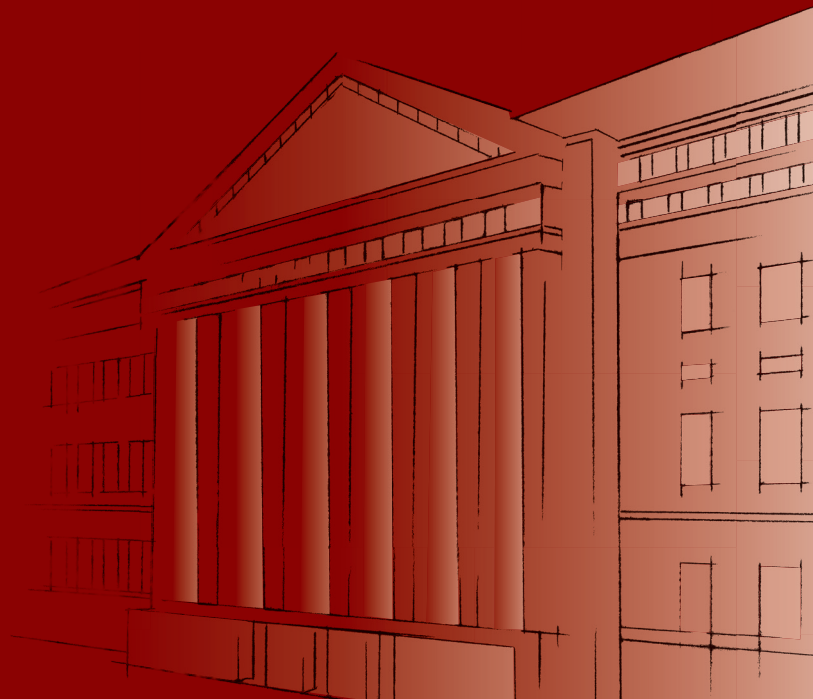


MICHELE CERUTTI

On Truth from a Semiotic Point of View



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UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

Press

1632

Department of Semiotics, Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu, Estonia

The council of the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics of the University of Tartu has, on January 21, 2026, accepted this dissertation for the defense for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (in Semiotics and Culture Studies).

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The thesis will be defended before the joint committee at the University of Torino, Italy, on March 27, 2026, at 14.15

This study has been supported by the Estonian Doctoral School; it was funded by the University of Turin, and co-funded by the European Union (Project “Cooperation between universities to promote doctoral studies” (2021–2027.4.04.24-0003)) and the Estonian Research Council project PRG1716 “Relational Approach of Strategic History Narratives”.



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ISSN 1406-6033 (print)

ISBN 978-9908-57-147-8 (print)

ISSN 2806-2582 (pdf)

ISBN 978-9908-57-148-5 (pdf)

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University of Tartu Press

www.tyk.ee

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the three years of doctoral study, I have been fortunate enough to work alongside researchers of the highest intellectual and academic caliber, both at the University of Turin and the University of Tartu. I would like to thank the semiotic community I met in those institutions, with which I had the opportunity to engage in sometimes heated but always fruitful discussions. The problem of truth divides our community between those who believe that we should laugh at the truth and those who believe that we should tell the truth to power, but both sides, and all the people I mention, share the same critical spirit, which they have not failed to exercise also in relation to my research, and for which I am very grateful: Silvia Barbotto, Massimo Roberto Beato, Federico Bellentani, Eleonora Chiaias, Alexander Stewart Davies, Baal Delupi, Angelo Di Caterino, Remo Gramigna, Kalevi Kull, Mari-Liis Madisson, Timo Maran, Maarja Ojamaa, Giovanni Pennisi, Francesco Piluso, Jenny Ponzio, Ott Puumeister, Silver Rattasepp, Tiit Remm, Camilla Robuschi, Antonio Santangelo, Bruno Surace, Simona Stano, Peeter Torop, and Cristina Voto.

The same goes for my colleagues with whom I have shared this journey: Karina Abdala, Eleni Alexandri, Daria Arhipova, Giustina Baron, Josh Bacigaluppi, Asia Bertoli, Luca Brunet, Valentina Corosaniti, Andrew Creighton, Claudia D'Amelio, Alessandro Flecchia, Simone Garofalo, Aurora Giribuola, Iliana Ingrao, Alec Kozicki, Pietro Lana, Bruna Lorenzin, Desy Macis, Maede Mirsonbol, Oscar Miyamoto, Niccolò Monti, Andrea Peressini, Tuuli Pern, Eléa Pertusati, Heidi C. Piva, Alessandra Richetto, Elio Sacchi, Susanna Silicati, Hongjin Song, Elisabetta Vaccarone, and Nicola Zengiaro.

I also want to thank Simona Stano, Antonio Santangelo, Gabriele Marino and Massimo Leone for their work, and particularly for organizing a series of seminars at the University of Turin (some of which I was also invited to participate in with a contribution) on the semiotic method, the sense of reality, and the concepts of precision and accuracy, which greatly influenced my reflection on truth. Mari-Liis Madisson has been a strict and enlightening discussant for this research, and I am also still indebted to Claudio Paolucci and Frederik Stjernfelt, my MA thesis supervisors, for the ideas I develop here.

I would like to express my gratitude to Massimo Leone for two more reasons: for believing in my project, and for his accurate and sincere supervision. If I am right, as I say in chapter 1., that the position I defend on truth is not majoritarian in semiotics, his agreement to supervise this research demonstrates how well he represents the value of semiotic openness that I discuss in this thesis. The same applies to Andreas Ventsel, who accepted and supported my project of co-tutelle with the University of Tartu. I don't know to what extent the ideas I present in this work are also theirs, but I have certainly received a great deal of valuable advice from both of them. Consequently, while I alone am responsible for the theses defended here (and for any errors), they too are responsible for their dissemination.

Finally, a special thank you goes to Marco Viola, Gabriele Marino, and Gianmarco Giuliana, for having helped me in a difficult time. And to Chiara (mia) De Robertis, for following, supporting, and enduring the whole process that has brought us here.

To my parents, who have always allowed me to seek the truth in freedom

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INTRODUCTION – WHY TRUTH?

Since I began this research on the concepts of truth and truthfulness, a series of events have taken place around the world that have increasingly placed truth at the center of academic debate: the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the biggest election year in history, 2024, and therefore with more election campaigns and propaganda¹, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Israel's attacks in Gaza, Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter (now X) and the end of fact-checking as a tool for monitoring and managing falsehoods online², the founding of the social media platform Truth and the re-election of Donald Trump as president of the United States which, as the first time (cf. Maddalena and Gili, 2020), marked the beginning of a new phase in the studies on the relationship between truth and political communication.

This short list alone gives the sense of what philosopher Gila Sher (forthcoming) has called “the post-truth crisis”, the historical juncture we have reached in which we are witnessing the “fall of truth”. On the one hand, this fall is explicitly theorized by many thinkers as a positive development (think, for example, of Richard Rorty, 1998, who suggested abandoning truth as the duty of a new Enlightenment, or the more recent Fuller, 2018); but, on the other hand, it is also the result of a series of practices which, far from being new, are now accentuated above all by the technological development of so-called ITCs and social media. As Sher puts it, the fall of truth «can be traced to Nietzsche and the post-modernists [...] It is made real by plagiarists, data-falsifiers, counterfeiters, demagogues, and trolls. It is manifested in tweets, speeches, and interviews by current heads of states and political organizations. It was fictionalized in Orwell's *1984*, and it is the subject of many newspaper articles and popular books» (Sher, forthcoming, 3).

Faced with the current crisis of truth (which, on closer inspection, concerns first and foremost the very notion of truth before a set of propositions considered true by a group or culture), we are divided between those who believe that truth is always deception, and that we would be better off without it, and those who instead promote truth as a tool to fight power (according to the opposition, which I will discuss in 1.4., between the two mottos “speak the truth” and “laugh at the truth”). In both cases, as Anna Maria Lorusso said, «the fractalization of truths, the emptying of the role of spokesperson for truths, the flattening of the public arena onto immediacy» (Lorusso, 2017, 136, my translation; see also Lorusso, 2025) should be of great concern for semioticians. Indeed, a common thread running throughout the text will be to highlight the novelty, at least from the point of view of semiotic theory, of the problems that this era imposes on us. Or at least that it imposes a new perspective on old semiotic problems. These include the

¹ <https://www.economist.com/interactive/the-world-ahead/2023/11/13/2024-is-the-biggest-election-year-in-history>.

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly74mpy8klo>; on the relation between falsehoods and freedom of speech online see Stjernfelt and Lauritzen (2020).

problem of trust, of the distinction between semiotic vices and virtues (cf. Danesi, 2024), testimony, the relationship between truth and verisimilitude, the quality of the public debate, disinformation/misinformation, and even democracy since, as Dewey said, «the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion» (1927/2016, 224) is *the* problem of the public, of democracy as the space of reasons.

Recent research in semioethics (Petrilli and Mancino, 2025) and Danesi's proposals for a semiotics with a conscience (2023; 2024; 2025) are moving towards an ethical stance on communication in the public sphere. In philosophy, this change of perspective has played a major role in the field of social and virtue epistemology, with the transition from questions about what truth and knowledge are to the distinction between epistemic vices and virtues and their importance for issues such as epistemic injustice, epistemic resistance, gender epistemology. Taking for granted that, whatever truth may be, having true beliefs is better than having false beliefs, and that conveying false beliefs to others is not only an epistemic vice, but also an injustice towards our interlocutors (and therefore that having true beliefs is not only good for the individual but also from the point of view of the community, cf. Fricker, 2007; Kidd et al., 2017)³.

Recently, Michael Lynch (2021; 2025) has also argued for the importance of truth in democracy (in a series of texts that have influenced several of the following pages), and that one of the main tasks of philosophy should be the promotion of «reliable social-epistemic practices» (Lynch, 2021, 21), i.e. practices that aim not to distribute (since this would be impossible and, as I will explain in 3., contrary to the values of truth), but to facilitate the production of true beliefs and the valorization of truth.

When I started reflecting on all these things, I immediately thought semiotics could significantly contribute to solving these problems and to the promotion of epistemic practices as defined. If it is true, as Peirce (1868, 111) said, that we have but signs to know the world and communicate with others, then the only way to recognize such things as epistemic vices and virtues is through the recognition of semiotic vices and virtues. However, this research does not deal with semiotic vices and virtues in a systematic way, but only in the last chapter, in the form of a first contribution to this line of research, which certainly does not put an end to the matter nor claims to be complete. This is because, having won a doctoral scholarship on the theme of falsification and verisimilitude in semiotic theories, I soon realized that all the problems I mentioned (as well as the concepts of post-truth, fake news, falsification, veridiction, etc. already widely studied in semiotic literature) all revolve around the more general issue of truth which, unlike the former, has always been under-addressed in semiotic theories. I concluded that in order to talk about semiotic justice, semiotic vices and virtues, and positive practices for the health of the public from a semiotic point of view,

³ Examples of epistemic virtues are open-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual courage, diligence in inquiry, epistemic humility (cf. Zagzebski, 2019); examples of vices are dogmatism, need for immediate certainty, gullibility (cf. Kidd et al, 2021).

we must first come to terms with the notion of truth itself. This is the conclusion Eco himself reached:

To be able to say whether and how people accept something as true, and to make them believe it is true, we must also assume that there is a naive concept of truth, the same one that authorizes us to say that the sentence *It's raining today* is empirically true – within the context in which it is uttered. I do not think that this criterion exists within the structuralist paradigm» (Eco, 1999, 258).

I would add that such a criterion does not exist in semiotic theories in general, nor the analysis of what it means to “tell the truth”. For this reason, although I started from more concrete concerns, in this essay I mainly deal with truth from a semiotic point of view – all in all, my thesis will be that truth is an important object of study for semiotics.

In 2. I will offer my interpretation of why, from a theoretical point of view, semiotics has excluded truth from its research interests (in short, as a theoretical positioning with respect to alternative semantic theories, on the one hand, and as a consequence of the theory of immanence, on the other). But I think that a socio-semiotic explanation can also be offered. Modern semiotics emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, at a time when the media landscape was different from the present. As Paolucci (2023, 103) put it, it was a time when «the media system was reliant upon the formula “one-to-many”: information originated from a source possessing cultural power and then flowed towards the so-called (at that time) “mass”». Given this context, and to use the terminology I propose in this work, semiotics has always been concerned, for ethical-critical reasons, with truth as the propositions presented as true by a discourse or within a semiotic system (an ethical position which, on closer inspection, already implied an alternative notion of truth, see presently)⁴.

An exemplary place to appreciate this aspect is around the notion of semiological guerrilla warfare, launched by Eco in one of his *Bustine* (Eco, 1973). At the time, Eco’s critical proposal was that, if it is not possible to control the production of information, since control of the media was in the hands of few, what we could control was the interpretation of the messages coming from above⁵. Yet,

⁴ As Leone (2024b, 4; 8) says, Barthes and Eco’s theories, who viewed semiotics as a tool for critiquing ideology, were also ethical-critic takes on the role of semiotics in society.

⁵ This is the passage where Eco introduces the notion of guerrilla warfare, translated by Paolucci (2023, 103–104), from Eco (1973, 296–297): «Usually politicians, educators, communication theorists, believe that in order to control the power of the media, it is necessary to control two moments of the communication chain: the Source and the Channel. In this way they believe they control the message; and instead, they control the message as an empty form that at the Destination everyone will fill with the meanings suggested to him by his own anthropological situation, by his own model of culture....For this...it will be necessary...to apply a guerrilla warfare solution. We must occupy, in every place in the world, the first chair in front of every television set....If you want a less paradoxical formulation, I will say: the battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Age of Communication is not won where communication starts, but where it arrives....: just as communication systems envisage

after fifty years the semiological guerrilla warfare seems to be still waged by the powerful against other powers or institutions, if not directly against the people. This, at least, is Paolucci's thesis (2023), which I espouse:

We now live in a world where a deviant version of the semiological guerrilla has won and has become, paradoxically, the default mechanism of many contemporary forms of communication, presenting aberrant decoding, misleading interpretations, and contents aimed at deconstructing knowledge, since everyone now knows that knowledge is always connected to some form of power. (Paolucci, 2023, 104)

It should be noted that this is not an exclusively semiotic issue, but concerns the very understanding of the role of truth in the public sphere. Consider, for example, the parable of Italian novelists Wu Ming who, in a book that provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the QAnon phenomenon (Wu Ming 1, 2020), had to witness the transition of the practices they themselves used to produce alternative interpretations against mainstream media (such as provocations, falsifications, deliberately paranoid and imaginary counter-narratives) from weapons for semiological guerrilla warfare, in Eco's sense, to weapons for the manipulation of the people by one political group against another⁶. With the help of the evolution of so-called ICTs, the semiological guerrilla warfare has thus gone from being a means of emancipation to a tool for polluting the public sphere in an electoral context, a movement which, as Paolucci (2023) says, poses new challenges for semiotics in terms of the relationship between truth and power.

Not only that, but as Leone (2023a) pointed out, another consequence of the digital technological evolution is that today it is not only difficult to recognize or trust the truth (as Eco, 1990a, argued), now it is just as difficult to recognize the false.

In the digital world, human culture enters the domain of the "absolute fake". This is due, firstly, to the material characteristics of this technology: everything that can be the object of digital representations, can also be the object of it without any ontological reference [...] Secondly, the domain of the absolute fake is caused by the power of quantitative accumulation: an image of a rejuvenated face can circulate in social networks in such an intense and viral way that it will end up representing its identity in the web. Thirdly, the domain of the absolute fake is determined by its new modalities of creation: previously, the stake of the fake was played between forgers and connoisseurs (for example, in the field of art); now, this game is played more and more by algorithms with largely unpredictable results (Leone, 2023a, 392–393)

a single industrialised Source and a single message that will reach an audience dispersed throughout the world, we will have to be able to imagine complementary communication systems that allow us to reach every single human group...to discuss the incoming message in the light of the arrival codes, comparing them with the departure codes».

⁶ Suggesting even that the Q in QAnon derives from a provocative and ironic reference to their character *Q* (Luther Blissett, 1999), who was then interpreted as a real by QAnon conspiracy theorists.

Given the situation as described by Leone and Paolucci, the main thesis that I defend throughout the text is that if this is the case, then the only alternative we have left to fight disinformation, fake news, and the other problems that characterize the post-truth crisis is to not limit ourselves to trying to recognize the false, which will become increasingly difficult, but to promote truth as a value of communication.

At present, multiplying interpretations from an emancipatory perspective is no longer enough. We must also distinguish between different ways of doing so. It is not a matter of putting limits on interpretation, nor of distinguishing between true and false discourses, but of *remembering* that limits of interpretation exist while producing or interpreting a text. And that we should take care of interpretation before interpretations, just as we should value truth before truths, in the plural (based on the distinction I propose in chapter 1. between truth as a property of signs and truths as the propositions that have that property, or that we believe have it). In other words, semiotics can and should deal not only with veridiction, that is the ways to make someone believe something is true in discourse, but also with the possibility of telling the truth with signs, in a rather general sense, as we shall see. What is needed, or at least so I will argue, is a semiotic theory of truthfulness.

However, again, in order to do this, semiotics must first have a minimal (or naive, as Eco called it) notion of truth. Eco's definition of semiotics as the discipline that studies everything that can be used to lie is well known: «semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used “to tell” at all» (Eco, 1976, 7). This definition itself suggested that signs can also be used to tell the truth. However, given the current philosophical premises on the relationship between semiotic systems and reality, we don't have a theory of how signs could, at least sometimes, tell the truth, and of what that means. After his “theory of lying”, Eco often repeated that he should have replaced it with a theory of the erroneous inference, since it is not necessary to intend to deceive someone in order to define the gap between a sign and its object; it is sufficient to postulate the ever-present possibility of being wrong, regardless of intentions. Still, this implies that signs can also be correct. Not only that, but the possibility of error further implies that, as far as truthfulness is concerned, making someone believe something is not always necessarily an act of deceptive manipulation.

Research question, methodology, and structure of the argument

The research question that inspired the following pages is the following: is it possible to address the problem of truth from a semiotic point of view? For this reason, in what follows I will first and foremost deal with truth, both in breadth, through the semiotic-semantic analysis of the lexeme, and depth, through a theoretical reconsideration of the role of truth and truthfulness in semiotic theories. As for the first investigation, I will be mainly inspired by Eve Sweetser's (1987) work on the definition of "lie", with the aim to offer, simply, a definition of "truth". As for the second, while I will consider and discuss various contributions that recent and less recent semiotics has produced on truth, my investigation will be mainly in dialogue with the semiotic work of Umberto Eco, whose reflections on truth, although not systematic, are, in my opinion, the most advanced on the subject from the point of view of general semiotics. However, those familiar with Eco's work may be surprised not to find many references to *Kant and the Platypus* (Eco, 1999), despite the fact that it is the text where Eco gave the most explicit and persuasive arguments in defense of realism. I have chosen to focus primarily on another of Eco's texts, the *Antiporphyry* (1984b; 2012), because I believe that Eco's re-examination of truth was motivated precisely by the results achieved in that text, as I will show. Results that, in my opinion, compel all semioticians to re-discuss truth, not only those inspired by Eco's *Kant and the Platypus*. Therefore, while my theoretical starting point will be Eco's conclusions in the *Antiporphyry*, the rest of my argument will be independent, and its purpose will not to discuss the limits of interpretation in perception or interpretation of a text, but rather to define truthfulness as a style of discourse. For this reason, as far as the philosophical literature on truth is concerned, I will not refer so much to the so-called theories of truth. On the contrary, already in section 1. I will devote several lines to distinguishing the philosophical problem of truth from the semiotic problem of 'truth', i.e. the problem of the meaning and use of the sign of truth. Rather, I will consider, on the one hand, recent literature that considers truth, regardless of what it is (or admitting that it is many things, as in the case of Lynch), to be important for democracy (Misak, 2000; Kitcher, 2001; Lynch, 2025). On the other, I will consider the philosophical literature on the concept of truthfulness, in particular Williams (2002), because, as I will mention several times in the text, given the distinction between signs and objects that I make in 2.3., and the definition of truth as that which is independent of something else (from our beliefs or signs, in the case of "truth" attributed to beliefs or signs), truth in semiotics is not relevant in order to distinguish between true and false texts – semiotics, as the discipline that studies signs, looks precisely at signs, while to know what is true and what is not one must look at the world. Truth is relevant because, if we admit that it is something of value not only for democracy but also for each of us individually, then we can semiotically distinguish between truthful and untruthful texts, respectively, i.e. texts that try to tell

the truth, and show to value truth as what is independent from signs, and texts that do not.

For the reasons mentioned so far, this research is of interest to semiotics because it is propaedeutic to the study of the related problems I mentioned in the first part of this introduction. In my mind, this inquiry is further necessary for a semiotics with a conscience (to use Danesi's terminology) that wished to positively contribute to the wealth of the public sphere by promoting semiotic means for truthful interpretations and productions of texts.

In chapter 1, I propose an analysis of the lexeme "truth" from a semiotic-semantic point of view. I will first distinguish between semantic analyses of "truth" and theories of truth (distinguishing the sign from the object), in order to make explicit the tools and interests of a semiotic approach to "truth".

Having made this distinction, I will then propose an analysis of the meaning of "truth" using, as a starting strategy, a distinction that I would define as Peircean between objects, signs, and speakers, in order to verify how the meaning of "truth" changes in relation to what is predicated as "true". I will show that a) "truth" means "independent from", even if the type of independence and from what varies in the three cases; and that b) along with this first meaning of "truth", there is also a second, almost opposite meaning, whereby we call "truth" not the property of being true of something, but the things that have that property. In this second sense, "truth" comes to mean almost the opposite of truth in the strict sense, that is, it means "certainty", or the things one is certain of in a system of content, an ideology, or within a discourse.

In 1.4. I will also test this distinction through the analysis of two mottos, "speak the truth" and "laugh at the truth". In light of this analysis, my conclusion will be that veridiction does not exhaust the critical tasks of semiotics with regard to truth, and that, beyond veridiction, semiotics can also study truthfulness (veridiction and truthfulness corresponding, respectively, to the two meanings of "truth" mentioned above, independence and certainty).

