, quite often, are not even explicitly stated.

In contrast, poststructuralism takes the challenge posed by the structuralist understanding of a linguistic system to its logical conclusion: "signifiers refer only to other signifiers, hence the notion of intertextuality, i.e., a complex and infinitely expanding web of possible meanings". Furthermore, the proliferation of possible meanings is not constrained by any agreed upon criteria to establish their relative plausibility.

However, our choices are not restricted to either an attempt to ground our understanding on a set of signified facts, or an endless interplay of signifiers without any stable point of reference. The text analogy is not exhausted by the comparison between linguistic and social systems. A linguistic system exists neither in space nor time, because it only refers to the abstract set of rules that constitute a language. Its basic unit of meaning is the sign. Discourse, on the other hand, refers to linguistic usage, its basic unit of meaning is the sentence, and it can only be interpreted with reference to its specific context of utterance:

Whereas the signs in language only refer to other signs within the same system, and whereas language therefore lacks a world just as it lacks temporality and subjectivity, discourse is always about something. It refers to a world which it claims to describe, to express, or to represent.

Discourse as a text form is composed of sentences, and any given sentence, just like any human action, can mean different things under different circumstances. To say that a sentence must have a context of utterance implies that those

39 Ibid.
40 Derrida 1964.
42 (44) This presumed impossibility to choose between different orders of meaning is referred to as the notion of "undecidability".
44 Like the "brute facts" of empiricism.
45 Ricoeur 1990, p. 75.

Furthermore, "Whereas language is only the condition for communication for which it provides the codes, it is in discourse that all messages are exchanged. In this sense, discourse alone has not only a world, but an other, another person, an interlocutor to whom it is addressed".

Ibid.
circumstances are presupposed by the enunciation of the sentence. However, as seen while talking about narrative forms, the meanings created through discourse are more than the sum of the meanings of the sentences that compose it. Just as a sentence comprises linguistic signs placed together in a syntactic structure in order to predicate something about a subject, a discourse emplots sentences within a certain narrative structure through relationships of presupposition, entailment, or contextual implicature:

Like a cube, or a volume in space, the text presents a "relief". Its different topics are not at the same altitude. Therefore the reconstruction of the whole has a perspectivist aspect similar to that of perception.46

Even if perception only entailed a mental representation of an object arrived at merely through sense data, if the object is not at a proper distance from our eyes and in appropriate light, we will not see what we strive to see.47 In other words, in order to see something, we need a point of focus, and quite often there are several available. Hence, we always perceive things (even from the standpoint of an empiricist understanding of perception), from a particular perspective. The "textured" nature of a text allows for more than one plausible interpretation of its meaning, just as its relief allows a volume in space to be perceived from different angles. Nonetheless, it could be argued that even though a volume in space can be perceived only from one perspective at a time, nothing prevents observers from adopting different perspectives over time. Eventually, those different perspectives will be compared, and an agreement will be reached concerning their relative accuracy and comprehensiveness.

Comparisons between perspectives are, indeed, possible.48 However, understanding social behavior is more complicated than the analogy of a volume in space might suggest. For one thing, the subject matter is a moving target: it changes through time and space, so no perspective could conclusively grasp it once and for all. On the other hand, attempts to step outside society in order to achieve an untainted understanding of it usually leave incriminating fingerprints all over the

41 Take the example of Hernadi’s hunter in footnote twenty eight. If he said “A storm is coming”, that would imply that he has seen a cloud formation of a certain kind moving his way, and taken it to represent a non-verbal sign indicating the future occurrence of a certain event (in this case, a storm).
46 Ibid., p. 90.
47 "(...) a text has to be constructed because it is not a mere sequence of sentences, all on an equal footing as separately understandable. A text is a whole (...) a hierarchy of topics". Paul Ricoeur; Op. Cit.; p.89.
49 “classical historical accounts always represent attempts both to emplot the historical series adequately and implicitly to come to terms with other plausible emplotments”. White 1992, p.401.
place: we can neither detach ourselves from our condition as social beings nor achieve an understanding of society that is aseptic in its consequences.

Another complication is that, as has been already said, seeing is not perceiving. Even in the natural sciences, observations are not reported as uncontroversial empirical findings, but they are phrased, rather, in theoretical language derived from theoretical constructs:

only someone trained in the theoretical and practical assumptions of the work can "read" what they see in microscopes as bacteria and the like, or see flashes on screens as evidence of sub-atomic particles.\footnote{O'Hear 1985, p.130.}

Furthermore,

the observational consequences of a doctrine are determined holistically: they depend on how it is spelled out - that is, on which auxiliary hypotheses are taken to be operative together with it. (...) Scientific methods for employing theories in making observations are thus theory dependent: the result of their application depends on the theoretical structure of the theories in question.\footnote{Richard Boyd 1993, p.7.}

In turn, those theories that organize the forms of Gestalten under which the data under scrutiny ought to be perceived, are what Thomas Kuhn calls "paradigms". In his view, when the prevailing paradigm within a given discipline is replaced by a new one, a gestalt-switch takes place: a new paradigm entails a brand new perspective that provides new theoretical concepts or, at least, new definitions for old theoretical concepts. Therefore, the same theoretical entities, even when they are described through the same theoretical concepts, mean something different under different paradigms:

the scientist who embraces a new paradigm is like the man wearing inverting lenses. Confronting the same constellation of objects as before and knowing that he does so, he nevertheless finds them transformed through and through in many of its details.\footnote{Thomas Kuhn 1970, p. 121.}

If this is the case, observation can not provide a neutral court to settle the differences between competing paradigms, since they may not even agree on how to describe their observations and the consequences that derive from them: "the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds (...), the
two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in
the same direction".52

VI. Some implications of an interpretive perspective

Even though there is not a universal set of rules used to adjudicate disputes between
competing paradigms, comparisons between them are still possible. Their relative
problem-solving ability is crucial to understanding a paradigm shift: in order to
dethrone the prevailing paradigm, the new one must be able to address and solve
questions raised within the framework of the prevailing paradigm which the latter
was unable to solve in its own terms. Thus, they can be judged “relative to their
fruitfulness in guiding research and their resources for solving problems".53
Furthermore, there are some basic questions that one could ask while comparing
paradigms, such as, “which needs less protection against counter-evidence, which is
more general, which is more integrated with other acceptable theories, which is
simpler, and so on".54

Properly speaking, though, there are no paradigms in social sciences (in the
sense that there are no agreed upon theoretical constructs to account for the subject
matter of sharply distinctive disciplines), and whether something resembling them
could eventually emerge remains a point of controversy. However, from the
standpoint of an interpretive approach, the proliferation of perspectives within social
disciplines is not necessarily something to worry about. In fact, the contrast between
different perspectives could add to the relative fullness of our accounts of social
behavior. In any event, this is an approach that “acknowledges the improbability of
cataloging, calculating, and specifying the ‘real causes’, and concerns itself instead
with considering the manifest political consequences of adopting one mode of
representation over another”55.

52 Ibid.; p.149.
53 Paradigm determine large areas of experience at the same time. It is, however, only after
experience has been thus determined that the search for an operational definition or a pure
observation-language can begin. The scientist or philosopher who asks what measurements or retinal
imprints make the pendulum what it is must already be able to recognize a pendulum when he sees
one. If he saw constrained fall instead, his question could not even be asked. And if he saw a
pendulum, but saw it in the same way he saw a tuning fork or an oscillating balance, his question
could not be answered".
Ibid.; p.129.
54 O’Hear 1985, p. 130.
55 Campbell 1992, p. 4.
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