The fact that veridiction does not exhaust the meaning of "truth" and that when people say that something is true they do not always intend to make someone believe that something is true, but also that something else could be false, that it is good to be sincere, that one could be wrong, etc. (cases that imply a substantial, albeit naive, notion of truth), does not imply, however, that it is actually possible to tell the truth with signs. I deal with this problem in chapter 2. Although I believe that the metaphysical problem of what truth is is not a semiotic problem, but a philosophical one, I propose an argument within semiotics that shows why a substantive, not discursive notion of truth is necessary for semiotics, based on the contradictory and problematic nature of the opposite position. This is, in particular, Eco's argumentative style in his *Antiporphyry* (1983b; 1984a; 1984b; 2012) which, proceeding by exclusion, demonstrates the impossibility of so-called dictionary semantics (that conceive of the structure of knowledge in the form of a Porphyrian tree and the meaning of signs as independent of reality). Eco's article is rightly considered one of the fundamental contributions to the debate between dictionaries and encyclopedias as tools for semantics. However, one

point that is often overlooked is how, for Eco, the encyclopedic structure of semiotic systems implied that signs are not only not-independent of reality, but are part of the same reality they represent (signs are external signs).

I will therefore begin by introducing what I consider to be the standard position of modern semiotics on truth, namely the idea that truth should not be a concern of semiotics. Starting from a reconstruction of the *Antiporphyry*'s argument and a comparison of Eco's weak semiotics with the epistemological theories of Quine and Peirce, I will argue that a) semiotics' problems, although concerning interpretations of interpretations (interpretations of texts), are nevertheless external problems whose truth is external and independent of what is considered to be true in a semiotic system; b) since signs are made of the same substance as the rest of reality, semiotics should conceive of the opposition between nature and culture as a simple distinction and not as a metaphysical dualism; and that, therefore, c) we must distinguish between two notions of truth: truth as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis, and truths as the *termini ad quem* of texts (borrowing the terminology from Eco, 1999).

Together, chapters 1 and 2 provide sufficient reasons to justify the importance of studying truth from a semiotic point of view. In the third chapter, then, I propose some first steps in this line of research. In particular, I will offer a definition of truthfulness as a pragmatic style of discourse, starting from Grice's conversational maxims, Williams's (2002) analysis of the concept, and a comparison with Leech's (1983; 2014) theory of politeness. Then, I will offer some semiotic resources for the distinction between what I will call the open and the closed, that is between discursive forms that show the traits of truthfulness (and hence respect the value of truth) and forms that don't respect them, respectively.

The first resource comes from the semiotic literature on ideology. I will first distinguish between two meanings of "ideology", as "a system of ideas" and as "false consciousness", respectively, in order to suggest that while both the open and the closed styles are semiotic ideologies in the first sense, only the closed style is ideological also in the second sense. Second, I will introduce the political semiotics of Selg and Ventsel (2020; 2022), and argue that i) the distinction between open and closed is a relevant distinction for political semiotics, and therefore for the analysis of natural texts (or Gamma narratives, to use Ferraro's, 2019, terminology) that aim to say something true about the world; ii) that open and closed are political semiotic forms, and therefore that political discourses can be distinguished as open or closed not on the basis of what is said, but on how it is said. Finally, I will propose some examples of the application of these categories, in particular, I will analyze a conspiracy theory in 3.4.1., and I will offer a first typology of ways of denying the world, i.e., of the closed discourse, in 3.4.2.

I should specify that these are only my proposals to define something. That aside, I can already imagine the objection: what I call truthfulness and the open style may themselves conceal more subtle forms of ideological discourse. Moreover, any discourse that claims to tell the truth actually conceals the fact that alternative views are always possible, and that even if no counterexamples or

counterarguments have been found so far, one can never be sure that they will not emerge in the future. As for the second point, it is also mine: as I will say in 3., it is in fact against the notion of truthfulness, once it has been analyzed, to say that something is true (in particular, this is what I will call the self-attribution contradiction). A truthful text is very rarely a text that says that something “is true”. As for the first point, I don’t claim to be able to say with certainty what is truthful and what is not, even with the resources I propose in the third chapter, although I will give some examples of the application of those categories. As I will explain in 3.1.7., the recognition of truthfulness is always fallible since, unlike other pragmatic styles of language, there are not conventionalized signs sufficient for the production of a truthful utterance. But here too, the only argument in favor of this research is the contradictory and problematic nature of the opposite position. If it were not possible to distinguish between truthfulness and untruthfulness, if every discourse were in any case ideological in the sense of false consciousness, and if those who create different signs or believe in different things lived in different worlds, then there would be nothing wrong with fake news or conspiracy theories, the false would only be false for some (but true for others), and one could not be sincere in a substantial sense, just as “true” conflict or solidarity wouldn’t be possible (since what is solidarity for me may not be so for others who may believe, for example, that silencing someone is an act of solidarity).

During my three years of doctoral studies, Antonio Santangelo often recommended reading Philip K. Dick’s *The Penultimate Truth* (1964), a novel that shows why we should always be wary of those who say that something is true, because “truth” is, in fact, always at best the “penultimate truth”, if not already a proven falsehood. I couldn’t agree more, and in this text I will never say otherwise, nor will I ever claim that something is true other than the theoretical and analytical proposals I put forward here. Semiotics must continue to study veridiction, which is still of the utmost importance. But the following pages are devoted to another great science fiction novel, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). In particular, they were written with the scene in mind where O’Brien tortures Winston: in that case, O’Brien is not so much interested in Winston believing that two plus two equals five is true, but in Winston abandoning his idea that truth can be independent and different from what the Big Brother’s party says is true. The reason why truth (or rather, the truths we think we know) is always penultimate is not because truth does not exist, otherwise the difference between what Winston believes and what the party wants him to believe would make no difference, but precisely because truth is independent of us, not to be confused with what someone believes or says to be true. Dick and Orwell’s novels represent two sides of the same coin, and it’s now time for semiotics to deal with the Orwellian one.

1. THE DEFINITION OF “TRUTH”

1.1. Introduction

In modern semiotics, the standard approach to truth has been a deflationary one. In their *Dictionnaire* (1979), Greimas e Courtès for example define truth as the union of *being* and *seeming*, but given the immanent and autonomous nature of languages with respect to reality, what is true is always relative to a system of content⁷. According to one reading, the pragmatist theory too wants truth to be relative to a community of interpreters, and we can consider the first Eco an example of this attitude⁸. So, it seems that truth, or rather its exclusion, could claim to be one of the few places where structuralism and pragmatism happily converge.

On the other hand, according to other interpretations for pragmatism truth is a substantial concept, defined as that on which interpreters agree (or, rather, that which is no longer doubted) at the end of inquiry, which is independent from what a community currently agrees on or what it may agree on at a given time *t* (see Misak, 2000; the second Eco is closer to this realistic interpretation of truth).

How can these two conceptions be reconciled? My answer is that they do not necessarily have to be reconciled: although truth is an interesting problem that influences semiotic theories, answering the question of what truth is is not in itself a semiotic problem, and, in principle, general semiotics and textual analysis can be carried out with both anti-realistic and realistic conceptions of truth as background theories.

Eco famously said that there is an unstable equilibrium to be accepted between the two main semiotic traditions, and that structuralism and pragmatism «*must* coexist, because if we choose one of them only, we cannot account for our way of knowing and expressing what we know» (Eco, 1999, 251). I think this is particularly true with regard to the semantic analysis of “truth”, for which it is necessary to maintain the unstable equilibrium between the two conceptions (the realist and the discursive), because this is exactly the situation in which speakers find themselves when they have to interpret “truth”. Hence, the alternative strategy is to distinguish the philosophical problem of truth from the semiotic problem of “truth”, with quotation marks (to be understood not in the postmodernist sense, as ironic distancing from the concept, but to indicate “truth” as a sign, as a word

⁷ This is Greimas and Courtès’ definition: «Truth designates the complex term which subsumes the terms *being* and *seeming* situated on the axis of contraries within the semiotic square of veridictory modalities. It might be helpful to point out that the “true” is situated within the discourse, for it is the fruit of the veridiction operations; this thus excludes any relation (or any homologation) with an external referent» (1982 [1979], 353)

⁸ Eco gave the famous definition of semiotics as the discipline that studies «everything which can be used in order to lie» (1976, 7). He also added that if something cannot be used to lie, it cannot be used to tell the truth either. But clearly Eco was, at the time, more interested in lies than truth⁸, a position soon to be changed in the second part of his career.

that we use every day)⁹, in order to address the issue of truth from a semiotic-semantic perspective, and offer an ordered representation of its various senses.

In what follows, I propose a semantic analysis of “truth”. First, I will introduce some preliminary reflections that aim to distinguish the specific tools and purposes of the semantic analysis of the word “truth” from those of the so-called theories of truth. I will then combine insights on truth from both the structuralist semiotic tradition, particularly in relation to the veridiction square as a representation of the meaning of “truth” (Graimas and Rastier, 1968), and from pragmatism.

I will also be inspired by Eve Sweetser’s (1987) definition of “lie”. Sweetser analysed “lie” as a fuzzy term, that is as a sign that, depending on context, can be used to mean many different things. In the philosophical literature lies are usually defined as deceptiveness + falsity; but while this is a good definition of what lies are, it’s not necessarily what we mean when we say that someone is lying – which is why Sweetser instead defines “lie” just as a false statement, indeed in a fuzzy and general way. Similarly, I will distinguish between different senses of “truth”. I will follow, as a starting point, a strategy that I would define as Peircean, showing how the meaning of “truth” changes depending on what is being predicated as “true”, if objects, signs, or speakers. I will argue that the diverse meanings of “truth” share a semantic core of *independence* (from falsification, belief, or deception, respectively).

A further semantic variation that I will consider concerns the meaning of “truth” when referring to something unknown or something known. In one case, we call “truth” that which is independent of man, of our manipulations and opinions; in the other, “truth” is instead that of which we are certain, that which is true within a framework of beliefs. Through this latter distinction, the apparently opposing views of Greimas and Peirce on truth are brought into unity in a weaker but heuristic sense, understanding them both as parts of a semantic representation of the meaning of “truth”, regardless of what truth is. From this perspective, that is, the two traditions have dealt with different senses of “truth”, or at least that will be my thesis. The two have opposing conceptions and approaches to the problem of truth because they deal with different things, not because they have different definitions of the same thing. In one case, pragmatism deals with truth as what is independent of signs. In the other, structuralist semiotics deals with truth as what is true for a discourse or system of signs.

To substantiate this opposition, I will also propose an analysis of two mottos which, although treating “truth” in opposite ways (which well represent the opposition between pragmatism and structuralism), convey the same value of criticism toward power: “speak the truth”, and “laugh at truth”, respectively. I will conclude with some considerations on the relationship between semiotics, truth, and power, which indicate the path to follow in the rest of the essay.

⁹ Furthermore, Eco (1984a; 1984b) offered a strong argument against the independence of language from reality (that I will consider in the next chapter), which implies, following Greimas and Courtès reasoning, that semiotics should be concerned with the problem of truth, a line of reasoning that I will delve into in the next chapter.

1.2. The distinction between semantic analysis of “truth” and theories of truth

1.2.1. Theories, semantic theories and semantic analysis

A preliminary issue concerns the distinction between theories of truth and semantic analyses of “truth”. It is one thing to seek an answer to the question “what is truth”, and quite another to say what we mean when we say that “x is true” or that “truth is y”. As simple as this distinction may seem, the philosophical literature on truth is littered with arguments that make the metaphysics of truth dependent on the meaning of “truth”, or vice versa, that reduce the problem of the meaning of “truth” to a metaphysical problem.

A case in point for illustrating the complexity of the distinction is the work of Shapin (1994), according to whom, if one studies the social history of truth, it’s clear that «the distinction between “truth” and “what locally counts as truth”» (4), dear to many philosophers, doesn’t hold true, and that in different times and places different groups of people have considered different things to be “true”. At first, Shapin seems to acknowledge that there is a distinction between truth and what is believed to be true by somebody, but then says that:

If one means to interpret variation in belief, then it seems prudent to ask how it is that truth speaks in different voices, how it is that what ‘they’ account to be true comes to be so accounted [...] If truth is not supposed to change over time – to have a history – neither it is supposed to have a sociology [...] In contrast, I want to argue the adequacy and legitimacy of a throughgoing social conception of truth. (5)

On the one hand, Shapin defines truth as singular (as opposed to the plurality of beliefs) and as never-changing; on the other hand, by truth Shapin explicitly also means the claims that are accepted as true by someone¹⁰, which justifies, with the distinction made by Shapin himself in the background, the desire to offer a social history of truth. The fact is that even if we concede (as I intend to concede in this chapter) that not only do different people believe different things to be true, but also that the words “truth” and “true” can be semiotically used by different speakers to mean many different things, and therefore that we can give not only a social history of “truth”, but also a semantic analysis of the form of its content, this does not imply that truth has been different things over time. Simply put, we need to distinguish between the problems of truth, of what locally counts as true, and of the meaning of “truth”, respectively, even though, as we shall see, the tendency to confuse the levels is partly motivated by the semiotic use we make of the word “truth”.

¹⁰ On Shapin’s results from a semiotic point of view see Paolucci (2023) and Paolucci and Alessi (2026).

We can use the word *atom* to mean “the smallest fundamental unit of a chemical element”; but the meaning of “atom” does not definitively establish what atoms are (as is well known, for example, and contrary to their name, atoms are not the smallest fundamental units, being themselves composed of protons, neutrons, and electrons). The same applies to truth and “truth”. Ruth Millikan (1986) proposed that if it is true that the senses of a term do not equate to its truth rules (the rules on how to produce sentences that properly map the structure of reality, regardless of what the structure of reality is and what these rules are), then the same must also apply to the word “truth” itself: the truth rules for “truth” are one thing, its intensions or senses another: «the question, “What is truth (in the case of representations)?” is a question about the truth rules for “true”, not about its intension [...]». The theorist of truth must not appeal to his

intuitions about how we use “true” or, say, to intuitions about what a proper name or natural kind term would denote given this or that set of possible circumstances, but should be to the elegance and fertility of his theory in helping us to understand a variety of phenomena about which, prior to his theory, we were puzzled. (Millikan, 1986, 463)

In turn, I think it is precisely the semiotician’s duty to give a semantic representation of the senses of truth and the analysis of the way people use the word “truth” in different contexts. The confusion between the two types of problem itself is also motivated by the semantic use we make of the term “truth”. Consider the following statements:

- (1) The truth is you don’t know what is going to happen tomorrow.
- (2) The truth is satisfactory to believe.
- (3) The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief (James, 1907, 75).

In all three cases, “truth” appears as the grammatical subject, but only (2–3) actually say something about truth as the subject of predication. In (1), the intended meaning is rather that “you don’t know what is going to happen tomorrow” (subject) is true (predicate). The Treccani dictionary defines *verità* as both “the character of what is true” and “what is true” as second meaning, while the Merriam-Webster defines *truth* as “the body of real things, events, or facts” but also as “the property (as of a statement) of being in accord with fact or reality”. That is, we call “truth” both the property and the things that (we believe) have that property, which is why we are led to the confusion between truth and the propositions we consider to be true, so that when the things we believe to be true change (and they have always changed, as Shapin has shown), we are led to think that truth also changes. But just as we can easily distinguish the color red from

things colored red, so must we do a priori with truth¹¹. As Susan Haack said, «there is one truth, but many truths; truth is objective, but our efforts to discover truths about the world are fallible» (2005, 104).

Moreover, sentences (2–3) refer to different things: in (2), “truth” is used to refer to truth as an object in the world, while in (3) it is used as the name we give to certain beliefs (namely those that prove to be good, or effective, to believe). The fact that we can use “truth” to refer to all these things means that we need to distinguish between four different issues: i) which propositions are true; ii) what truth is; iii) which beliefs we consider to be true; iv) what are the meanings of “truth”.

The senses of a term do not determine the truth conditions of the sentences in which that term appears. In its simplest form, this was the conclusion of Putnam’s Twin Earth argument (1975): on a twin planet, the chemical composition of water could be XYZ instead of H₂O, and our belief that “water is H₂O” would therefore be false when referring to Twin Earth. More simply, the fact of having certain beliefs does not prevent humans from being wrong, nor does it prevent water from being something other than what we mean by the word “water”. Applied to “truth”, this consideration means that the fact that different people may understand different things by “true” in different contexts, or that “truth” may be used in different ways (problem iv), does not imply that truth is different things for different people or at different times (problem ii)¹². For the same reason, and conversely, the distinction also implies that the semantic analysis of “truth” does not imply a commitment to any specific theory of truth, nor is knowledge of theories of truth a prerequisite for its semantic analysis. The fact that truth determines the truth rules of “truth” does not prevent people from using the word “truth” in many different ways, as demonstrated by examples (1–2–3), ways that a semantic representation of the lexeme must capture.

A further source of possible confusion between theories of truth and semantic analysis of “truth” derives from the success in philosophy of the so-called semantic theories of truth which, inspired by Alfred Tarski’s definitions, consider it satisfactory for a theory of truth to provide criteria that identify those sentences that comply with the so-called T-schema, according to which for every sentence “x”, “x” is true if and only if x. Still, semantic theories of this kind are different

¹¹ This does not, of course, preclude the possibility that a theory might, a posteriori, combine the two things, but as I will say in the conclusions, I think that the opposite is often the case, namely that when philosophers argue about truth they often talk about different things, truth and truths, respectively.

¹² Nor does it prohibit it. We simply need to remember that these are two distinct issues. But this does not imply that truth must be singular and never-changing, as for Shapin. Distinguishing between truth, beliefs, and the meanings of “truth” does not prevent truth from changing, or beliefs held to be true from changing. In principle, it would be possible, for example, to have a theory opposite to that of Shapin and to the scenario we are perhaps most accustomed to, in which truth is plural and ever-changing, but all the people share the same, never-changing, beliefs about truth and what is true.

from the problem of giving the senses of “truth”, as a theory of truth, however semantic, remains a theory that aims to answer the question of what truth is¹³.

Table 1. Differences between theories of truth and the semantic analysis of “truth”.

	Object	Research question	Method
Theories of truth	Truth	What is truth?	Conceptual analysis, metaphysics
Semantic theories of truth	Truth	What is truth?	Semantic analysis of the word
Semantic analysis of truth	“Truth”	What does “truth” mean?	Semantic analysis of the word

Take Bertrand Russell’s criticism of William James’ pragmatic conception of truth. His criticism was based on the distinction between criteria and meanings: «the arguments of pragmatists are almost wholly directed to proving that utility is a criterion; that utility is the meaning of truth is then supposed to follow» (1908, 137–138)¹⁴. As several commentators have pointed out, Russell’s criticism does not take into account all of the statements made by the fathers of pragmatism on truth (Haack, 1976). Furthermore, it does not consider that the pragmatist theory of meaning, based on Peirce’s pragmatic maxim¹⁵, does not allow for a strong distinction between meanings and criteria for the use of a sign (or criteria for the recognition of the corresponding object). However, it is true that the criteria for defining the meaning of “truth” are different from the criteria for establishing which beliefs are true and which are false (see again the distinction between problems (ii) and (iii) above). In the terms I am positing, therefore, when Russell

¹³ Behind the distinction between theories and semantic analyses of a lexeme lies the deeper problem of the meaning of “meaning”. In the semiotic and philosophical literature there are many competing theories about what the meaning of a sign is, but a major distinction that can be made, if imprecise, is between extensional theories, which consider referents to be the main dimension of the meaning of a sign, and intensional theories, according to which the meaning of a sign is primarily expressed by its senses (mental representations, propositions, ideas, cultural units, or other signs, depending on the specific theory). It is therefore clear why proponents of the extensional conception consider the identification of a referent for “truth”, or a series of referents (corresponding to all the sentences of a language that respect the T-convention), to be a semantic theory of truth.

¹⁴ This is Russell’s example: «If you wish to know whether a certain book is in a library, you consult the catalogue [...] Thus, the catalogue affords a *criterion* of whether a book is in the library or not. But even supposing the catalogue perfect, it is obvious that when you say the book is in the library you do not *mean* that it is mentioned in the catalogue. You mean that the actual book is to be found somewhere in the shelves» (1908, 137)

¹⁵ Which states that «the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object» (CP 5.388).

contrasts criteria and meaning he means to make the distinction between (ii) and (iii), not between (ii) and (iv): in other words, he is contrasting the criteria for sorting true and false beliefs with the theory of truth, albeit based on semantic considerations, not with the analysis of the senses of “truth”. In table 1. I summarized the differences between theories of truth and the semantic analysis of “truth”. As for the distinction between semantic theories and semantic analysis, while both use, in a broad sense, semantics as method of inquiry, the two have different objects of study and research questions (what is truth, from a metaphysical point of view, and what are the meanings of the word “truth”, respectively).

Sometimes the distinction between semantic theories and semantic analyses is also explicitly acknowledged. Susan Haack (2005), for example, before specifying that she is only interested in one sense of truth, namely truth as a property of propositions/sentences, mentions that «Polonius’s advice to Laertes, “To thine own self be true... Thou canst not then be false to any man,” reminds us that the root of our word “true”, the Old English “treowe”, meant “faithful”», and that we can also speak of «true friends», say that «the frog is “not a true reptile”, or describe a joint or beam as “out of truth”» (2005, 87–88). In these cases, “truth” is used to mean a property of objects, instead of a property of propositions. Another example is Charles Morris (1946) who, in order to advance his theory of T-ascriptors (signs that denote or that comply with Tarski’s T-Schema), specified that «‘True’ is a very ambiguous term in ordinary speech, and the identification of it with ‘T-ascriptor’ accords with only one of its many significations» (1946, 107; see also Gramigna, 2022, 98). Morris even added that «the important point for semiotic is not to analyse the various significations of ‘true’ nor to prescribe one of these significations but to clarify the similarities and the differences between ascriptors» (108). While I agree that semiotics could contribute to the description of the sentences that denote (but it is a line of inquiry almost opposite to the one semiotics decided to follow), I think that the semantic analysis of “truth” should be semiotics’ major concern.

1.2.2. Two kinds of deflationism

A semantic theory of the type required by Russell is the theory of minimalism. According to this theory, the meaning of “truth” is minimal: «the deflationary redundancy theory [...] denies the existence of surplus meaning and contends that Tarski’s schema [“p” is true iff p] is quite sufficient to capture the concept» (Horwich, 1982, 182). The redundancy theory was developed by Frank Ramsey (1927), who argued that adding the truth operator to a declarative sentence does not add any content:

Truth and falsity are ascribed primarily to propositions. The proposition to which they are ascribed may be either explicitly given or described. Suppose first that it is explicitly given; then it is evident that ‘It is true that Caesar was murdered’ means no more than that Caesar was murdered, and ‘It is false that Caesar was murdered’ means no more than Caesar was not murdered. (1927, 157)

According to Paul Horwich, the first to associate these considerations on truth with deflationism about truth, the basis of deflationism is the so-called equivalence scheme, clearly derivative of Tarski's T-scheme. According to the equivalence scheme, "p" is true iff p, where p is a declarative (not the corresponding state of affairs), and the left and right sides of the schema are semantically equivalent, so that adding to the sentence x that it "is true" adds nothing to x (or very little, see presently). And since the equivalence scheme is all there is to say about the use of "truth" in language, its role is effectively minimal, adding nothing informative to the equivalent declaratives where the word "truth" does not appear. "Truth" serves only to perform the logical operation of generalization (as in "everything that John says is true", in order not to have to repeat everything that John has said), or to form pro-sentences that express equivalences of meaning (as in "that is true", whose content depends anaphorically on the preceding sentence).

To a certain extent, deflationists do the opposite of what pragmatists did according to Russell: the movement here is not from the criteria for identifying true beliefs to the meaning of "truth", but from the meaning of "truth" (considered minimal) to a deflationary theory of truth.

From this point of view, we need to distinguish between two types of alethic deflationism: Horwich's deflationism, based on the theory of the minimal meaning of "truth", and the type of alethic deflationism of, for example, Greimas, based on theoretical considerations about the nature of languages («by postulating autonomy as well as the immanent character of every language and, by this same token, the impossibility of any recourse to an external referent, Saussurian theory has constrained semiotics to make its concerns not the problem of truth, but that of truthsaying, of veridiction», Greimas and Courtès, 1982, 367).

Having made the distinction between the two types, deflationism has nevertheless received various criticisms¹⁶, particularly from pragmatist-inspired positions and from a maximalist conception of the meaning of signs (Misak, 1998; Haack, 2005). As will be seen, in what follows I will maintain that, in a sense, "truth" is indeed minimal in terms of meaning (cf. Pickel, forthcoming) – *but this is only true for one of its senses*. From the point of view of semantic analysis, the fact that the meaning of "truth" is minimal does not equate to say that it has no role in language. Brandom (1988), for example, while proposing his pro-sententialist theory of truth, admits that "truth" in language is often used as an indicator of pragmatic force, rather than as a tool for specifying content:

What motivates such a performative analysis, for the pragmatists no less than for later theorists, is the special relation that obtains between the force or practical significance of an act of taking-true [...] and the force or significance of a straightforward assertion. (Brandom, 1988, 78)

To assert that something is true conveys a pragmatic meaning (a line of research that I will explore in 3.1.): it means to positively sanction something, to commit

¹⁶ See for example Sher (2023).

to the proposition considered true, to assume both «commitments to choose (representing preference, desire, interest, need, and so on) as well as commitments to say (assert and believe)» (79). There is a reason why the word exists and is used. For instance, in the examples of generalization I provided above, even without providing a specific context it is clear that “truth” also (if not primarily) serves to positively sanction something (respectively: everything John says, and the anaphoric reference of “that is true”). Attaching a pro-sentence “that is true” at the end of a sentence, or in response to a statement made by someone, establishes equivalences of meaning, but this is not the main reason why people use pro-sentences of that kind (or it would be redundant, as well as annoying), but to pragmatically communicate agreement and adherence with the interlocutor, for example, or to highlight that something else is considered false.

As another example, consider the following. In 3.1.4., I will argue that truth, understood as that which is independent from what we think is true, or from our beliefs, is a good to be pursued and is necessary in order to have a notion of fallibilism, which I will call semiotic humility, that is, the awareness that we can be wrong. However, precisely because we can be wrong, saying that something is true may convey a sense of certainty that does not sit well with the value of fallibilism. It is the difference between saying “it is true that x did y” and “I think that x did y” or “it is likely that x did y”. Minimalism tells us that (1) and (2) are semantically equivalent

- (1) “x did y”
- (2) “it is true that x did y”

but it does not tell us why we sometimes choose to say (2) instead of (1), even though (1) is less phonetically expensive. Moreover, let’s imagine that (1) is posed as a question, rather than a statement. And that the listener can respond in two ways, either (2) or (3)

- (3) “I think that x did y”

Minimalism allows us to say that (2) is equivalent to

- (2*) “‘it is true that x did y’ is true”

just as (3) is equivalent to

- (3*) “‘I think that x did y’ is true”

But if the difference between hypothesizing and asserting something seems immediate, it is less obvious to see the difference between (2*) and (3-3*), between saying that it is true that I think something is true and saying that something is true (for example, a difference that I will explore in more depth in chapter 3. is that, even while saying that something is true, in one case the value of fallibilism is respected, but not in the other). In other words, minimalism tells

us an important aspect of the role of “truth” in language, perhaps the most important, but it does not tell us everything.

In any case, given the distinction between theories and semantic analysis I am positing, the semantic analysis I will carry out does not imply that truth does not exist, nor does the fact that “truth” can be said in many ways imply that truth is inaccessible to languages.

1.2.3. Two kinds of pluralism

The last distinction I would like to make is between two types of pluralism, that is, between pluralism as the starting point of inquiry and as the end of inquiry, respectively. As the end of inquiry, pluralism concerns the so-called pluralist theories of truth (Wright, 1992; Lynch, 2009), according to which truth (but here too, truth is understood exclusively as a property of signs or propositions) is not just a single property (correspondence *or* coherence *or* warranted assertability, etc.), but many (correspondence *and* coherence *and* assertability, etc.). According to pluralist theories, then, there are many different ways in which a sign can be true. For claims concerning material objects, truth manifests itself as a relation of correspondence between signs and material objects, but for moral claims, truth would instead manifest as a property of assertability within a belief system, or, finally, for claims concerning civil law systems or, for example, mathematical propositions, truth is realized as a relation of coherence between the claims and the axioms of the system in question.

In the next chapter, I will distinguish between truth as *terminus a quo* of semiosis and truths as the *termini ad quem* of signs, based on considerations on the semantics of “truth” that I will develop below. In particular, often we use “truth” to mean “what we are certain of”: in this sense, as the *termini ad quem* of signs, we can say that there are many truths (see again Haack’s distinction between one truth and many truths). However, given the purposes of this chapter, by pluralism as the starting point of a semantic inquiry I am not referring to the fact that different people are certain of different things, but to the situation the semiotician who wanted to offer a semantic analysis of truth faces. From this point of view, truth can be a single property or plural (and it cannot be ruled out that the semantic analysis, at the end of the research, may contribute to the debate on the nature of truth); but we must first deal with an initial pluralism of meanings of “truth” to which we must give an order, which is what I’m going to do in the next section.

1.3. The definition of “Truth”

As mentioned in the introduction, I will be inspired by the analysis offered by Eve Sweetser (1987) for the definition of “lie”. After her analysis, the linguist offers a definition of lie as a false statement, a definition that differs from the standard one discussed in philosophy, whereby a lie is the intent to deceive + falsity (see Bok, 1978, for example). The two don’t contradict each other: based on what I said so far about the distinction between theories and semantic analyses, while the task of the theory of lying is to provide a definition that gives necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a lie, the task of semantic analysis is to say what we mean when we say that something “is a lie”. This is what I intend to do in what follows for “truth”.

It is useful to briefly introduce the strategy used by Sweetser, in order to show why mine will have to differ, at least partially. Sweetser introduces the problem with Coleman and Kay’s (1981) work on lies and their definition of “lie”, which is not far from Bok’s just mentioned: the conditions for something to be a lie are: a) the speaker believes that his statement is false; b) the speaker produces his statement because he intends to deceive the hearer; c) the statement is false. To identify the prototype of a lie, Sweetser proceeds with the hypothesis that «lies are inherently grounded in a simplified or prototypical schema of human experience» (Sweetser, 1987, 44). Therefore, a simplified model of communication is given, a model that corresponds to a dialogue in which Paul Grice’s (1989) conversational maxims apply, in particular the maxim of quantity, which states the speaker must “be informative”¹⁷.

In such a model, two basic principles must hold for social interaction in general to be possible:

- (1) try to help;
- (2) knowledge is beneficial.

(1–2) together give, according to Sweetser, Grice’s maxim of quantity:

- (3) try to inform others.

¹⁷ I will say more about simplified models and basic communicative situations in 3. However, here I must specify that for Sweetser, and for cognitive linguistics in general, modeling is not just a matter of doing thought experiments to see what can be logically obtained from them and then compare the results with the real world. According to the cognitive linguistic tradition, or maximalist semantic theories more generally, knowledge of a language is based on knowledge of the world, and the regularities that are found in languages are based on regularities of situations, scenes, and events in the world, which is why concepts such as frames, prototypes, cognitive models, etc. are posited (see also next chapter 2.1.).

Points (4–5) are then added, under the consideration that «whatever our rules of practical everyday inferences are like, we trust them, in the default case. Thus, belief is normally taken as having adequate justification, and hence as equivalent to knowledge, which would entail truth» (Sweetser, 1987, 47).

(4) Beliefs have adequate justification.

(5) Justified beliefs are knowledge (that is, are true).

From (4–5), (6) is obtained:

(6) Beliefs are true.

Finally, combining (6) with (3):

(7) Say what you believe; do not say what you don't believe.

As Sweetser herself says, «logically (outside our model), or statistically, this conclusion is rubbish» (48). Indeed, these considerations would lead to the conclusion that justification = knowledge = truth, a conclusion that would hold only from the point of view of the description of what speakers expect to give/receive in a communicative exchange.

But Sweetser's point is that, in the simplified model, Coleman and Kay's three conditions (a-b-c) are mutually implicative, or even the same thing. This gives the fuzzy definition of lie as "a false statement", and explains why the terms "lie" and "false" can, and often are, used interchangeably in discourse. From this prototypical definition, we can then obtain more complex versions of the concept by analyzing less simplified models. For example, the definition implies that a statement can only be judged as a lie if the false/true category is relevant in the context. So, in a context where the category is not relevant, lying is referred to as joking, kidding, or a fantasy, a tall tale, etc. Another example of a context in which the false/true category has a different relevance than in the simplified model is when the information conveyed could be not helpful but dangerous to the hearer. In these cases, we rather speak of white lies or social lies. If, on the other hand, to the category true/false we add the category of knowing/not knowing, we can distinguish between lies proper, or lies in the strict sense (+ false statement + know), and errors (+ false statement – know, which Sweetser further distinguishes into careless or honest errors, based on the information available to the speaker), which can still be called "lies", albeit quite far from the prototype.

Now, in comparison with this analysis, the definition of "truth" faces some specific difficulties. The first, which I will not discuss here, is that if we follow Sweetser's suggestion for the identification of the starting prototype, i.e., to start from Grice's conversational maxims, we obtain that "telling the truth" is the same as respecting the conversational maxims, but there are good reasons to doubt that this will suffice (reasons that I will consider in 3.1.3.). This is linked to two further

difficulties: the first is that if we define truth simply as “a true statement”, we obtain a redundant and uninformative definition; the second is that, therefore, we cannot start from a basic situation to identify the starting prototype.

Truth is a superordinate term with respect to lie. Following Sweetser’s strategy, we could define “sincerity” as a true statement, but “true” and “false” are at a higher level of generality: they can be used to define “lie”, but not to define themselves. Sweetser herself places “tell the truth” as the opposite of “lie” in her model but, strictly speaking, the opposite of lie would rather be sincerity (even if, in both Italian and English, for example, it is not possible to derive a verb from it). The same applies to other terms, for example: while the opposite of truth would be falsity or falsehood, it is also possible to use truth as the opposite of fake, counterfeit, deception, and many other terms.

Here is a list of synonyms of “truth”: correctness, justice, accuracy, harmony, consistency, correspondence, authenticity, transparency, genuineness, purity, originality, fullness, nature, reality, fidelity, honesty, frankness, candor. “Truth” is the vaguest, most general term in this semantic field, so a different strategy is needed to reach a definition. While Sweetser based her analysis on the experimental findings of Coleman and Kay (1981) and Rosch’s (1978) theory of prototypes, the following will be a qualitative conceptual semantic analysis grounded in semiotic theory. Instead of searching among superordinate terms (as Sweetser did for “lie”), I will distinguish, following a sort of Peircean style in making typologies, three senses of truth based on types of things we can describe as “true”: objects, signs, or speakers, respectively. I analyze them in turns in what follows.

1.3.1. Truth vs. fake as properties of objects

In this sense, “truth” is used to refer to a property that can be said of certain objects. Consider Susan Haack’s examples mentioned above: we can define, for example, a friendship as a true friendship, or say that a frog is not a true reptile. In these cases, we are not referring to propositions that say something about the state of affairs of the world, but to objects. Predicated of an object, *true* means “being that which is the case rather than what is manifest or assumed” (Merriam-Webster online), and its synonyms are “authentic”, “unfalsified”, “unaltered”, “unmanipulated”, but also “original”, “full”, “fully realized”. If you look up the definition of *authentic*, the first meaning is “that which is true, not false” (Treccani online, my translation), or “truth” (Merriam-Webster online), but also “not falsified”, with the past participle implying the intervention of someone or something that acted on the object, that has modified the object. Another meaning of *authentic* is “conformity” with respect to something else (an original object, a standard, a rule, a model), which explains why we say “a dream come true” or “true friendship” (a dream must conform to a future reality to become true, a friendship to a conception of what friendship should be).

We also use “truth” in this sense when talking about cultural objects. For example, Eco’s reflection on fakes and forgeries (1990a; 1990b) belongs to this sense of “truth”. According to Eco, the problem of fakes concerns the claim that

an object Ob, present in front of us, is the original Oa, while Oa is somewhere else. Fakes, that is, concern cases in which either «there is a physical object that, because of its similarity to some other object, can be mistaken for the latter», or «a given object is falsely attributed to an author who is said to have made – or is supposed to have been capable of making – similar objects» (Eco, 1990a, 215, my translation).

Here is a list of synonyms provided by Eco, with their respective definitions from the Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary: *forgery* ("the act of forging, fabricating or producing falsely"), *fake* (v. "to make (something) seem real [...] to counterfeit", n. "any copy or likeness"), *facsimile* ("any copy or likeness"), *spurious* ("illegitimate, bastard, false, counterfeit, not genuine"), *Pseudo* ("fictitious, pretended, sham [...] counterfeit, spurious [...] closely or deceptively similar to") and *apocryphal* ("writings falsely attributed [...] spurious").

In the English version of *The Limits of Interpretation* Eco didn't include *false* and *to falsify*, present in the list from the Italian version. Among other definitions, *falso* and *falsificare* are defined as "that has been counterfeited, altered with malicious intent" and "to counterfeit, distort, alter with the intention of committing a crime", respectively. In English too, *false* can mean, in addition to "not true or correct", also "not real, not genuine, intended to deceive, artificial".

Eco also distinguishes between doubles and forgeries. Doubles refer to all cases in which two objects possess all the characteristics prescribed by a type, so that two chairs of the same model are doubles of each other (neither are considered to be the counterfeit of the other). Forgeries occur instead when «an object is produced [...] with the intention of making someone believe that it is indistinguishable from another unique object» (1990a, 219, my translation). This clarification should be considered a prototypical definition of "forgery", which applies only to central and, indeed, prototypical cases (Eco himself gave examples of unintentional forgeries) and to relations between tokens (for example, between two identical chairs, or, for allographic arts, between two realizations of the same script). But depending on the context, we can say that something is a fake or a forgery even in the absence of intent to deceive on someone's part, as demonstrated by the examples given above (e.g., the frog as a fake reptile; a fake dream). Furthermore, apart from the case of industrial fakes, we could also define a chair as "fake" not in relation to another chair (as in doubles), but in relation to its type. For example, we could say that "a three-legged chair is not a real chair". Therefore, the distinction between fakes in general and forgeries concerns the intention to deceive only in prototypical cases (all forgeries are fakes, but not vice versa) but does not concern the distinction between types of objects (e.g., between natural, cultural, and artistic objects).

It is also worth mentioning that, for Eco, terms such as «deceptive, illusory, altered, or genuine, authentic, similar, and so on», while important for semiotics, they all depend «on a "satisfactory" semiotic definition of Truth and Falsehood» (Eco, 1990a, 213, my translation). Hence his conclusion that «concepts such as Truth and Falsehood, Authentic and Fake, Identity and Difference circularly

define each other» (1990b, 201). I believe the opposite is true, based precisely on Echiian considerations on meaning. I do not think that the meaning of terms such as “authentic” and “deceptive” depend on the meaning of “truth” any more than the notion of “cat” depends on that of “feline”. One of the most important results of maximalist programs in semantics, championed by Eco himself, is that our way of categorizing depends on our experience of the world, so it is not necessary to know the superordinate genus of a sign in order to use that sign. In other words, it is not necessary to know what felines are in order to talk about cats. After all, Eco himself implicitly establishes the same point in his conclusions when he says that the reflection on fakes shows how difficult it is to recognize the original and how vague our notions of truth and falsehood are:

The current notion of fake presupposes a “true” original with which the fake should be compared. But we have seen that every criterion for ascertaining whether something is the fake of an original coincides with the criteria for ascertaining whether the original is authentic. Thus the original cannot be used as a parameter for unmasking its forgeries unless we blindly take for granted that what is presented to us as the original is unchallengeably so (but this would contrast with any philological criterion) [...] The reflection on these most commonly forged objects should, however, tell us how hazardous are our general criteria for identity and how much such concepts as Truth and Falsity, Authentic and Fake, Identity and Difference circularly define each other. (Eco, 1990b, 199–201)

However, the fact that it is difficult to recognize what is original or what is true does not mean that we do not know what we mean by “true”, “original”, “authentic”, and “false”, “forgery”, etc.¹⁸. Here, again, we find an example of the confusion between truth as a property and the things that have that property.

Be it referred to frogs, to a work of art, or abstract concepts, “truth” is used to set a standard against which compare something, be it the concept of reptile in the case of the frog (in this sense, all the prototypes studied in cognitive linguistics can perform a similar function: we can say that a chicken is not a real bird, for example, because it is far from the prototype of bird, etc.), a presumed original object (whether it exists or not), or a presumed essence of something.

Taking again the frog example, to say that the crocodile is the true reptile means that there are traits of the reptile, the “true” ones, that crocodiles have and frogs do not. The same applies to the original/counterfeit relationship. Eco identifies three types of false identification:

¹⁸ Not only that, but the fact that it is often difficult to recognize the original implies that we often have a vague notion of what is true and what is not, but not necessarily that we don’t have a notion of what truth is as well. Behind this conclusion lies the same confusion we saw with Shapin above: since we can use the word “truth” to refer not only to truth, but also to things that are true (or that we believe to be true), we are led to think, erroneously, that if we do not know what is true, then we do not know what truth is, or that, as I said above, if the things that are true change, then truth also changes.

- (i) Downright forgeries: when, given the original object *Oa* and another object *Ob*, someone says that *Ob* is *Oa*, or modifies *Oa* in order to obtain *Ob*.

These are the prototypical cases of forgery, and usually include the intention of the falsifier to deceive someone, such as when a copy of a painting is reproduced and passed off as the original. But even in these cases, the intention to deceive is not always necessary. For example, an archaeologist might mistakenly claim to have found ancient remains of a well-known building *x*. Eco himself cites the case of the naive tourists who take pictures of the copy of Michelangelo's *David* outside Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, without knowing that the original one is elsewhere.

- (ii) Moderate forgeries: when someone says not that *Ob* is *Oa*, but that *Oa* and *Ob* are interchangeable.

In this case too, the intention to deceive is not always necessary. For example, the naive tourists may have been led by someone to believe that they are looking at the original *David*, but they may also be perfectly aware of its inauthenticity and still want to photograph it, without being pedantic about issues of authenticity (afterall, that *Oa* and *Ob* are interchangeable may be claimed not only by the pretender, but also by the users of *Ob*).

- (iii) Forgeries *ex-nihilo*: when someone says that *Ob* is *Oa*, but *Oa* does not exist.

Examples of this type include so-called diplomatic forgeries, or acts of false evidence fabrication against someone. But here again, it is not so much the intention to deceive that defines something as a “forgery”. A forgery is something that does not have all the properties it should have with respect to a type or token of reference, considered the original, the authentic or the true *x*. It must be concluded that the meaning of “false” in this sense is precisely the trait of “degeneration with respect to something else”, or of “not having all the characteristics considered necessary to be the true/authentic/original”. Such a degeneration, in the case of forgeries, is due to manipulation, corruption, alteration, modification, etc. that is, an intervention by someone or something (not necessarily human, and not necessarily intentional) that alters either the features of the original (as in downright forgeries where *Oa* is directly modified) or its copy (of *Ob*). In turn, we call the objects that possess all the relevant traits as “the truth” or “true”, and we consider relevant (i.e. “true”) all those traits that are not modified, touched, altered, manipulated, or degenerated.

Given the definition, It could be said that all signs are fakes in relation to their objects. This is how Cantwell-Smith (2019) puts it, for example, in his essay on the distinction between natural and artificial intelligence, when he says that what AI systems lack in order to be intelligent is the ability to distinguish between the

true (the world) and the false (the internal symbols of AI), and the ability to prefer the former («when word and world part company, the world wins» 86). However, as Eco says, fakes are fake-signs (1990b, 188). A fake, insofar as it can be mistaken for the original, is in some respect similar to the original (at least to the pretender), hence could be said an iconic sign of the original. But if a fake could be a sign of the original «it would be a rather curious kind of sign: it would succeed in being a sign insofar as nobody takes it as a sign [...] as soon as one recognizes it as a sign, Ob becomes something similar to Oa [the original] – a facsimile of Oa – but can no longer be confused with Oa. In fact, facsimiles are iconic signs but are not fakes» (1990b, 188–189). An icon by itself is not a sign of anything if confused with the object represented. It is a sign only if it is interpreted as similar *but also different from its object* (in the same way, if I mistake a black stain for a spider the former is not a sign of the latter; it would only be a sign if recognising the stain made me think of a spider because similar – in Peirce’s terms, an index must be added to the iconic stain in order for the stain to become a sign)¹⁹. So, there are two conditions for something to be an iconic sign of something else: it has to be similar to the object, but it has also to be interpreted as different from the same object. Fakes cannot be signs because they don’t meet, by definition, the second condition.

Now, this doctrine seems to contradict the possibility of signs to be false. If fakes are fake-signs, then it seems that signs cannot be fake. But we must distinguish between two meanings of “false” (and “true”). Signs are, on the one hand, quasi-fake in that they are objects different from the objects they are supposed to represent, but true because no one claims that a sign must be identical to its object – but if they are “true” in this sense, they are not necessarily true in the next sense I’m about to consider.

1.3.2. Truth vs. false as properties of signs

Signs and objects are different things. Anything can be a sign, that is, refer to something else for us (according to Peirce’s well-known definition of a sign) and have a meaning, but this does not mean that everything is always a sign for us. There are cases in which certain sign-functions are narcotized or irrelevant (a red T-shirt with a hammer and sickle is a sign of the political beliefs of the wearer regardless of the materials of the T-shirt, regardless of whether it is V-necked or not, long-sleeved, short-sleeved, sleeveless, etc.). There could also be things that are never meaningful to us (think of ultrasound waves above 20,000 Hz). Finally, although more debated, it is doubtful that the interaction with/perception of something, including the perception of the material basis of a sign, is semiotic in

¹⁹ On fakes as fake-signs see also Sonesson (2018).

nature²⁰: it is one thing to open an umbrella, another to semiotically infer that if there is an umbrella, then it is raining.

When Eco says that fakes are fake-signs, he means that a fake, in order to be a fake, must not refer to the original, otherwise it would become a sign (and cease to be a fake) – for this reason, being different from their objects is not a weakness of signs, but rather their condition of possibility (contrary to post-structuralist theories of difference). A part from this, signs too can be said true or false, but in a different sense.

When we say that a story, a tale, a news item, a proverb, or a text is true, we are not referring to their authenticity (otherwise, again, all signs would always just be fakes or quasi-fakes and nothing more), but to the possibility of signs of saying, according to Aristotle's well-known definition, of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not (*Metaphysics*, IV, 7, 1011 b). "True" in this case means "that which is really what its name says"; "that which corresponds to the reality of the facts" (Treccani, my translation), "being in accordance with the actual state of affairs" (Merriam-Webster). Thus, when it comes to signs, and combining the two senses of "truth" considered so far, there may be fakes that tell the truth, or, conversely, there may be texts that, however original and true in the first sense (as objects), tell the false in this second sense, such as historical fakes (authentic texts that contain falsehoods) or the original Greek of Ptolemy's *Mathematical Treatise*. Finally, there are cases in which, without the help of context, the meaning of "true" remains ambiguous, e.g., in "a true document", true could refer either to the document itself (as opposed to a counterfeited document or a forgery), or to the content of the document (that is, not just a true document, but a document that tells the truth).

As we have seen, this is the meaning of "truth" most studied by philosophers. Even pluralist theories of truth, when they say that truth is not a single property, they mean that it is a property of signs that can take different forms. Regardless of what it is (or how many things it is), the meaning of "truth" in this sense is well captured by Tarski's T-scheme seen above ("p" is true if and only if p). As minimalism dictates, "truth" applied to signs adds nothing to the propositional content of a statement, except to imply some pragmatic effect (such as adherence to something, or rejection of something else). While in "the true Mona Lisa" or "the true reptile" the attribute "true" adds information (if it is the real Mona Lisa, then it was painted by Leonardo; if it is the real reptile, then it is not a frog), there is no difference between saying "two plus two equals four" and "it is true that 'two plus two equals four'".

There is much debate on both how the left side of the T-schema should be understood. According to the specific theory, "p" is seen as a statement in an

²⁰ The problem was raised in particular by Eco (1997). Anthropologist Tim Ingold has more recently relaunched this debate in Ingold (2022, 337). Ingold calls semiotic the theory that perception is cognitively mediated by internal concepts or mental representation, and since he believes perception to be, instead, direct, then perception is not semiotic. For an alternative interpretation, see Malafouris' theory of enactive signs (2013).

object language L, simply as a sign of any kind (cf. Rahwles and Dickson, 2025), or as a proposition; the right side p is seen as a state of the world, as a proposition in a metalanguage, or as a proposition in the same language as “p”. But from a semantic point of view, we can say that we habitually use “truth” to refer to any of these things depending on the context. However minimal, the T-schema tells us that to say that a statement is true means to say that the world, or part of it, is as the statement says. One can have the most refined anti-realist theories that demonstrate how and why truth does not exist, or have a conception of semiotic systems as independent from truth according to which, therefore, even if truth existed, they cannot express it. But at the semiotic-semantic level, it is not possible to say that a statement “is true” without implying that the world is in a certain way and, conversely, it is not possible to say that the world is in a certain way without implying that it is true that it is in that way.

1.3.3. Lie vs. truth as properties of speakers

“Truth” can also be used to refer to speakers. Sweetser posited “tell the truth” as the opposite of “lie”, and “lie”, at least in the default and general communicative situation, as the opposite of “tell the truth”, which is why she defines lie as a false statement. But strictly speaking, the category lie vs. sincerity means something more specific, closer to the definitions of Bok and Coleman and Kay seen above (on the definition of lie, see also Gramigna, 2020).

As we have seen, there are three dimensions relevant to the theory of lying: a) the intention to deceive someone; b) having a belief about something; c) saying something false. Here too, there is debate in the philosophical literature about the necessity of each of the conditions (a-c). For example, starting with (a), there are so-called white lies, which are told not to deceive, but to help someone. Or consider the following situation, typical of teen drama TV series: J and S have just broken up, but J feels guilty about how he treated S, so he goes to her house to apologize. S’s mother opens the door and tells him that “S is not home”, even though she knows J is well aware that S is home. Did S’s mother lie to J? If so, then (a) is not a necessary condition for lying.

As for (b-c), we tend to consider as just an error (but perhaps not of sincerity) if someone says something they believe to be true but is false. It is not a lie if, for example, S’s mother said, in good faith, that “yes, S is home” but S is not home. On the other hand, not only is it possible to be truthful while telling the false (error), but it is equally possible to tell the truth while believing to be saying something false and with the intention to deceive. This would have been the case if, for example, S’s mother had said to J that “S is not at home”, because she believes that S is at home but she does not want S and J to meet, but S is indeed not at home. Similar questions can also be asked about sincerity: is it necessary to actually say something that is true in order to be considered sincere, or is it sufficient to say what one thinks is true in a transparent way? Is it possible to define sincere someone who, while telling the truth, had the intention to deceive?

Leaving the problem of defining what is and what is not a lie to philosophers, I think that from a semiotic point of view it is a matter of pragmatic negotiation between speakers of a language, and that it is possible to call someone sincere or insincere in each of the cases considered. Following Sweetser's reasoning, if it is possible to define lies as false statements, and consider each of the conditions (a–c) as sufficient (and not necessary) for something to be a lie, the same applies, at the same level of generality, to "sincerity": depending on the context, telling the truth, or saying what one believes to be true, or having no intention of deceiving anyone, could be sufficient in order to be considered sincere.

However, turning the question on its head, it is also true that defining someone as "sincere" or "deceitful" usually does not mean simply that that person has told the truth or a falsehood, respectively. Take the adjective "correct". As we have seen, we can say that a statement is correct to mean that it is true. But if we say instead that a person x is a correct person, we do not mean "only" that they have told or are telling something that is correct, but that their behavior exhibits the traits of correctness (conformity to certain ethical or educational standards). Something similar applies to sincerity: a sincere person is not only someone who tells the truth (or who says what they think is true), but someone who does so without the intention of deceiving, or, more generally, who does so by showing themselves to be authentic, without manipulating their thoughts. In the Treccani online dictionary, *sincerità* is defined as "speaking and acting in accordance with and expressing what one feels or thinks, without pretense or simulation and without reticence" (my translation). A text can also be described as sincere, but with the following meaning, which still refers to the qualities of the speaker: "referring to words or behavior, said or done without any falsehood or duplicity, without ulterior motives, following what one really thinks and feels". Finally, the Merriam-Webster defines *sincerity* as "free of dissimulation or adulteration". A sincere person can also be defined as "transparent", "genuine", and, indeed, "authentic", and a true statement made by a sincere person can also be defined as "faithful" to what they really think.

To say that someone "tells the truth" means at the same time that the speaker is "true" in the sense of authentic vs. counterfeit, and that their statement is "true" in the sense of true vs. false. Obviously, individuals are also objects in the world: so we can say "the true July would never have done that" (meaning that July behaved in an inauthentic way, which is not the way July normally behaves, but modified, altered by something or in any case different for some external reason), or that "x is a true man" (believing that being a "true man" implies having certain characteristics or properties that x has or has had in a given circumstance). But truth as a property of speakers concerns the possibility for them to say what they believe to be true, a definition that implies both the choice to tell the truth *and* the truth of what is said (which is why Eco defined semiotics as the discipline that studies everything that can be used to lie). Truth in this sense concerns *the authenticity of the semiotic behavior of speakers*, that is, of individuals in the act of saying something, of producing signs, of communicating something to someone.

As proof of this analysis, we can also cite Greimas' square of veridiction (figure 1), which should be read as a square for "sincerity", or for truth applied to speakers, rather than for "truth" in general. The square combines the axes of being/non-being and seeming/non-seeming.

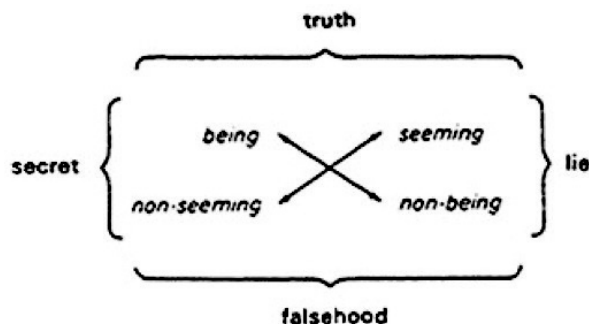


Figure 1. Greimas and Courtès' (1982 [1979], 369) square of veridictory modalities.

If Greimas was inclined to define truth as "being + seeming", it is because, as Sweetser herself did, it is possible to consider truth as the opposite both of "falsehood" and of "lie" (thus using "truth" instead of "sincerity"). In other words, different categories are mixed in the square of veridiction, which is why it gives the contradictory definition of "falsehood" as not saying what is not (if saying what is not is a lie, then not saying what is not will be, if anything, a way of being sincere).

Table 2. The matrix of "sincerity" as combination of truth/false and intention to deceive/non-intention to deceive.

	authenticity of S	non-authenticity of S
truth	insincerity	sincerity
false	lie	error or failed sincerity ²¹

As we have seen, saying that something is the case and saying that it is true that something is the case are the same thing, so being/not-being and truth/false should be considered interchangeable. Using true/false further allows to explain some semantic effects of "sincerity". For example, while it is possible to say that someone "believed to be sincere, but in reality he was lying", saying that someone is "sincere, but lying" sounds non-semantic. The reason being that, at least in most, prototypical cases, truth/false is a definitional feature of sincerity/lie. As for

²¹ As Hébert (2020, 53) pointed out, the square of veridiction is not really a semiotic square, but a matrix, since "truth" in Greimas' square is not understood as the complex term between being and seeming, but the union of being + seeming (just as falsehood is the union of non-being + non-seeming).

the axis of seeming/non-seeming, since we already have the pair true/false (but with being/non-being the reasoning would not have changed), it is not necessary to add seeming/non-seeming (by which Greimas means manifestation, see Greimas and Courtès, 1982, 369; by manifestation, they mean the production of a sign, see *ibid.*, 183). Instead, it is more urgent to include the category of authenticity/non-authenticity of the speaker's semiotic behavior²². I therefore propose replacing being/not-being with truth/false and seeming/not-seeming with authentic/inauthentic in order to obtain the matrix that defines sincerity and lie, respectively (table 2.).

As mentioned, since we produce signs to communicate something to someone, in the case of speakers with authenticity/inauthenticity we mean, in fact, the intention/non-intention to deceive someone (authentic vs. inauthentic semiotic behavior). Therefore, the resulting matrix defines sincerity as the combination of truth + non-intention to deceive someone, and lies as false + intention to deceive. In turn, it defines insincerity as saying something true while intending to deceive someone, and error as saying something false without intending to do so.

1.3.4. First results – The meaning of “truth”

Thinking back to the list of possible meanings of “truth”, some seem more appropriate when used to refer specifically to objects (e.g., “authentic”, “original”), to signs (e.g., “correspondent”), or speakers (e.g., “transparent”, “sincere”). In turn, all of those terms can be used to refer to all three types of things, but not without variations in meaning. I have already mentioned the case of “correct”, and we have also seen how “authentic” changes meaning when referring to objects or speakers. Depending on context, saying that someone is “authentic” can mean either that they behave in an unaffected manner, consistent with their usual behavior, or that they have been sincere. It is rarer to refer to a text as “authentic” to say that it tells the truth, although one can say that an interpretation is “authentic” to say that it is correct. Sincerity too can be attributed to objects, signs, and speakers. A text that tells the truth can be said to be sincere, even if the semantic effect appears to be metaphorical and anthropomorphic. Or consider Dante's verse “Questa natura al suo fattore unita, Qual fu creata, fu sincera e buona” (“This nature when united to its Maker, Such as created, was sincere and good”), where “sincera” stands for genuine, pure, unaltered.

In any case, the meaning of each of these terms changes when referring to objects, signs, or speakers. The representation of the meaning of “truth” should therefore be given by contextual selections, specifying to what the property of being “true” is attributed:

²² This is why the “secret” disappears from the square, because it is not immediately relevant to the definition of sincerity or truth: given Greimas' own definition, one may not say the truth either with the intention of deceiving someone (in which case the secret becomes a case of lie through omission), or without such an intention (in which case we have a secret proper, or at most a white lie).

Truth (of objects) – not modified, that conforms to a model or a standard. Synonyms: “authentic/authenticity”, “original”, “complete/completeness”, “full/fullness”, “natural”, “fully realized”, “fulfilled”, “genuine/genuinity”, “pure”, “non-altered”; antonyms: “artificiality”, “falsified”, “counterfeit”, “fake”, “altered”, “manipulated”, “artifact”.

Truth (of signs) – that says certain things are a certain way. Synonyms: “just”, “exact”, “correct/correctness”, “faithful”, “coherent/coherence”, “correspondent/ correspondence”; antonyms: “false”, “incorrect”, “inexact”.

Truth (of speakers) – whose communicative behavior is not modified, that conforms to a model or standard. Synonyms: “honest/honesty”, “frank”, “straightforward”, “truthful/truthfulness”; antonyms: “lie/lying”, “pretend/pretended”, “insincerity”, “mendacious”.

Can we derive from this analysis the prototypical meaning of “truth”, or a trait common to all three senses of “truth”? In all three cases, truth is used to attribute to something a property of *independence*, or of being independent from something else.

In the case of objects, the trait of independence takes on the characteristics of authenticity, that is independence from alterations or modifications. As we have seen, the authentic object is such precisely because it is independent of external factors intervening to falsify, modify, alter, etc. that object.

In the case of signs, truth in the strict sense means independence with respect to opinions, beliefs, theories (to say that a proposition is true means that the world objectively is how the proposition says it is).

In the case of speakers, the trait of independence is expressed in both of the above ways at the same time.

Eco’s conclusion on fakes was that, the problem is not so much the recognition of fakes. Given an original (existent or not), the truth (about fakes) will out, meaning that the criteria we have for recognizing fakes are, at least in the long run, sufficient. Instead, the real problem is the recognition of the original, or the truth (which we can never be completely certain of). However, this doesn’t mean that we do not have a clear understanding of the meaning of “false” and “true”²³. I return to the distinction made at the beginning of the chapter: we call “truth” both the property of being true and the things that have the property of being true. But the fact that we do not know what is true, i.e. which objects, signs or people have the property of being true, does not mean that truth does not exist, nor that we do not know what “truth” means or how a true object, sign, speaker is.

The problem of recognizing the original is no different from the problem of recognizing fakes: we consider objects to be original until some signs emerge that tell us otherwise. As is well known, for Peirce truth was the end of inquiry. The

²³ Eco himself wrote two “fictions” on truth that perfectly show the meaning of “truth”: see Eco (1988b) and his chapter on *The Strange Case of Doctor Jeckyll and The Brothers Hyde* in Eco (1999, 305).

adjective is ambiguous in English, between “conclusion” and “goal”, but Peirce is clear that truth is what the community of interpreters agrees on not out of weariness, but because no more doubts emerge, no more clues, counterexamples or contradictory signs are encountered (see Misak, 2000, 95). Of course, the end of inquiry is never reached, if only because the world is constantly changing, so that, with the world, also what is true changes – that is, in Eco’s terms, we can never be one hundred percent sure of the originality/truth of something. But if we devote ourselves to the search of fakes, it is because we believe that truth exists (and this applies to all the senses of “truth”). The proof that “independence from” is what we mean by “truth” is that if we thought that truth and falsehood were dependent on us, on what we think or how we speak, we would not expend so much energy trying to falsify objects, signs and speakers, i.e. we would not worry so much about fakes, falsehoods and lies.

The meaning of “truth” is that there is something independent of us that resists our interpretations and our will. “Truth” is a sign that we need to say that we can be wrong, that there is a difference between our beliefs and reality, between the presumed original and the original, between the presumed authentic and the authentic, between simulation and sincerity. We often declare many things that are not true to be true or the truth, and even when we find no contradictory signs to indicate that something is false, we can never be certain that something is true. But we need the sign of “truth” to say that something is false even if we do not know exactly what is true. We need it as the opposite of something that has been found to be false (fake, counterfeit, a lie, etc.). Regardless of what is true or what we believe to be true, when we say that something is true we mean that it is independent, in some respect, from us, and that the world does not always go as we want it to or as we thought it would.

1.4. Speak the truth vs. laugh at truth

Once we have distinguished between the meanings of “truth” from what is true, it seems intuitive to conclude that there are things that are true even if we do not know them, such as the number of hairs on my head, and others that we can know quite easily, such as the number of hands with which I am writing this document. Obviously, between these two extremes there are all the cases that matter most to us and on which full agreement is rarely reached, either because the history of thought has shown that what we consider true is constantly changing, or because different people believe different things that contradict each other. This is the situation that has led many philosophers to believe not only that truth does not exist, but that it is a tool of domination of man over man, or in any case a concept that we would better do without.

This is also the position of many semioticians who, on the basis of Greimas’ theory of veridiction, conceive truth useful only for making someone believe something to be true for manipulative purposes, or as a type of discourse that a society accepts on the basis of its regime of truth, as Foucault (1977) called it. Even those who concede that what is needed today is no longer, or not only, to multiply interpretations but, given the polarization of opinions exacerbated by the digital revolution, building a common ground of beliefs on which to agree for the health of public debate, they still define “truth” as that on which a community agrees, and not as that on which a community could agree (e.g. Lorusso, 2025; see also Lotman’s reflections on truth reconstructed by Gramigna, 2022b). The difference is, again, between truth and “truths”.

However, in light of the semantic analysis presented, it should be doubted that philosophers and semioticians have always talked about the same thing when debating truth. To verify this hypothesis, and to appreciate the differences in attitude towards truth, consider the following two mottos (1–2) which, even though one better known than the other, express the same critical spirit towards power while using “truth” in seemingly opposite ways:

- (1) Speak the truth to power!
- (2) Laugh at the truth!

In the following paragraphs, I briefly analyze these two mottos (1–2). My thesis is that, although they treat truth in opposite ways, the two slogans say the same thing. If (1–2) say the same thing, then it means that the “truth” they refer to is understood in two different ways.

1.4.1. Speak the truth

In its most known version, this phrase was popularized by civil rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s in the form of “speaking truth to power”. The intended meaning can vary depending on who the intended addressee is and what is meant by “truth”. For example, Vaclav Havel, in his *The Power of The Powerless* (1985), spoke of “living within the truth”, meaning by “truth” something very similar to “sincerity” as I described it here, that is, as a property of speakers or their behavior: «individuals can be alienated from themselves only because there is something in them to alienate [...] Living the truth is thus woven directly into the texture of living a lie. It is the repressed alternative, the authentic aim to which living a lie is an inauthentic response» (Havel, 1985, 41). Here, speaking the truth becomes an act of individual resistance which, as Havel says, «is not an insignificant step to take» (1985, 85)²⁴. In other cases, “speaking truth to power” means taking the risk of publicly contradicting what those in power claim to be true as a form of duty to oneself and to the community. In this case, speaking truth takes on the characteristics of the Greek parrhesia studied by Foucault in his later lectures (e.g. Foucault, 2001), according to which the *parrhesiaste* does not say what he thinks is true, but the truth, because he takes the risk of saying it (corollary: kings and tyrants cannot practice parrhesia because they risk nothing).

Those who speak the truth are recognized for their courage. The risks involved in speaking the truth to power are, in fact, proof of the truth of what the parrhesiaste says. In most cases, people are encouraged to speak the truth to power because truth is seen as a nonviolent weapon in the hands of the powerless, so much so that Chomsky, who was more pessimistic than Havel and Foucault, corrected the motto with the following reasoning: «speaking truth to power makes no sense [...] instead speak truth to the powerless» (1998: 158).

A more recent variation on the motto is the case of the environmental movement *Extinction Rebellion* (XR), whose primary objective and fundamental principle is “tell the truth”, presented not as a political practice, but as an invitation to governments and the media. What does “truth” mean in this case? Does it refer to a particular content, for example, a set of specific theses on the climate or the Anthropocene, or something else? To answer, let’s look at some passages from XR’s manifesto, *This is Not a Drill* (2019), and particularly from the first section, *Tell the Truth*²⁵.

As mentioned, in semiotics the most common approach is to study not truth, or the relationship between statements and truth, but the so-called truth effects

²⁴ «Our greengrocer’s attempt to live within the truth may be confined to not doing certain things. He decides not to put flags in his window when his only motive for putting them there in the first place would have been to avoid being reported by the house warden; he does not vote in elections that he considers false; he does not hide his opinions from his superiors. In other words, he may go no further than ‘merely’ refusing to comply with certain demands made on him by the system (which of course is not an insignificant step to take)» (Havel, 1985, 85).

²⁵ See also Zengiaro, et al (2024).

produced by a text (veridiction). In certain passages, the meaning of “truth” can oscillate, in XR’s discourse, between certainty and truth in the strict sense. The text expresses certainty, for example, about certain future truths, contingent futures such as: «should we continue as a planet to increase greenhouse gases as we have done for the past two years and as we have done for the past 150 years, we would way exceed the 2°C maximum temperature rise and certainly the 1.5 °C»²⁶. This kind of statement also reveals the full meaning of “truth” in the long version of the principle, “tell the truth and act as if the truth is real”: in this case, “truth” refers to these future truths about the effects of climate change, with the invitation to behave as if these outcomes were already real. Certainty about something is also expressed in the opposite direction of fit between signs and the world when, for example, it is expressed the certainty that if we do something, we can still change the world. See the following example from Vandana Shiva’s foreword: «today’s struggle for truth is that extinction and extermination are not inevitable» (17). In these cases where “truth” is used to express certainty in something, we are dealing with issues of veridiction, with making someone believe something is true in order to make him act accordingly.

However, the analysis of veridiction appears insufficient to explain the meaning of “truth” in other passages of the manifesto. When XR activists ask their interlocutors to tell the truth, they do not necessarily intend to make them believe a particular truth claim. The first of XR’s points does not primarily concern a particular proposition, or a set of scientific data on CO₂ emissions into the atmosphere, for example; it concerns truth itself. Take one of the first appearances of “truth” in the text, in Sam Knights’ introduction, which outlines the movement’s three points: «1/ the government must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change» (22). Shortly afterwards, Knights introduces the contents of the first section of the book as follows:

The first section of the book is about telling the truth; it will spell out the severity of the situation and describe, in painstaking detail, the effects of climate breakdown. It will tell you the facts and it will not hold back. It presents dispatches from the front lines of climate change and attempts to diagnose decades of denial. It considers the psychological damage of the climate crisis and the role of love, grief and courage in finding a way out of the wreckage. (24)

Although it is true that XR activists oppose science to politics, it is interesting to note that, in fact, throughout the first section of *This is Not a Drill*, “truth” is never mentioned in relation to any specific content. Furthermore, “truth” never appears in the same discourse in which scientific data is presented.

The first article in section 1 does not mention the word truth, except in the title, but offers a series of facts that justify «the unification and intensification of our shared struggle» (33). The same applies to articles 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 12.

²⁶ Cfr. <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/the-emergency/part-5/>.

These articles present facts, data, and a series of reconstructions on why a movement such as Extinction Rebellion was necessary, alternating with anecdotes or personal considerations. In none of these is “truth” ever mentioned. As for the passages where “truth” is mentioned, starting with the initial *Declaration of Rebellion*, “truth” appears alongside the “values of truth”: «rational mind, ethical conscience, moral concern, or spiritual belief. In accordance with these values, the virtues of truth, and the weight of scientific evidence, we declare it our duty to act [...]» (9). See the numerous references to the virtues of truth understood not as properties of objects or statements, but of speakers²⁷. For example, the second article by Ripple and Houtman is presented as a brief exposition of the moral and ethical duty of scientists to tell the truth:

We scientists have been frustrated and even in despair over the many years of inaction, but we will continue to speak out, telling the truth about what we all need to do to protect life on planet Earth. (42)

The first point of XR’s requests is above all a request for sincerity, to allow an open and ideologically unbiased discussion on the climate crisis. The semantic effect, then, is not to oppose one or a series of scientific propositions to those of politics, but rather to oppose the open discourse of science to the ideological discourse of politics, where by ideological discourse I mean Eco’s (1975) theory of telling only part of the story, intentionally concealing that there are also other relevant aspects to a given problem (I will have more to say about ideology and truth in chapter 3). The intended meaning is therefore not so much to oppose one’s own truth to the mainstream one, but truth and its values) to what power says is true, regardless of what is true.

Regardless of whether it is considered an effective weapon or not, and regardless of who should be the addressee of the imperative (those in power or the powerless), in all cases “truth” is used not so much or not directly to say that something is true, but to say that something else is false. Recently, Lynch (2025) proposed that “speaking truth to power” is the social value of truth, a profound reason why we have the concept to begin with and why it is important for democracy. Truth is necessary in order to disagree with others (particularly with those in power) and for political change and progress to take place. To disagree, there needs to be something to disagree about. To have change, there needs to be something that changes that is not just our interpretations. Moreover, valuing speaking truth to power involves acting on the basis of two ideas: «first, people should, where possible, publicly point out the falsehoods made by those in power when they make claims that are false. Second, people from marginalized communities should, where possible, publicly speak the truths about their own communities’ experiences» (Lynch, 2025, 16). Both of which don’t reduce to acts of veridiction.

In “speak the truth”, truth is meant either as a property of signs or of speakers. While it is clear that to “tell the truth” one must say what one believes to be true,

²⁷ By definition, lie implies the intention to deceive somebody, see the analysis of “sincerity” above.

in contrast to what those in power say is true, the invitation to “speak truth to power” implies that what those in power say is true is false, or at least not the whole truth. For this reason, contrary to the motto we’ll see in the next section, the meaning of truth here is that there is a distinction between what those in power say is true and truth as what is independent from what those in power say is true.

1.4.2. Laugh at the truth

While certainly less famous than the previous, the idea that “laughing at the truth” is a positive value is well known at least in semiotics, being the central theme of William of Baskerville’s concluding reflections in *The Name of the Rose* (Eco, 1980; 1983a). But we mainly owe this concept to Michail Bakhtin’s analysis of the comic and carnivalesque in Rabelais (Bakhtin, 1984 [1965]).

For Bakhtin, Rabelais «is the most difficult classical author of world literature» (1984, 3), but his work is the most representative for understanding the culture of folk humor in the Renaissance, before this culture radically changed the next century. This change can be observed especially in the approach to laughter. In the seventeenth century laughter is considered an inferior literary form, unsuitable for representing the truth of important themes such as history, philosophy, etc. («truth about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter», 67). For the Renaissance, instead (and unlike subsequent theories of laughter, from modernity to Bergson), laughter has a «deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world» (66), and, consequently, it is as acceptable in great literature as seriousness. The primarily positive trait of laughter, according to Bakhtin, emerges in its most universal and radical form «from the depths of folk culture» (72), and in an exemplary way in the work of Rabelais. In addition to its universality (one can laugh at anything; plus laughter is man’s second nature, given Aristotle’s intuition that laughter is the proper of man), one of the characteristic features of laughter in parodic works and rituals such as festivals and carnivals, officially banned but partly legalized by the church, is its relationship with freedom and truth:

Medieval laughter is not a subjective, individual and biological consciousness of the uninterrupted flow of time. It is the social consciousness of all the people. Man experiences this flow of time in the festive marketplace, in the carnival crowd, as he comes into contact with other bodies of varying age and social caste. He is aware of being a member of a continually growing and renewed people. This is why festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts. (Bakhtin, 1984, 92)

According to Bakhtin there is an important connection between laughter, truth, and political change (or at least the possibility of it). In particular, when medieval laughter triumphed over fear and the oppression of power and of the mysteries of the world (at least for the fleeting duration of the festival), it «boldly unveiled the

truth about both» (92). What interests me here is understanding what Bakhtin means by “truth”.

On the one hand, we have the opposition between the “feudal truth” (built within the frameworks of scholastic science and hierarchy) and the “unofficial truth” of laughter and the people. On the other hand, the truth of laughter for Bakhtin «can hardly be determined as “objectively abstract” [...] no doubt laughter was in part an external defensive form of truth», but laughter is essentially a form of internal truth, freeing man not only from external oppression, but «first of all from the great interior censor» (94).

These two oppositions, official feudal truth vs. unofficial truth of the people, and internal truth vs. external truth, reveal the profound meaning of the principle “laugh at truth”, perfectly expressed by Umberto Eco’s William of Baskerville: «Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh*, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth» (Eco, 1983a, 287).

The idea that laughter allows us to “free ourselves from insane passion for the truth” also recurs in many of the considerations on truth expressed by post-modernist philosophies and in the semiotic concept of veridiction. However, at least for Bakhtin, laughing at truth meant laughing at the official feudal truth, and therefore at what was true within the feudal framework of Christian doctrine and scholastic philosophy. But if laughter is capable of revealing the falsity of the official truth, it is because laughter is a tool for discovering truth (the unofficial truth) on a par with science and serious philosophy, not because truth does not exist.

Through laughter, the people free themselves not only from external censorship (feudal truth), but also from internal censorship, so that internal truth could find expression: «This is why it not only permitted the expression of an antifeudal, popular truth; it helped to uncover this truth and to give it an internal form» (94). Evidently, for Bakhtin the power of laughter comes from its connection with truth, not from their separation. Moreover, just like “truth” in the previous motto, laughter too is a “free” weapon for those who are not in power («laughter could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the People. It always remained a free weapon in their hands», 94). At the same time, laughter also expresses «the people’s hopes of a happier future, of a more just social and economic order, a new truth» (Bakhtin, 1984, 81). Finally, the point about liberating ourselves from internal censorship is not dissimilar from Foucault’s analysis of “speak the truth” as something that requires courage and carries risks.

One could say that, just like us, Bakhtin had to deal with the various meanings of “truth”. But reading the text, it is clear that according to his interpretation the relationship between laughter and truth in Renaissance folk literature did not concern the mockery of the concept of truth, but rather of what was presented as true by those in power, and that laughter was considered a tool for finding the truth on a par with other methods of inquiry.

Laughing at what is true for those in power is the truth of laughter: we have, on one side, the truth that can be known through laughter (unmasking the false, hope for change); on the other, what is presented as true by the official philosophies

and doctrines of those in power. Something similar holds even for William of Baskerville who, after expressing the principle that one must laugh at the truth, admitted, pressed by his disciple: «I have never doubted the truth of signs, Adso; they are the only things man has with which to orient himself in the world. What I did not understand was the relation among signs» (Eco, 1983a, 287–288).

Regarding the passage quoted from *The Name of the Rose*, Paolucci (2017, 130) notes that «there is a very clear textual opposition between “truth” and “philosophy”: Jorge loves his truth so much (he is willing to die for it) that he hates philosophy, hates the love of knowledge, so much so that he is willing to destroy the library”» (my translation). As we have seen, Bakhtin would have been tempted to express himself in the opposite way, opposing scholastic philosophy to the truth of laughter – but we should not conclude that the intended meaning is equally contradictory. I believe, instead, that the terminological difference can be cited as proof of the polysemy of “truth”, which is precisely what I am arguing for. Although the terms are used in a contradictory way at the lexical level (truth vs. philosophy; philosophy vs. truth), the intended, underlying opposition is the same: on the one hand, truth understood as that which is true within a framework (the “truth” loved by Jorge, scholastic philosophy for Bakhtin), on the other, truth as that which is independent of any framework, doctrine, theory or law (philosophy for Jorge, and the truth of laughter for Bakhtin).

1.4.3. Truth vs. Certainty

Against appearances, (1–2) say the same thing. While in (1) it is recommended to tell the truth to those in power (or to ask those in power to tell the truth), meaning by “truth” that which is different from what those in power are saying, or what they should be saying if their semiotic behavior were not inauthentic, in (2) it is recommended to laugh at the Truth, this time understood as that which those in power say is true (I will use the capital letter T to distinguish the two senses).

So, the “truth” mentioned in the two mottos is two different things, and the two mottos do not contradict each other. Laughing at the Truth, that is, at what someone believes to be true, is, on the one hand, an invitation to humility, to not taking anything for granted, an expression of the value of critical thinking and of fallibilism as a semiotic value (following the example of William of Baskerville). On the other hand, it concerns laughter, or not accepting as gospel everything that others tell us is true in a more general sense, as a tool for emancipation from power. But if laughing at Truth can be emancipatory, it is because things are or can be different from how those in power say they are (i.e., they do not tell the truth), and laughing at the Truth only makes sense if the Truth is not true, whereas if there were no difference between Truths and truth, there would be nothing to laugh about, because laughing at the Truth would make no difference compared to taking it seriously (the official Truth and the Unofficial Truth would be equally untrue).

Note that the distinction between (1–2), and between the two related meanings of “truth”, does not correspond to Foucault’s (2001, 168) distinction between the analytical tradition (which studies the relationship between a sentence and truth) and the critical tradition of truth (which studies how and why one should tell the truth). Both (1–2) belong to the critical tradition. This is not a matter of opposing alethic realists and anti-realists, but of bringing together two modes of the critical analysis of truth: a) the study of the semiotic modes of “speaking the truth”, and b) the study of the semiotic modes of veridiction, which corresponds instead to the semioethic principle of laughing at Truth.

In the rest of the thesis I propose some semiotic considerations on the possibility of speaking the truth through signs and on speaking the truth through signs (chapters 2 and 3, respectively), which I do not conceive as opposed to or in contradiction with the study of veridiction, but as a parallel line of research.

Above, I gave a definition of truth as independence and resistance to will, independence and resistance that take on semantic variations when attributed to objects, signs, or speakers, respectively. But the analysis of (1–2) shows that there is a further variation in meaning to be considered, which particularly concerns truth in the strict sense, as a property of signs. I have already mentioned the possibility of using “truth” to refer both to truth and to what is true: in this sense, Haack (2005) distinguished between one truth and many truths, because if truth as a property is one (according to her interpretation of pragmatist theory of truth), there are many different things that can be said to be true. But a further variation in meaning occurs when we call “truth” something believed to be true vs. something we do not know yet, respectively.

Precisely because the prototypical meaning of “truth” is independence from something else, and in the case of signs independence from opinions, theories, etc., when we believe that a proposition is true, we are tempted to believe it to be “certainly” true, and that possible alternative beliefs or theories are false. To believe that Umberto Eco was Piedmontese means to believe that it is false that he was Sardinian, and that anyone who thinks Eco was Sardinian is wrong. Obviously, the same applies to those who think it is true that Eco was Sardinian. We must assume that by dint of calling “the truth” what we believe to be true, what we are certain of, “truth” takes on the meaning of “what we are certain of”.

Although they are different things (we can be, and often are, certain of beliefs that are not true), semiotically we use “truth” to refer to both things:

Truth (+ believed) – what one is certain of.

Truth (– believed) – that which is independent of what one is certain of.

When William of Baskerville affirms the principle that one must laugh at truth, he means that one must laugh at certainty. Curiously, but this is one of the intrinsic difficulties of the concept, even though truth is a property of signs (a true sign is a sign that says that things are the way they are), one must laugh at what signs

say is true, but this is precisely because truth, in the strict sense, is independent of our beliefs (which we express through signs).

As something unknown, potentially knowable but independent of us and about which we can never be certain (truth – believed), truth is that which is independent and resistant to our opinions, manipulations, etc. But if we add the trait of being believed by someone, then we consider truth to be everything that does not contradict our other beliefs, what we are certain of or what is most dear to us, what is extremely important to us, what defines our identity (often distinguished by the use of a possessive adjective, such as “my truth”, “our truths”). In this second sense, “truth” becomes what signs say is true in a given culture or society, the certainties, dogmas, and everything that, as Foucault said, passes for true in a society and contributes to maintaining the status quo.

1.4.4. Conclusions – power of and power over

Having established the specificity of the semiotic research on “truth” with respect to the philosophical one, in this chapter I have proposed an analysis of the sign of truth based on the hypothesis that truth, like being for Aristotle, can be said in many ways. I proposed to bring order to these many ways by, first, distinguishing between three senses of “truth” based on what is being predicated as true, whether objects, signs, or speakers. In all three cases, attributing the adjective “true” to something means predicating its independence from something else, its autonomy from external factors or manipulations. Respectively: to say that an object is true means to say that it is “authentic”; to say that a sign is true means saying that things are as that sign says; to say that a speaker is true, finally, means that they are sincere (sincerity which I have defined, in turn, as authenticity of semiotic behavior, as truth + authenticity).

Through the analysis of the meaning of “truth” in two mottos, I then deepened the analysis examining a further semantic variation, according to which the meaning of “truth” changes in relation to the trait + believed/– believed. When the trait + believed is added, and therefore the reference is not to truth but to propositions believed to have the property by someone, “truth” becomes what one is certain of, or what is true within a framework.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the semantic difference between the two meanings of “truth” also concerns two different notions of power. For Sweetser, for example, the semantic analysis of “lie” spontaneously implies a certain relationship between truth and power:

Placed in the framework of cultural models of discourse and information, the variable reprehensibility of lies follows naturally. To the extent that information really is beneficial at a higher level, and false information harmful, a lie will harm. (Sweetser, 1987, 55)

As another example, it is well known that Foucault (1977) believed truth to be closely connected to power. However, for Foucault, truth should «be understood

as a system of ordered procedures for the production of, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements [...] linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it» (2001 [1977], 320). In other words, it seems that truth can be as harmful as lies. But based on the analysis made so far, it should now be clear that, even in this case, Foucault and Sweetser's considerations do not a priori contradict each other, they just say the same thing in different terms: lying, in Sweetser's sense, is not so different from saying that something is true in Foucault's sense (i.e., making someone believe that something is certainly true).

Foucault's theory of power is one of the most cited in literature. Moreover, it is considered a decisive contribution to the understanding the pervasiveness of power, which goes far beyond the relationship between the state and its citizens, but is present in all types of relationships ("power comes from everywhere"). This conception of power reinforces the thesis that truth is always a form of power, not only when it is the state or governments promoting something as truth. However, Foucault's theory has also received several criticisms (see Nash, 2001 for an overview), particularly with regard to the question of how should we conceive of power, whether as something (always) negative or (possibly) positive for society. But if we distinguish between truth in the strict sense and certainty, the solution is very simple, at least for what concerns truth. Using Spinoza's distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*, the analysis I have proposed suggests that "truth", with a lowercase t, should be conceived as an instrument of emancipation in the hands of the powerless (as in the motto "speak the truth to power"), thus as a form of *power of*, of *potentia* capable of liberating man and promoting change. In turn, "Truth", with a capital T, implies a different notion of power, since certainty is often something dogmatic, an expression of man's *power over* man (*potestas*), from which one must be freed (for example, through laughter).

For this reason, the distinction between truth in the strict sense and truth as certainty is fundamental for distinguishing between the two critical approaches to truth. On the one hand, we must ask ourselves through which semiotic modalities is it possible to speak the truth in the strict sense; on the other hand, we must question Truth understood as that which is presented as the truth in a culture or society. Since we are already well equipped in semiotics to deal with the second problem, in the rest of this work I will focus on the first one.

2. ON TRUTH FROM A SEMIOTIC POINT OF VIEW

But it follows from our own existence (which is proved by the occurrence of ignorance and error) that everything which is present to us is a phenomenal manifestation of ourselves. This does not prevent its being a phenomenon of something without us, just as a rainbow is at once a manifestation both of the sun and of the rain.

(Charles Sanders Peirce, *Some consequences of four incapacities*, 1868)

2.1. One dogma of semiotics

2.1.1. Introduction to semiotics' standard position on truth

As Remo Gramigna recently said, «semiotic research on the subject of truth has been scant» (2022, 84). Indeed, while contemporary semiotics has dealt extensively with truth-related problems such as disinformation and misinformation (Danesi, 2023; 2024; 2025), conspiracy theories (Leone, 2016; Leone et al, 2020; Leone, 2021a; 2023b; Madisson and Ventsel, 2021; Lorusso, 2023), and the spiral of digital falsehoods augmented by digital tools and social platforms (Leone, 2023a), it's almost never dealt directly with truth. This is not due to chance. It is the result of what might be called the standard position on truth in semiotics, according to which truth is beyond the interests of the semiotician. The semiotician studies not truth, but veridiction. And we do not study how things are, but effects of meaning (assuming that effects of meaning are not part of how things are). As we shall see, this assumption about truth comes both from the early Eco, from his most important semiotic book, *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), and from the *Dictionnaire* (1979) of Greimas and Courtès. So, it seems that truth, or rather its exclusion, could claim to be one of the few topics about which generative and interpretative semiotics happily converged.

I think most semioticians would make the following two points as argument against truth in semiotics:

- 1) We know but signs;
- 2) Reality is amorphous mass before the appearance of language.

The first point (1) is widely accepted, so much so that many semioticians were led to pose the problem of semiotics' imperialism (Eco, 1976; 1984c) and pan-semiotism (Stjernfelt, 2006). I have formulated it in William of Baskerville's terms from *The Name of the Rose* (Eco, 1980, 495), but it originates in the third human incapacity identified by Peirce (1868), according to which there is no

cognition without signs. According to (1), the fact that we know only through signs means that truth is constitutively unattainable to us.

The second point (2), on the other hand, is obtained from the union of the Saussurian principle that the mind is amorphous mass before the appearance of language (de Saussure, 1916, 156) and Hjelmslev's (1943) glossematics, according to which the substance of the two faces of a sign is the result of the cut operation of form onto matter (usually translated as "purport"). I do not consider (1–2) to be dogmas that contemporary semiotics uncritically accepts. But I will show that the interpretation that connects (1–2) to the rejection of truth in semiotics is dogmatic. Therefore, I will not elaborate deeply on (1–2). Instead, my strategy will be to gather some reflections on the relationship between semiotic methodology and truth that should lead to a different interpretation of the two points. That is, (1–2) will not be changed one letter; instead, they will change in meaning: the thesis I defend is that (1–2) do not imply the exclusion of truth from the horizon of semiotic interests²⁸.

My starting point will be based on my interpretation of Eco's analysis of the tree of Porphyry (1984a; 1984b). If I start with the *Antiporphyry* is to show that it is not for arbitrary reasons, nor for philosophical preference that I think it's important for semiotics to rethink the problem of truth, but because of the cogency of an argument within semiotics. Although the main purpose of the paper was to demonstrate the impossibility of so-called dictionary semantics, Eco also drew other conclusions, namely that if the content units of a language are not genera or species (i.e. linguistic primitives) whose truth is analytic, that is, independent of the world, then they must be synthetic external signs. With these conclusions, Eco changed his position on the definition of semiotic problems, which becomes opposite to that of *A Theory*, as I will demonstrate. Whereas in *A Theory* Eco believed that semiotic judgments were analytic, now they appear to be synthetic.

To show the consequences of this turn, I will then introduce a distinction between external and internal problems and pose the question of what kind of problems are semiotic problems. Although semiotics' problems seem *prima facie* to be a prototypical example of internal questions, because they deal with second-order problems (semiotics produces interpretations of interpretations already made by others), I will argue that semiotics' problems are external problems, the truth of which is independent of the beliefs and tools that the semiotician summons for his/her analyses. I will use two strategies. The first is an analysis of my intuitions about how semioticians proceed when they analyze a text. The second is to compare the weak semiotics that Eco proposes at the end of the *Antiporphyry* with Quine and Peirce's theories of knowledge. In all three cases, the inability to distinguish between external differences and linguistic primitives (Eco), between synthetic and analytic judgments (Quine), and between inferences and intuitions (Peirce) indicates that there are no beliefs immune to revision, on the one hand, and no internal problems, on the other. If my analysis holds, then

²⁸ For a similar argument based on different premises see Giuliana (2026).

truth cannot be just an effect of discourse for semiotics, and veridiction does not exhaust the function of “truth” in language, or this at least will be my thesis.

In several passages, I will mention considerations that pragmatist philosophers have made about truth and the nature of inquiry, but this is only because my reflection starts from Eco’s pragmatist conclusions. The strength of Eco’s paper is that, even though it leads to conclusions close to pragmatism (in particular that of Peirce and Quine), its premises and development apply to structuralist semiotics as well. My intention is to show why truth is important to semiotics without assuming or discussing a particular theory of truth, and for this purpose, the *Antiporphyry* is the best possible starting point. Therefore, it is not necessary to embrace pragmatism as a background philosophy to accept or reject the thesis I defend here.

A further problem concerns the question of what is meant by “sign”, whether a sign is something external or an internal mental representation. To answer this, I will consider another problem, that of the distinction between nature and culture. I propose a semantic analysis, focusing on two, often overlooked ways of understanding the opposition, which I obtain from Dewey’s (1925) critique of the opposition between means and ends. In particular, the opposition between nature and culture can be understood as a dualism or as a simple distinction. So, when it is said that we need to “overcome the opposition between nature and culture”, we need to specify what we mean to overcome. Apart from the framework I build here around the discussion of the *Antiporphyry*, I do not offer independent arguments for preferring one conception over the other. I conceive of this discussion as a contribution to an important contemporary debate in semiotics and as a way of specifying the philosophical premises that form the background to this chapter and the rest of the work: I agree that we must say goodbye to the opposition between nature and culture, but we must say goodbye to their metaphysical dichotomization (or dualism), not to the possibility of “simply” distinguishing between natural things and cultural things (in a very broad sense, as we shall see).

All in all, my thesis will be that truth is a substantive problem for semiotics. Here, I’m presenting the reasons why I think this is the case, along with some consequences of this thought. When I say that truth is a substantive problem for semiotics, I do not mean that semiotics should be concerned with what is true and what is not, but only that veridiction does not exhaust the meaning and function of “truth” in language. I will conclude by proposing to distinguish between truth as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis and truth as the *terminus ad quem* of texts, and between truth and signs.

2.1.2. The Antiporphyry

The *Antiporphyry* is one of the most important articles in Eco's entire semiotic and philosophical work²⁹. Originally appearing in the collection of essays on the *Weak Thought* edited by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (1983), the same contribution has been reprinted, with small changes, in Eco (1983b; 1984a; 1984b; 1985; 2007; 2014). It's not unusual to divide Eco's semiotic work into two parts, the first related to *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), the other to *Kant and the Platypus* (1999) which, as Eco himself made explicit, amended several parts of his earlier theories. A particularly controversial point is the question of realism in Eco (Traini, 2017; Fadda, 2017). Again, the tendency is to contrast the Eco of '75, with its theory of the arbitrary and conventional relation between icons and referents, and the Eco of '97 (see Eco, 1997; 1999) with the theory of primary iconism, contractual realism, and affordances and experience as the starting point of semiosis. My argument is that the *Antiporphyry* is where we can appreciate the evolution of Eco's thought, and the reasons that led him to modify important parts of his semiotic theory. Furthermore, while the importance of this article is often recognized, Eco's conclusions are not always appreciated in all their consequences for the semiotic methodology. Specifically, I will show that if we accept the conclusions of the *Antiporphyry*, then semiotics should reconsider its approach to the concept of truth.

Eco's argument takes the following form: first, Eco posits what he calls *strong thought theories*, that is, theories that describe the form of content of a semiotic system as a Porphyrian tree; then, he demonstrates that strong thought theories are impossible; and concludes that if the form of content cannot be tree-like, then it must be encyclopedic.

Eco distinguishes two types of strong thought. In what follows, I will characterize the distinction, but the most important thing for my purposes is that strong thought theories imply a dualism between two types of truth, analytical and synthetic truths, respectively, a dualism that underlies semiotics' rejection of truth as an interesting object of research. Instead, the encyclopedic form of knowledge implies, for Eco, that languages and semiotic systems in general cannot be closed but must be open to the outside, hence no dualism is possible between two kinds of truth. In what follows I expand this argument.

²⁹ For the intellectual history and evolution of Eco's thought, see Lorusso (2008), Paolucci (2017) and Eco (2017a). Eco never made explicit the connection between the conclusions of the *Antiporphyry* and the terminus a quo I propose here. But see Violi (2000), Petitot (2000) and Eco et al. (2021 [1998]) for a critical discussion of *Kant and the Platypus*.

2.1.3. Strong thought theories

Eco distinguished two kinds of strong thought theories:

In the first, one aspires to a thought which is so complex (but at the same time organic) that it can account for the complexity (and the organicity) of the world of our experience, or the natural world. In the second, one aspires to construct a model world which is simplified in such a way that, no longer so complex as to be intersubjectively uncontrollable, thought may mirror its structure. In this second case, in order for it to be intersubjectively controllable, thought takes on the form of a language L endowed with its own rules, and such that these rules are nonetheless the same as those of the model world that the language expresses.

In the first case, thought presumes to proceed according to rules which are given (and found in the becoming of thought itself), and which for some reason are the same as those (as yet unknown, moreover) of the “natural” world which it thinks. In the second case, both the linguistic rules and those of the model world are posited and both, insofar as they are assumed, must be known in advance and formulated in some metalinguistic form (naturally the problem of what renders the metalanguage adequate to the language which it describes remains open). (Eco, 2012 [1983a], 75)

This passage appeared in the first version of the article in a volume edited by postmodernist philosophers Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti titled *Il pensiero debole* (1983, translated in English in Vattimo and Rovatti, 2012), and in Eco (1985, 334). Eco doesn't connect the two types to specific examples, but they correspond to the two main versions of foundationalism in epistemology, what Ernest Sosa (1980) called the pyramid and the raft, foundationalism and coheren-tism, respectively. The theories based on the pyramid metaphor want knowledge (defined as true and justified beliefs) to be those beliefs that can be deduced from a base (a foundation) of indubitable beliefs, thus establishing an asymmetrical relationship between the foundation, which are indubitable beliefs of a finite number («each branch of an epistemic pyramid must terminate», 5), and the rest of the deducible knowledge (from which the shape of an inverted pyramid is obtained).

The raft metaphor is due to Otto Neurath's (1921) simile based on the ship of Theseus. According to this position justified are those beliefs that cohere with a comprehensive system of beliefs, an image favored by idealists, says Sosa (as we shall see, there is also an alternative way of conceiving Neurath's ship metaphor). Notably, Neurath (1932) presented the ship simile in opposition to Rudolph Carnap's foundationalism (see below 2.1.7.):

There is no way of taking conclusively established pure protocol sentences as the starting point of the sciences. No tabula rasa exists. We are like sailors who must rebuild their ships on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials [...] No sentence

enjoys the *noli me tangere* which Carnap ordains for protocol sentences. (Neurath, 1933 [1932], 203)³⁰

In any case, coherentism too is a form of foundationalism at a deep level, insofar as it posits knowledge as independent of reality (a free-floating ship) and based on a finite set of given beliefs (as in idealism or so-called doxastic coherentism). In this case too an asymmetrical relation is arranged between a base, the basic set of simple concepts or ideas, and the rest that is coherent with it. Not only that, but coherence with a belief system is a property we ascribe to those beliefs that entertain logical relations of implication and deducibility with parts of the same belief system. My belief that “the streets are wet outside” is coherent (justified) with a system *S* because, for example, it’s deducible from other beliefs in *S*, such as (i) “it is raining today” and (ii) “when it rains, streets get wet”. In short, the relation of coherence with *S* is supervenient to the relations of implication and deducibility with the parts (i-ii) of *S*: «the justification of the member belief B(Q) by its membership in *a* would then be parasitical on the logical relations among the beliefs in *a* which constitute the coherence of that set of beliefs» (Sosa, 1980, 8). In other words, the real difference between the two metaphors is not the structure of knowledge, but the nature of the baseline. Both foundationalism and coherentism are examples of strong thought theories based on the Porphyry’s tree structure (see presently for the diagrammatic representation).

We can further read through the two kinds of strong thought the distinction proposed by Eco (1968) between ontological and methodological structuralism (according to the former, structures have real existence, according to the latter, structures are just posits of the analyst). Strong thought theories posit language and cognition as independent of reality but as capable (or posited as capable) of mirroring the structure of reality³¹. An example of strong thought theories in semiotics are so-called dictionary semantics. These are theories of language that represent the meaning of an indefinite number of lexical units (the words of a language) through a finite number of semantic components (called figures, markers, or parts of a definition). Such components are conceived as simple concepts, linguistic primitives (or combinations of linguistic primitives) not themselves

³⁰ The original version from Neurath (1973 [1921], 199): «we are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood, the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction».

³¹ Both types would fall under the group of those philosophies that see logic as a *lingua universalis*, to which Hintikka (1997) opposed an approach that sees logic as a *calculus ratiocinator* (his examples were Peirce, Boole and Schröder). From this perspective, we can see Eco’s analysis as an argument against universal languages (see Eco, 1995 [1993a]). From similar premises, weak thought postmodernists concluded that then, since even science can no longer give the ultimate structure of reality, there is no truth, only interpretation, and one interpretation is as good as any other. Eco, however, came to different conclusions already in 1983, as we shall see. What Eco calls encyclopedic thought sees logic and semiotics as a form of calculus ratiocinator.

interpretable by further components. The main example Eco gives is Hjelmslev's glossematics. The strategy of dictionary semantics is the following: as phonetics successfully analyzed expressions into smaller figures, so that «unrestricted inventories are resolved into restricted» (Hjelmslev, 1943, 71), semantics shall do the same for contents.

While the inventory of word-contents is unrestricted, in a language of familiar structures even the minimal signs will be distributed (on the basis of relational differences) into some (selected) inventories, which are unrestricted (e.g., inventories of root-contents), and other (selecting) inventories, which are restricted. (*ibidem*)

Dictionary semantics implies the clear-cut distinction between signs and meanings (biplanarity), that is, between the unrestricted units and the restricted (either platonic ideas, innate mental symbols or concepts); between meanings and senses (in order to distinguish semantics from pragmatics, denotation from connotation and competence from performance); and between a language and its pragmatic use. Given these limitations, a dictionary only establishes the conditions for the correct construction of a sentence through the study of synonymy, analytical implication (through hyponymy and hyperonymy relations between the content figures of a sign), paraphrase, and contradiction.

2.1.4. Dictionaries don't work

The second step in Eco's argument is the demonstration that strong thought theories are impossible for structural reasons. His idea is that the problems of strong thought theories, in their various forms, can be traced back to the problems of using the structure of a Porphyrian tree to give definitions, that is, a structure based on «a purely lexical system of hyponyms and hyperonyms organized in the format of a tree such that every n-tuple of hyponyms postulates a single hyperonym, and every n-tuple of hyperonyms becomes an n-tuple of hyponyms of a higher single hyperonym, and so on» (Eco, 1984b, 51).

Now, Eco discusses the case of the definition of man as rational and mortal. Here, I merely reproduce a shortened version of Eco's demonstration by trying to define the bone of a skeleton as a weapon from the point of view of the hominid in *2001: A Space Odyssey*³² (somewhat similarly to what Eco, 1999 did taking the point of view of Kant wondering what the philosopher would have said had he seen a platypus). If I offer this example, it's because I want to emphasize not only that dictionaries are not suitable for representing the form of a sign's content, but that this incapacity appears most vividly when we face something new, an inexplicable fact that makes our semiotic codes change.

³² I want to thank Antonio Santangelo and Simona Stano for letting me present this example at their seminar *Incontri sul senso*, in 2023, at the University of Turin. I especially thank Santangelo who is the real author of the mental experiment of the hominid from *2001* in relation to the problem of realism in semiotics.

In the famous scene from Stanley Kubrick’s movie, a hominid, after his tribe was driven out of its water hole by a rival tribe, learns to use a bone as a weapon. Clearly the bone is given a new content by the hominid. However, we need not conclude that the hominid invented a new concept that didn’t exist before. We can hypothesize that the concept of weapon already existed before the hominid re-discovered it (or remembered it, as Plato would have it) or simply as if the hominid attributed the concept of /weapon/, that he already had, to something that didn’t have that property before. These are the possible interpretative moves the hominid can do if he uses a Porphyrian tree.

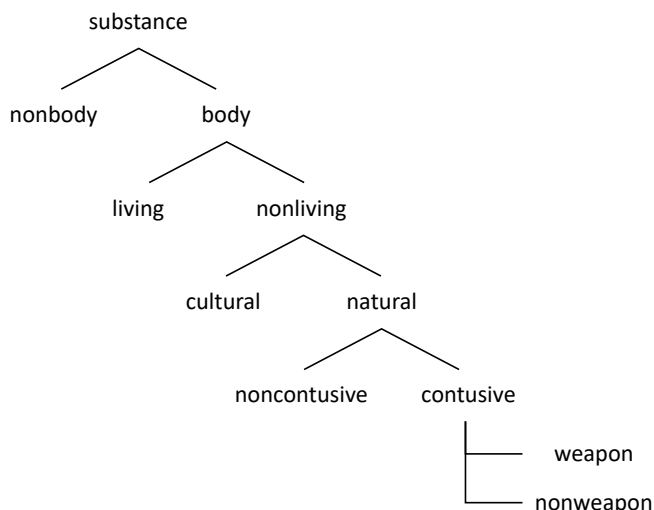


Figure 2. An example of a Porphyrian tree for “bone”, representing it as contusive natural object and weapon vs. nonweapon³³

Obviously, a bone is “any of the hard parts inside a human or animal that make up its frame” (Cambridge dictionary online). As such, “bone” should be placed in the tree of the animal parts. The definition must aim at the essence, and this is what the distinction between meaning and senses is based on. So, the fact that a bone can be used as a weapon shouldn’t be part of the meaning of the bone, being a piece of encyclopedic knowledge that comes from the experience of the world and not from just knowing the language. However, in order not to premise what needs to be demonstrated, let’s construct the tree for the bone for the hominid, granting that that a bone is a weapon could be part of its definition.

In a Porphyrian tree the definition of a species (a lexical unit) is given by the genus (the hyperonymous term) + the specific difference (not all differences are specific, and the point is precisely to find the right ones: man for example is also bipedal, but he is the only one who is also rational). With a representation like the one in Figure 2 we would place the bone under /weapon/ and define it as a contusive object that is also a weapon. With this representation we can infer that

³³ Figures 2, 3 and 4 are reproduced from Cerutti (2025).

a bone is a natural non-living object, that *therefore* it is not an incorporeal substance, that *if* it is a bone *then* it is a contusive object, and also paraphrase “give me that weapon” for “give me that bone”, omitting the contusive object part of the definition. But this representation is problematic because weapons include also non-natural weapons, but the same category (weapon vs. non-weapon) cannot be placed in two different positions in a Porphyry tree, or we would lose its strength. In this case, for example, given the information that something is “weapon” we would not be able, using the tree alone, to disambiguate whether it is a natural object or a cultural object.

One possible solution is to move the nature/culture pair lower down, so that we can distinguish between natural and cultural weapons.

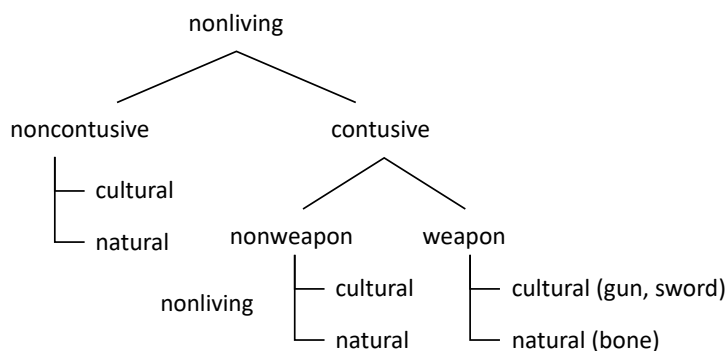


Figure 3. A Porphyrian tree representing “bone” as natural weapon

In this way we would know that a gun is a cultural weapon while a bone is a natural weapon. First problem with this representation is that we cannot distinguish a chair, a cultural object that is not a weapon, from a gun, nor a tree (a real one) from a bone. The second problem with placing a pair of general concepts further down is that we would be forced again to place the same pair of differences under different genus (Figure 3). If we eliminated the nature/culture pair instead, we would no longer be able to distinguish bones from guns. Moreover, the same problem seems to apply to other pairs of differences. Can we think, for example, of bones that are not weapons? If so, we would face the following ambivalence:



Figure 4. Ambivalent Porphyrian trees after eliminating the nature/culture distinction, representing “bone” and “weapon”

Depending on context we would need the first or the other representation to define a bone that is a weapon and a weapon that is not a bone.

2.1.5. Eco's conclusions

It seems to be impossible for the hominid to define the bone or use the bone as a weapon without restructuring his whole tree of knowledge, just as it was impossible for ancient and medieval logicians to define man through a tool like the Porphyrian tree. When something new emerges such as the weapon function of the bone, this fact leads to restructure the form of the content, to construct an ad hoc, contextual tree that allows to interpret that phenomenon. This shows how it's not possible to identify properties that can simultaneously define something and distinguish it from everything else without the same concepts, supposed to be primitive and finite in number, appearing in more than one definition, blowing up the difference between universal primitives (genus and species in the case of Porphyry) and differences. Thus, «either the primitives cannot be interpreted, and one cannot explain the meaning of a term, or they can and must be interpreted, and one cannot limit their number» (Eco, 1984b, 57).

The following are Eco's conclusions:

- i) In a tree like the one in Figure 3 «many new and still unknown natural kinds can be discovered and defined» (Eco, 1984b, 64);
- ii) Genera and species are just names «by which one labels only clusters of differentiae» (1984b, 65); They are «linguistic ghosts» (65–66);
- iii) One cannot deduce that if x then y independently of contexts, because the same pair of concepts can be placed at many different points of the tree – hence, the tree «can be freely reorganized according to alternative hierarchies» (*ibidem*).

Points (i–ii–iii) stand as Eco's argument for encyclopedic semantics: if genus and species are only differences named differently, and if the tree is not finite but (potentially) continuously reorganizable, then the tree is not a tree but an encyclopedia «in disguise» (Eco, 1984b, 68).

Eco (1984a, 106) says at this point that these results open a “new season” for the concept of difference (cf. Paolucci, 2010), where it's no longer held that only the “true difference” defines something, but the way various accidents are grouped together in each context. The terms we find in a Porphyrian tree are just names, elements of a language that can equally be defined by other terms and be used to define other terms (as in Peirce's theory of interpretation, cf. Bellucci, 2013).

Much attention has been paid to the rhizomatic structure of the encyclopedia³⁴. However, an equally defining feature is that encyclopedic information, unlike dictionary information, is information *from the world*, from outside the tree of knowledge. Proponents of dictionary semantics wanted the figures in the semantic representation of a sign to be concepts that represent the relations internal to a given language, disregarding elements of knowledge from the world. Even if

³⁴ For the features of an encyclopedia see Violi (2015).

I was trying to take the point of view of the hominid in Kubrick's film, I admitted that the possibility of using a bone as a weapon is part of its encyclopedic knowledge, and that it is therefore beyond the tasks of a dictionary semantics to include it in the definition of "bone". This principle, in the vein of generativism, was repeated many times by Chomsky (since Chomsky, 1965, 4) with the distinction between competence and performance and the idea that linguistics should be concerned with the former, not the latter (that is, with the speaker's abstract knowledge of a language's rules, not with language use). But just the same problems arise with dictionary categories as well. Eco's discovery is that there is no difference, in principle, between encyclopedic and dictionary knowledge, and that what we consider a dictionary category, supposed to be primitive and simple, is only hypostatized encyclopedic knowledge (see also next paragraph). Another consequence of Eco's discovery, for example, that he explored in Eco (1999, 232), is that there are no systems con content with a priori indelible properties. That a cat is necessarily an /animal/ is a very resistant trait, but this is not because it is so categorized by the system, but because we haven't yet encountered cats that are not animals. Take the case of Pluto. That Pluto is a planet is a property that has been shown to be erasable; but as a wild, experience-based categorization it is very difficult to erase the features of /planet/ and /star/ to refer to Pluto, just as it is still admissible to refer to dolphins as /fishes/. On the other hand, we consider very resistant also the following inferences about cats, based not on their definition, but on the available encyclopedic information: "if it is a cat, then it has a tail" and "if it is a cat, then it will hunt mice". When Eco said that differences are accidents and external signs, he meant that knowledge must come from experience. *Differentiae* «are accidents, and accidents are infinite, or at least indefinite, in number» (1984b, 67). This doesn't exclude that there could be essential differences (traits that give necessary and sufficient conditions for the identification of something). But:

Essential differences cannot be known directly by us; we know (we infer!) them by semiotic means, through the effects (accidents) they produce, and these accidents are the sign of their unknowable cause. (*ibidem*)

That differences are external signs we can't be certain about further implies, according to Eco, that «not being analytic properties, in contemporary terms, differences will be synthetic properties» coming from «outside the tree of substances» (Eco, 1984a, 102, my translation)³⁵, from experience of the world (see also Eco, 1984b, 68). Returning to our example, then, as a piece of encyclopedic information the notion of /weapon/ was not always there, like an empty square

³⁵ This is the complete passage in Italian: «le differenze, che provengono dal di fuori dell'albero delle sostanze, sono accidenti, e gli accidenti sono potenzialmente infiniti. Si aggiunga che, non essendo proprietà analitiche, in termini contemporanei, le differenze saranno proprietà sintetiche, ed ecco che l'albero si trasforma, in forza di quanto si è discusso nei primi paragrafi di questo saggio, da dizionario in enciclopedia, dato che si compone di elementi di conoscenza del mondo».

ready to be occupied by the bone. Rather, it was a difference coming from outside the hominid's tree, a new accident of the bone emerging from the hominid's experience and interaction with the bone. In other words, the *Antiporphyry* paves the way for the problem of the *terminus a quo* of semiosis, as Eco will call it. Compare the previous quote with the following from Eco (1999, 3) where, with different terminology, the exact same point is expressed: «If, in a Peircean sense, there is such a thing as a Dynamical Object, we know it only through an Immediate Object [*terminus ad quem*]». But then, «if we speak (or emit signs, of whatever type they may be), it is because Something urges us to speak. And this ushered in the problem of the Dynamical Object as a *terminus a quo*».

Every philosophy of language finds itself faced not only with a *terminus ad quem* but also with a *terminus a quo*. It must ask itself not only “To what do we refer when we talk, and with what degree of reliability?” (a problem certainly worthy of consideration) but also “What makes us talk?”. (Eco, 1999, 12–13)

For this reason I think that more than from the “debts” incurred in the second part of *A Theory* only, as Eco says in the introduction to *Kant and the Platypus*, it is because of the constitutive incompleteness of dictionary semantics discovered in the *Antiporphyry* that the «problems of reference, iconism, truth, perception» (Eco, 1999, 2) must be reconsidered in semiotics. After the *Antiporphyry* Eco was mainly interested in the synthetic origins of concepts, also known as the content determination problem (Dretske, 1981; Millikan, 1984; Heras-Escribano et al, 2024), to which he responded with his theory of primary iconism (Eco, 1997; 1999)³⁶. But the admission of the external origin of contents entails important consequences also from the point of view of the role of truth in semiotic theories and of the relation between signs and world more generally.

2.1.6. On semiotic judgments

Although using different terminology, the problems of the limits of interpretation and the synthetic origin of content, which Eco addresses in (1990a; 1990b) and (1997; 1999), respectively, assume semiotic relevance because of the conclusions reached in the *Antiporphyry*. As seen, Eco reasoned by exclusion: if there are no linguistic primitives from which to obtain the rest of knowledge by deduction, then the elements that populate what we call paradigms or semiotic systems must come from reality in the form of external signs, a conclusion he summarized by saying that if the elements of the tree are not analytic, then they must be synthetic.

Eco had already dealt with the analytic/synthetic distinction in *A Theory* (in relation to a very similar problem to that of the bone for the hominid: «what happens when messages state something concerning an as yet unorganized and

³⁶ See Stjernfelt (2007), Paolucci (2010) for their criticisms of the theory. See also Cerutti (2023a).

non-segmented content?» 1976, 158; see also 1975, 211). In that case, Eco translated the analytic/synthetic pair with the semiotic/factual opposition, respectively, quoting Cassirer's (1906) interpretation of the Kantian distinction according to which a judgment is said analytic when it predicates of an object something that is already implicitly contained in its concept and that, therefore, can be known *a priori* (without investigating the world); and a judgment is said synthetic when it *a posteriori* ascribes a new attribute to something, so that a judgment that was synthetic at a time t will become analytic at a time $t + n$ (the time it takes for a culture to internalize the new content)³⁷. According to this conception, examples of (analytic) semiotic judgments are as much the classic “every unmarried man is a bachelor”, from the code of the English language, as “Mussolini took power in Italy”, from the available information concerning the history of the twentieth century. A judgment is analytic/semiotic on the basis of a convention, but when conventions change «the judgments that were once analytic can become synthetic, and vice versa» (1976, 159). That is, according to Eco factual and semiotic judgments differ only in relation to a time (accordingly, “Mussolini took power in Italy” was factual when Mussolini took power in Italy, but semiotic if expressed by a student after reading the history book).

While the distinction between factual and semiotic judgments seems to anticipate the *Antiporphyry*, in *A Theory* Eco answered the problem of changing codes in the manner of the strong thought theories he later rejected: on the one hand, he equated semiotic judgments with analytic judgments; on the other, factual judgments are said to be able to restructure the code, but only in a weak sense. Factual judgments «are an example of creativity *permitted* by the rules of the code» (1976, 161, my italics):

One can verbally define a new physical particle combining pre-established elements of the expression form in order to introduce something new in the content form; one can technically define a new chemical compound using and combining pre-existing content-units in a new way, in order to fill up an empty space within a pre-established system of possible semantic oppositions. (*ibidem*)

³⁷ Kant's distinction was slightly different: analytic judgments predicate of something something that is already covertly contained in its concept (Kant's famous example was “all bodies are extended”, because that bodies have extension was considered a necessary feature already implicit in the concept of body), while synthetic judgments are those that produce knowledge, predicating something different and new about something (“all bodies are heavy”), which is why he considered mathematical judgments to be synthetic judgments, contrary to what later philosophy will say. However, after Quine the pairs analytic/synthetic and *a priori/a posteriori* are disjuncted by Kripke (1972), Williamson (2007); Floridi (2019). Peirce, in turn, translated the opposition between analytic/synthetic in semiotic terms (see Peirce's principle that there's no reasoning without signs below) with the opposition between corollarial/theorematic (see Stjernfelt, 2022, 150): corollarial judgments are those immediately deducible from a sign, while theorematic judgments are those expressible only by manipulation and addition of other signs to the source sign.

In this case, the hominid of 2001 would have simply assigned to the bone a content already provided by the system, which is exactly what is rejected in the *Antiporphyry*. In *A Theory*, semiotic judgments are thus analytic judgments, albeit secularized, whereas, as seen, around 1983–4 Eco concluded that contents must have synthetic origin, and that synthetic are precisely those semiotic judgments that (can) lead to the restructuring of the system³⁸. What kind of judgments are semiotic judgments then? To answer, I will pose the question in terms of kinds of problems and the distinction between internal and external questions (using Carnap’s terminology, see Carnap, 1950; Eklund, 2013).

2.1.7. Internal and external questions

Internal questions are of the following sort: “according to the Italian Civil Code is it permissible to do x ?”. They are internal because the significance of the question and the answer depend on a framework, in this case the Italian Civil Code. External questions, on the other hand, are those that ask whether something is true independently of any framework, for example: “do numbers exist?”, or “did Ramses II suffer from tuberculosis before tuberculosis was discovered by 19th century scientists?” (taking the example of the much-debated statement by Bruno Latour, 2000)³⁹.

As mentioned, I take the internal/external distinction from Carnap. It’s debated how closely Carnap associated the distinction between external/internal with the distinction between synthetic/analytic truths. However, such an association seems to me unproblematic if we understand the opposition in the way Cassirer understood it. Thus, “all bachelors are unmarried” would be a good example of an answer to an internal question (“if someone is a bachelor, is he married?”) whose truth depends only on the meanings of the terms involved (in relation to a language), without any knowledge of the world. Similarly, Eco’s example “Mussolini took power in Italy” would be another example of an internal utterance whose

³⁸ Eco’s transition from *A Theory* to the *Antiporphyry* implies also a shift from a theory of semiotic change based on the combinatorial possibilities left open (or empty) by a code (it is no coincidence that he invokes Hegel in saying that change should manifest itself in the form of a dialectical movement, a spontaneous and independent evolution of the system) to a usage-based conception in which linguistic-semiotic change occurs through the use of signs in new contexts from which new meanings emerge through bottom-up hypostatization.

³⁹ Carnap (1950) posited the distinction between internal and external questions to solve ontological disputes about abstract entities which, notoriously, were a favorite polemical target for logical positivists (Edmonds, 2020, 143). For frameworks Carnap intended something very similar to a Porphyrian tree: they are the systems providing the «rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting or rejecting them» (1950, 208). See also: «if someone wishes to speak in her language about a new kind of entities, she has to introduce a system of new ways of speaking, subject to new rules. We may call this the construction of a linguistic framework for the new entities in question. (Carnap 1950, 206). Carnap’s take was that external questions are nonsensical and therefore impossible questions, since «to be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the system» (Carnap 1950, 207). Or, they are pseudo-questions, that is internal questions in search for a framework.

meaningfulness and truth depend on the framework of the history of the twentieth century. Analytic judgments of this kind don't produce knowledge, they only predicate of something what is already contained in the code. It follows that internal questions are *easy* questions: one has just to consult a framework (or code, paradigm, dictionary, etc.) to know with certainty what is true (cf. Berto and Plebani, 2015, 70). If one struggles to answer an internal question, it's because he doesn't know the framework, not because the question is difficult. If, for example, someone asked whether there can be married bachelor, we wouldn't find his question interesting or difficult, we would just doubt his linguistic competence⁴⁰.

External questions, on the other hand, are difficult questions, because we cannot rely on frameworks to know whether something is true independently of a framework. One can be substantially wrong about external questions: an interpretive error is not due to unfamiliarity with a framework, but to the inherent difficulty of the problem. And the truth that can be attributed to an external judgment (in response to an external question) is also different, because it does not depend on the meaning of the terms alone (assigned by a framework), but on independent external factors. In semiotic terms, the truth of an analytic judgment depends on dictionary information (in Carnap's terminology, on the information contained in a framework), while the truth of a synthetic judgment depends on encyclopedic information about the world.

2.1.8. What kind of problems are semiotic problems?

The distinction between external and internal truths just outlined corresponds to the two senses of truth that I distinguished in 1.4.3.: regardless of what truth *is*, we can semiotically use the word "truth" either to *mean* that something is true for someone (or in a framework) or that truth is what is independent of what is believed to be true by anyone. But the question here is what kind of problems semiotic problems are, and whether the truth at which semiotic judgments aim is internal or external. If we return to points (1–2) from the introduction, it would seem obvious that semiotic problems must be internal problems. The semiotician gives interpretations of interpretations (Eco, 1985), he/she studies cultures and texts and so he/she's not concerned with how things are, but how cultures and texts say they are, their effects of meaning. As mentioned, this was Eco's position in *A Theory*, for which semiotic judgments were analytic judgments internal to codes. Many philosophers hold a similar account, like Thomas Kuhn⁴¹ in

⁴⁰ If we added the thesis that the structure of a framework reflects that of reality, we'd get what Eco called a strong thought theory, or foundationalism; if, in turn, one decides that the strong assumption of the universality of thought doesn't hold, this conception leads to relativism (see Baghrarian, 2004). Either way, deflationary or substantive, according to this Carnapian conception truth is an internal issue.

⁴¹ «The proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds. One contains constrained bodies that fall slowly, the other pendulums that repeat their motions again and again [...] Practicing in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction» (Kuhn, 1962/1970, 150).

philosophy of science, or Gianni Vattimo⁴² and Michel Foucault⁴³ in continental philosophy. In the case of philosophical postmodernism, the impossibility of being able to posit indubitable simple concepts as foundation for knowledge (what Eco called strong thought), implied that theories are incommensurable and construct their own worlds, and that if there are no analytic truths, then these are only presumed “truths” held to be true by someone or some group, obtained by deduction not from indubitable beliefs, but from ideological premises. The resulting image is indeed close to the raft introduced above with Sosa: according to this image, «knowledge is a raft that floats free of any anchor or tie. Repairs must be made afloat, and though no part is untouchable, we must stand on some in order to replace or repair others» (1980, 6)⁴⁴.

But the difficulties in conceiving problems as internal problems become apparent precisely when we consider the kinds of second-order problems that semioticians deal with. When the semiotician says that Clark Kent and Superman are the same person in the comic book series *Superman*, he is not only saying what is true *in* a framework, but also making a judgment *about* that framework, the truth of which is external to the semiotician (cf. Marconi, 2006). Conceiving semiotics’ questions and problems as internal would mean that the truth of its judgments and analyses do not depend on the text he is studying, but on the ideology, culture, and interpretive scheme of the semiotician. This conclusion would seem acceptable to those who believe that the semiotician invents the text he is analyzing (Marrone, 2010), but there’s a regression to infinity that I don’t think is in the intentions of the position. Suppose that for semiotician A, based on the way he has cropped the text and chosen the relevant interpretive categories, Clark Kent and Superman actually are two different people, contrary to what many believe. We would say that this conclusion is true *in* or *for* the analysis carried out by A. But can we say that it’s also true *of* A that he reached such a conclusion? Now, given the originality of the thesis defended by A, two other semioticians, B and C, question whether this is really what A meant, reaching opposite conclusions: for B, A never meant to say that Clark Kent is not Superman; for C, in turn, it is true that for A Clark Kent and Superman are different persons. Note that the point is not that we must necessarily accept a definitive truth about

⁴² «Only within a cultural-historical openness, or paradigm, can one speak of truth in the sense of conformity to rules, which are given with the openness itself» (Vattimo 1989, p. 233, my translation).

⁴³ «Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true» (Foucault 1980 [1972], p. 131).

⁴⁴ One problem with this version of Neurath’s metaphor, that I won’t explore here, is that it’s not clear why one should change the pieces of the raft to begin with. Eco was aware of the problem as early as 1975, when he invoked dialectical logic as a solution to the problem of code-switching (see Eco, 1975, 216; 1976, 161). As we shall see presently, after the *Antiporphyry* in Eco is implicit a different version of the same metaphor.

A's interpretation (nor about Clark Kent's true identity). The problem is, on the contrary, the possibility of being wrong. But we can be wrong about A only if how A interpreted Superman is a fact independent of how we construct our interpretation of A's interpretation. That is, we can be wrong about A's interpretation only if the way A interpreted the text is external to what we believe. If the semiotician's problems were internal problems, the truth of which depends only on the frameworks used, then both B's and C's interpretations of A would be true, with neither of them being wrong about A⁴⁵.

Popper (1994, 33) cites the "extreme" case of Darius the First, king of Persia, reported by Herodotus, who allegedly brought Greeks and Callatians living in Persia together in order to teach a lesson to the Greeks. The two groups had opposite funeral practices: the Greeks used to burn their dead, while the Callatians used to eat their fathers when they died. Each considered an abomination the practice of the other. What Popper wanted to refute was what he called the myth of the framework, according to which we cannot understand each other unless we share much of the same frameworks (basic principles and beliefs, interpretive paradigms). His argument was that, even in this extreme case where mutual understanding seems impossible, at least some of the participants at the meeting and some of the readers of Herodotus could appreciate the principle of tolerance that Herodotus says the scene should exemplify, and recognize the conventionality of human practices. More generally, Popper argued that the confrontation of different cultures is what historically led to the realization that truth and reality are different from beliefs, opinions and certainties, and that the distinction between facts and beliefs was necessary for the birth of science. The discovery that there could be different opinions about something leads to the critical comparison of opinions and to the search for better solutions – a thesis beautifully expressed by Lotman when he said that semiospheres are permeable and that the origin of change occurs through contact with external diversity (as semiospheres change through external contact, see Lotman, 2009, 133). Many would say that what this story shows is instead that truth is an internal matter: the statement "it is right to burn one's dead" is true in the belief framework of the Greeks, but false in the belief framework of the Callatians. However, at least the following truths should be accepted by both Greeks and Callatians: a) for Greeks to burn the dead is right; b) for Callatians to burn the dead is wrong. Which shows that (a–b) are external truths. What is true *in* a framework (or for the members of a group), is also an external truth *of* that framework (for everybody else). Notice that (a–b) are exactly the kind of judgments semioticians make (interpretations of interpretations).

How does the semiotician operate? It is true that he will consult dictionaries, for example to consult the meaning of the signs used in Herodotus' *Histories*, but

⁴⁵ Again: the problem is not so much whether or not to accept contradictory interpretations as true but rather losing the notion that one can be wrong about something. The very fact of considering B and C's interpretations of A as contradictory, or at least different, could be true in D but false in E, and so on *ad infinitum*.

it is well established that actual dictionaries are not the dictionaries discussed in semantics (Petöfi, 1976; Haiman, 1980; 1982; Eco, 1979; 1981; Eco and Magli, 1989; Marconi, 1997; Eco, 1997; 1999; Peeters, 2000; Violi, 2015). Actual dictionaries contain not only dictionary information, which is obtained from knowledge of a language alone, but also encyclopedic information. In any case, the semiotician who wanted to solve the problem of the correct interpretation of a text *x* will also want to consider interpretations already given by other semioticians or scientists from other disciplines, often finding that his or her own interpretations may differ from others (cf. Polidoro, 2016), which indicates that semiotic questions are not internal questions in the defined sense. They seem to be internal because they concern questions about meanings in a framework, a text or a culture, which doesn't seem to imply any inquiry concerning reality. But this approach underestimates that frameworks, cultures, and texts could be external things as well, just like chairs and trees, things about which we can make assumptions, theories, interpretations, and be wrong. It also underestimates that to understand what is true *in* a framework is to make assumptions about what is true *of* that framework. Semioticians observe discordant phenomena, synchronic inconsistencies, unsettled or open questions, diachronic changes in the use of terms, often within the same culture, all of which happen independently of our theories. When the semiotician studies a text, it's not enough for him to consult *his* framework of reference, or *his* tree of knowledge; he must consult the text itself. Knowing whether it is true that in novel *x* happens *y* depends also on *x*, not just on the tools the semiotician uses.

Even if we were to consider the possibility that semiotic problems are easy, internal problems, to answer which we needed only consult the relative framework (and assuming that the structure of the framework reflects the form of the object studied), we saw with the analysis of Eco's *Antiporphyry* that there is no way to structure knowledge in an orderly way that would work in all contexts. The same internal question may need very different frameworks in different contexts. Further, the whole point about the platypus for Eco (1999) was that it was something in the experience of naturalists from 18th century that forced them to restructure the whole framework of the classification of the species. In other words, the platypus was an external problem that found no coherent solution in any framework – there was no pre-established empty space available. Carnap, who posed the distinction in order to reject external questions, was at least aware of this problem, so much so that he considered external questions either as pseudo-problems, that is problems that could be solved once the framework of reference is made explicit, or as questions that must be reinterpreted as pragmatic questions about the effectiveness of a framework, about whether a framework is «more or less expedient, fruitful, conducive to the aim for which the language is intended» (1950, 31). What he had not realized is that this pragmatic solution to code change leads to a crossroads: the question about changing or modifying frameworks, however pragmatic, is again an internal and easy question, the truth of which depends on another framework, or is it a genuine external question, the truth of which depends on external facts?

If semiotic questions are external, then I don't see how things could be any different when it comes to the texts that the semiotician studies. These too, and especially political texts, as we shall see in 3.3.2.2., are signs that pose external questions, which is precisely the reason why theoretical disputes, political disputes, squabbles on social media, etc., happen. When people produce texts that concern the actual world, they are giving interpretations and posing questions whose truth is independent of their opinions (i.e., just like the semiotician or social scientist, they can be wrong). Often, the problems discussed are extremely important, and it wouldn't be fair to reduce them to a matter of alethic relativism.

Still, it's not the semiotician's specific task to say who is right and who is wrong in a political dispute, even if I reject the idea that two contradictory assertions could be both right. It is, however, the task of the semiotician to offer interpretations on how the signs used in a text refer to their meaning, which is an external and often difficult problem⁴⁶.

2.1.9. Weak thought, fragile semiotics

Quine (1951) criticized Carnap's theory, based on the distinction between external (and impossible) and internal questions, in relation to the analytic/synthetic distinction, which he notoriously considered as a false dogma of empiricism. Quine's argument was that it is not possible to give a clear definition of analyticity that is not circular. We can say that bachelors are unmarried by mere knowledge of the meaning of the terms involved. But how do we know that bachelor, in English, means unmarried? If it is knowledge from the experience of the world, then it is not analytic; if we know it because it is an analytic truth, obtainable a priori from the internal tree of knowledge, then the argument is circular (the notion of linguistic definition, in order to ground the phenomenon of analyticity, seems to have to be grounded by analyticity itself).

Quine's alternative was holism, according to which a proposition cannot be verified in isolation but only as part of, and together with, a complex network of beliefs (so-called Quine-Duhem hypothesis). Is this not the same thing as saying that there are no external questions, and that the meaningfulness of a proposition always depends on a framework? Eco (1999, 258) noted how the definition of truth in Greimas and Courtès' *Dictionnaire* was comparable to the holist position:

Greimas's position is based on a Hjelmslevian version of the structuralist paradigm, and the Hjelmslevian version anticipated (and when it was not anticipating, it was on a parallel course: the dates speak volumes) the development of that internal criticism of logical neopositivism and analytic philosophy that goes by the name of *holism*.

However, this position can be likened to a particular interpretation of holism only, that of Rorty and his critique of knowledge as the mirror of nature (1979), which shifted the emphasis from the sign-world relationship to the sign-sign relationship.

⁴⁶ On externalism in cultural semiotics see Lorusso (2015, 98) and Violi (2017, 19).

However, this was not Quine's position (nor is it that of pragmatism, as we shall see). In Quine's version, the impossibility of distinguishing between analytic and synthetic judgments means that we cannot distinguish between sentences that are true in a framework or theory and sentences whose truth depends instead on external facts⁴⁷. But the truth of a framework as a whole will depend on external facts. As Quine (1951, 41) said, we must accept that theories «face the tribunal of sense-experience [...] as a corporate body». See also Berto and Plebani: «there are always two factors responsible for any sentence's truth: the meaning of the terms that figure in it, and worldly facts» (2015, 72)⁴⁸. Which implies, at the same time, that there are no indubitable certainties immune to revision, on one hand, and that “internal” problems are a still (a kind of) external problems.

In his *Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man* (1868), Peirce advanced a similar line of reasoning with his critique of the capacity of intuition. Peirce famously asked:

Whether by the simple contemplation of a cognition, independently of any previous knowledge and without reasoning from signs, we are enabled rightly to judge whether that cognition has been determined by previous cognition or whether it refers immediately to its object. (103; EP1,11)

Peirce defines an intuition as a «premise not itself a conclusion» (103). An intuition then is a kind of knowledge that doesn't derive from «previous knowledge», that is, knowledge that is not the result (a conclusion) of an inference but «determined directly by the transcendental object». Now, Peirce argued against the possibility of knowledge of such a kind *from the impossibility of distinguishing between intuitions and inferences* (just like Quine for the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments).

Peirce questions whether for any idea *x* we can tell that *x* is an intuition or the product of an inference. This would be a second-order power of intuition, the ability to tell intuitions from inferences. But, Peirce says, there is no evidence that we have this faculty. He also gave an historical argument against intuitions: historically, humans have considered intuitions, that is, settled (or analytic, in Cassirer's sense) truths, things that we don't consider such anymore. In the Middle Ages, the external authority of the Pope was considered a source of truths, a belief soon to be rejected by the enlightenment revolution. In turn, in his time Peirce says (but it's a belief still held by many today) people considered internal authority (Cartesianism) to be a source of certain knowledge, but «what if our internal authority should meet the same fate, in the history of opinions, as that external authority has met?» (Peirce, 1868, 104).

⁴⁷ The reference was also to logical empiricists' verificationist theory of meaning, according to which only those sentences that could be verified are meaningful. See Misak (1995). On the differences between verification, falsification and fallibilism see Haack and Kolenda (1977).

⁴⁸ See also Quine (1951, 34): «It is obvious that truth in general depends on both language and extralinguistic facts». See also Godfrey-Smith (2021, 196) on this and on the difference between one-process and two-process views of scientific change.

According to one interpretation, Peirce's critique of the capacity of intuition indicates that perception is always mediated by prior knowledge (Helmholtzian perception in contemporary terms: perception is cognitively penetrated by internal mental representations, see Clark, 2013), and indeed, among the examples Peirce adduces there's that of the witness who is unable to distinguish between what he has seen and what he has inferred. But beyond the examples, Peirce makes it clear that he is talking about contemplation of concepts, not perception of objects, and that an intuition is for him the information present in cognition not motivated by another cognition, not information obtained directly from external objects. According to this alternative interpretation, and as Bellucci (2017, 90) has argued, for Peirce it is reasoning and inference to always have a perceptual component (that is, iconic and diagrammatic components, which is why Peirce is also seen as an anticipator of the extended mind, see Stjernfelt, 2014; Gallagher, 2017; Paolucci, 2021), not perception to be cognitively mediated. In other words, Peirce is saying that we cannot distinguish between simple, innate concepts and concepts derived from experience through signs; in our terms, that we cannot distinguish between internal dictionary information and external encyclopedic information.

The other consequences that Peirce derived are also close to those reached by Eco and Quine: a) if there is no capacity of intuition, then there is also no capacity of intuition about ourselves (no introspection): «all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts» (Peirce, EP, 30); b) there is no reasoning that is not reasoning by signs: «if we seek the light of external facts, the only cases of thought which we can find are of thought in signs» (Peirce, 1868, 111); c) nothing can be absolutely unknowable, because «nothing of the kind occurs in experience» (24).

Now, when Eco says that if the terms in a Porphyrian tree are not analytic, they must be synthetic, he means something very similar to Quine's tribunal of experience and Peirce's anti-intuitionism (cf. Eco's idea that differences are external signs with Peirce's principle (b) that there's no reasoning without signs)⁴⁹. So, the point is not whether external questions can be answered, but whether internal questions are possible! For Peirce, Quine and Eco, the impossibility of distinguishing between intuition/inference, analytic/synthetic, and differences/

⁴⁹ Besides the similarities, the differences between Eco and Quine are also important: Quine's holism implies, like Eco's encyclopedia, that theories are not incommensurable with each other, but Quine's intent was to answer the question what is true, replying that what is true depends on the best scientific disciplines available, which for him were the hard sciences (reductionist naturalism); Eco's encyclopedia, on the other hand, has a different purpose which is to be the tool that guides the interpretation and production of signs. For this reason, the encyclopedia is the library of libraries, and everything that's already said (in a broad sense: every sign produced) can be used to interpret something, no disciplines or genres are excluded. Moreover, it seems to me that there is quite a consensus concerning philosophical naturalism now, according to which the humanities and the social sciences should not be excluded from the list of disciplines that can say something true about the world. See for example De Caro and Macarthur (2004; 2022), Gregoratto et al (2022) and, in philosophy of the cognitive sciences, Gallagher (2017, 21) and Hutto (2022; 2023).

primitives, respectively, implied that the truth of an interpretation, and its meaningfulness, depend not only on its internal position in a framework, theory, dictionary, paradigm, language, etc., but on its position in a framework *and* the responsiveness of the whole framework to the world⁵⁰ (as Haack, 1976, 243 says, according to pragmatism: «correspondence with reality *is* coherence with the totality of experience»⁵¹). That is, all questions are external.

The result is a different, pragmatist take of Neurath's ship metaphor. While there are no indubitable primitives, in this version knowledge (the ship) doesn't float free of any anchor, as in idealism, instead it's a tool we use to navigate and survive, that we modify accordingly as we go, giving up the pieces that no longer work for others that, fallibly, might work better. Neurath himself didn't mean that justified are beliefs that cohere with the ship, but that there are no sentences immune to verification and revision (both protocol and non-protocol sentences, as Carnap called them, are factual sentences for Neurath, 1933, 202). As Haack nicely put it, we rebuild the ship while sailing on the water (1990). Before Neurath, Peirce used a similar metaphor for his pragmatism, that of walking on a bog: inquiry «is not standing upon the bedrock of fact. It is walking upon a bog, and can only say, this ground seems to hold for the present. Here I will stay till it begins to give way» (CP 5.589; cf. Misak, 1995, 113)⁵².

It should be clear that for this tradition (Quine was as much a theoretical reference for Eco as was Peirce), overcoming foundationalism as architecture for describing the form of content of semiotic systems implies the impossibility of certainty through the rejection of the distinction between certain truths that can be known a priori (called analytical) and a posteriori truths, not the impossibility of truth itself. Using the terms I used in the previous paragraph, it suggests that truth is always independent of signs, even when it seems to depend on the meaning of a term or the place that the term occupies in a framework. As Eco concluded his analysis of the *Antiporphyry*:

When one speaks of a crisis of reason, one thinks of globalizing reason, which sought to provide a “strongly” definitive image of the universe to which it was applied (given or assumed, as the case may be). The system of thought of the labyrinth, and of the encyclopedia, is weak insofar as it is conjectural and contextual, but it is reasonable because it allows for intersubjective control, it leads to neither renunciation nor solipsism. It is reasonable because it does not aspire to globality; it is weak in the same way that the oriental wrestler is weak, who works with the adversary's strength, and tends to yield, only to find in the situation the other has created the (conjectural) means for responding victoriously. The oriental fighter has no predetermined rule; he has conjectural

⁵⁰ Which does not imply that models in semiotics accurately reflect the structure of reality, nor that that is their goal. On models in semiotics see Nöth (2018). For a recent, close to pragmatism take on models in science see Sanches de Oliveira (2022).

⁵¹ See also Haack (2004); cf. Eco's notion of negotiation in Eco (1999) or, more recently, Lynch (2025) on the notion of concordance instead of correspondence. On the pragmatist theory of truth see also Legg (2014).

matrices for regulating, temporarily, every event given from the outside. And then to transform it into his own decisive proposal. It is “weak” before whoever believes that the fight depends on a strong dictionary. It is strong and wins, at times, because it is content with being reasonable. (Eco, 2012 [1983b], 98)

More recently, Massimo Leone (2020, 24) proposed a similar opposition, not in terms of weakness/strength, but in terms of fragility/enthusiasm, respectively:

The enthusiastic semiotician will be convinced that, by adopting the right method, it is possible to grasp this fascinating magma beyond the veil: the meaning of a sign, of a literary text, even of a face or a ritual. The fragile semiotician, on the other hand, will doubt this [...] For him, the semiosphere presents itself as a very different place. Here, faces, icons, and stories do indeed appear endowed with meaning, and even with a determined meaning, but he cannot but always keep in mind the tragically playful framework in which this meaning manifests itself. (my translation)⁵³

Although none of these authors have used these terms, what fragile semiotics and (Eco’s) weak thought have in common is that they conceive semiotic problems as external problems, which implies that we can never be certain of our judgments. But we can never be certain of our judgments *because* their truth is external and independent of what we believe to be true⁵⁴.

⁵³ The original in Italian: «il semiotico entusiasta sarà convinto del fatto che, adottato il metodo giusto, si possa giungere a carpire questo magma affascinante al di là del velo: il senso di un segno, di un testo letterario, addirittura di un volto o di un rituale. Il semiotico fragile, invece, ne dubiterà [...] Per questi ultimi, la semiosfera si presenta come un luogo ben diverso. Qui i volti, le icone, le storie compaiono sì dotate di senso, e persino di un senso determinato, ma senza mai poter dimenticare del tutto la cornice tragicamente ludica in cui questo senso si manifesta».

⁵⁴ Another relevant distinction is that of Hintikka (1997) between conceiving logic and semiotics as the *lingua universalis* of meaning and conceiving them instead as a *calculus ratiocinator*. As Stjernfelt (2007, 109) said, in the first case, semiotics builds a formalized language that is «universal in so far as it is impossible to address the world by any other means [...] Surprisingly, what might at first glance seem to be a strongly realist position (logic as one, universal language) thus holds a series of antirealist or even relativist or skepticist consequences». In the second case, logic and semiotics are «no universal language, but rather a calculus aimed at problem-solving in a given domain of discourse [...] While this tradition might at a first glance seem antirealist with its emphasis on many competing representation systems, its corollaries are, quite on the contrary, realist [...] because one fragment of logic or language may be unproblematically put to use in the discussion of another such fragment», which is the essence of Peirce’s theory of interpretants according to which the meaning of a sign is not something metaphysically different (an idea or a mental representation), but another sign called its interpretant. See also Eco (1990b, 8). On the many attempts at building a perfect, universal language in the history of ideas see Eco (1993a).

But Hintikka’s distinction poses a different problem, which I explore in the next section, namely whether signs are part of the same reality as the objects they represent, or signs and objects constitute an impassable dualism. This is a fundamental distinction that, although not semiotic in nature, significantly informs and influences the way semioticians proceed.

2.2. On nature and culture⁵⁵

So far, I have presented an Echian argument for the relevance of truth for semiotic theories. According to the conclusions of the *Antiporphyry*, if strong thought theories implode and are unable, with only the tools of the tree, to give order to the form of content, then knowledge must be structured differently and cannot be independent of reality. This further implies that if semiotics can say anything meaningful about interpretation, it is not because we can rely on an ordered organon that faithfully reflects the structure of reality, but because languages interact with reality. Texts, signs, and cultures are just as real and external as trees, chairs, and climate change, which implies, on the one hand, that we can never be certain of our judgments about them and that all knowledge can be subject to revision; on the other, that we must measure semiotic tools against the reality of texts.

This leads to a parallel problem, namely the question whether languages and signs are things of this world or made of a different substance. To conceive of signs as something other than the reality they represent is to posit a form of dualism, the most famous version of which is cartesian mind-body dualism, according to which the mind and the body constitute two metaphysically different substances (the mental and the physical, respectively). The fact is that the problems that arise with mind-body dualism apply to any form of dualism. In particular, the so-called pairing problem: if two things are deemed fundamentally different and belonging to separate spheres of reality, then it is impossible for the two to interact and influence each other (Kim, 2001, 31) avoiding simultaneously that physical reality plays no role in the formation of concepts (idealism) or that the mind, on the contrary, plays no role in reality (epiphenomenalism). The same problem arises for the sign-object dualism. Eco (1975; 1976) had already embraced, at least methodologically, Peirce's theory of interpretation according to which the meaning of a sign is not a heterogeneous entity, ideal, mental, or otherwise, but another sign called its interpretant, but he didn't consider the close connection between this pragmatist, anti-Cartesian conception of signs and the problem of truth for semiotics. Those who noticed the connection were, instead, Greimas and Courtès (1979, see below), who excluded truth from the problems of semiotics precisely on the basis of the principle of the independence of languages. According to this tradition, languages are governed only by internal and immanent rules, independent of reality. Accordingly, if signs are made of a different substance from the things they represent, it must be concluded that signs cannot faithfully represent reality in any sense. Hence, the exclusion of truth from semiotics.

So far, I have not offered arguments for or against sign-object monism, or what Peirce called synechism (the continuity between reality and mind). And I am not going to argue for or against monism here either since, although relevant, the metaphysics of signs is not a semiotic issue, but a philosophical one. What I will

⁵⁵ A version of this section was published in Cerutti (2026).

do is address the problem indirectly. The question of the metaphysics of signs is related to the question of how we conceive the opposition between nature and culture, a problem that has become central in ontological anthropology and for recent semiotic theories inspired by it. In what follows, I will limit myself to offering a semantic analysis of the nature/culture opposition, showing two alternative and opposing ways of conceiving their separation, as a dualism or as a simple distinction, respectively. I will not offer arguments for the truth of one conception over the other. For one, it is just useful to take note of a difference that often goes unnoticed in the literature. Secondly, I will make explicit the consequences of conceiving the opposition in one way or the other, and argue that one conception should be preferred from the methodological point of view.

2.2.1. Overcoming the nature and culture opposition

The main references, at least in semiotics, for the claim that we should overcome the opposition between nature and culture are Philippe Descola (2005), significantly titled *Par-delà nature et culture*, and Bruno Latour (1991). The former offers a “genealogy of dualism” between nature and culture, showing how the conception of “nature” has evolved through history as an alternation of autonomies until their final separation in modern times. For the Greeks, it is with Aristotle that a notion of physis as «the principle that produces the development of a being that contains within itself the sources of its movement and its rest» (Descola, 2005, eng. translation 2013, 64) is stabilized. But in Greek thought man remains part of nature, while it will be Christian thought that will place the autonomy of man’s creation in a separate, and higher, sphere than nature (ibidem, 66–67). Modernity, therefore, combines Greek and Christian thought, and the notion of nature as an autonomous domain of scientific experimentation emerges, while the human is relegated to an inferior sphere. However, what appears to be a simple description of the historical development of ideas about nature actually conceals Descola’s normative position. As Descola argues that the opposition of nature and culture is always contingent, it is also suggested that modernity’s dualism between nature and culture is a false separation with political consequences⁵⁶ (as Latour’s famous title say, we have never been modern, Latour, 2013) which seems to imply that there should be a “correct” or “true” conception in comparison to which the modern dualism is deemed wrong. See the following passage:

Now the construction of Nature had really begun! It was, to be sure, a social and ideological construction, but it was also a practical one [...] experimentation led to ongoing efforts to dissociate and reconstruct the phenomena that produced the objects of the new science. This process then acquired autonomy

⁵⁶ At least from an academic point of view, such an opposition is in fact at the foundation of the separation of the sciences into natural sciences and the sciences of the spirit (from Humboldt, see Stjernfelt, 2012), or, in contemporary terms, of the division between the “two cultures” (Snow, 1961). For further discussion, see below 2.2.

at the cost of forgetting the conditions of the objectivization of the phenomena [...] continuity, the “factishes” of modernity (to borrow Bruno Latour’s handy neologism, *faitiches*) now made their appearance. The dualism of the individual and the world now became irreversible: this was the keystone in a cosmology that set in opposition, on the one hand, things governed by laws and, on the other, the thought that organized them into meaningful sets: on the one hand, the body—now regarded as a mechanism—and, on the other, the soul [...] (Descola, 2013, 62)

From a synchronic perspective, Descola identifies four “dispositions of being”. Drawing on the principle of the «universality of a conventional distinction between interiority and physicality», the modern separation of minds and souls from bodies should be regarded as just a «local variant of a more general system of elementary contrast» (Descola, 2013, 121). Therefore, from the combination of the two categories of physicality (similar vs dissimilar physicalities) and interiority (similar vs dissimilar interiorities), the following ontological square (or “grammar of cosmologies”) can be generated. According to the Western naturalist conception, nature is the biological and physical basis that different cultures, as well as human and non-human animals, share. For the animist conception, on the other hand, the opposite is true, living beings have a spiritual substance in common, but inhabit different natures. For totemism, both nature and culture are in common. Finally, for analogism, neither nature nor culture are in common. The conclusion, then, is that «the opposition between nature and culture [...] is not universal at all», (Marrone, 2024, 16, my translation), or at least that our Western conception of the opposition is not universal, and that we must therefore abandon this artificial opposition.

The analyses of Latour, Descola, and of the anthropologists of the ontological turn in general have contributed positively to our understanding of the pluralism of ways of conceiving the opposition between nature and culture. However, with regard to the associated claim that we need to move away from the dualism between nature and culture, I think the anthropological and semiotic discussion has suffered from a historicist approach that prevented from appreciating the semantic complexity of these notions. Descola (2013, 69) partially acknowledged this complexity, admitting, for example, how in modernity there were several competing interpretations of the dualism (e.g. mechanists vs organicists). Stjernfelt (2012b) identified as many as sixteen different meanings of “culture”⁵⁷,

⁵⁷ They are: culture as inner process of refinement vs. an externalized process of development of habits, products and institutions; culture as universal progress vs. specific to particular groups; culture as the development of selected “elite” products vs. broadly the set of human products or so-called “popular culture”; culture as subsisting at the level of society vs. pertaining to subgroups of society; culture as forming overarching, organic wholes determining whole groups vs. pertaining only to the acceptance and continuation of inherited practices or as just an epiphenomenon; culture as the unchanged perpetuation of inherited practices vs. habits developing and changing more quickly; culture as pertaining to a particular territorial environment vs. as pertaining to groups able to transfer cultures more or less unchanged in moving from one place to another (see Stjernfelt 2012a, 66).

and, similarly, we could identify just as many meanings for “nature” (cf. Stano, 2023). Moreover, there is an ambivalence concerning the opposition at a deeper level of generality – and this is the thesis I intend to demonstrate – that plays a decisive role in the understanding of the meaning of the claim to “overcome the opposition between nature and culture”.

Although it has not been noticed by many (cf. Cefai, 2023), both Latour and Descola’s diachronic interpretation of the ontological turn are very similar to the analysis proposed by Dewey for the opposition between facts and values in *Experience and Nature* (1929 [1925]). In what follows I will show how from Dewey’s analysis it is possible to obtain a general distinction between two ways of understanding the opposition between nature and culture: as a metaphysical dualism, and as a simple distinction, respectively. I will then show that “overcome the opposition between nature and culture” can have two different interpretations, depending on what is meant by “nature and culture”, leading to opposite conclusions. Denying that nature/culture can be distinguished ends up reaffirming their dualism, while denying that nature/culture are metaphysically different things concedes the possibility of distinguishing them.

2.2.2. Dewey’s genealogy of the distinction

In chapters 3 and 4 of his *Experience and Nature* (1929 [1925]), Dewey delves into the problem of the distinction between means and ends⁵⁸. That by means and ends Dewey had in mind the opposition between nature and culture is clear from the examples he offers, as well as from the title he gives to the chapters in question (“Nature, Ends and Histories” and “Nature, Means and Knowledge”, respectively):

Direct appropriations and satisfactions were prior to anything but the most elementary and exigent prudence, just as the useful arts preceded the sciences. The body is decked before it is clothed. While homes are still hovels, temples and palaces are embellished. Luxuries prevail over necessities except when necessities can be festally celebrated. (1929, 78)

The opposition is between necessity vs. imagination, facts vs. values, or science vs. art, and Dewey’s problem is to give the right place in the “theory of existence” to things like imagination, values, and anything humans do beyond necessity. But the philosophical background to Dewey’s attack on the opposition between facts and values is also provided by his historical reconstruction of how their relationship has been conceived in the history of ideas. In pre–modern times, the distinction between facts and values leaned in favor of the latter. On one hand, the Greeks

⁵⁸ We can consider facts/values a particular instance of the problem of the distinction between nature and culture (other names of the same are: means and ends; theory and praxis; causes and forms; facts and norms; facts and interpretations; is and oughts; synthetic and analytic judgments; structures and superstructures – these are obviously all different things, but still the problem of the demarcation we are considering has received all of these labels in different moments and places in the history of ideas).

didn't distinguish between the two, as "they thought of minds as a realization of natural existence" (ibid., 87); on the other, ends were conceived as immutable and as the object of intellectual contemplation, while means were inferior. Thus, "they [the Greeks] were saved from the epistemological problem of how things and mind [...] can have anything to do with each other" (ibidem). But they were safe because they relegated facts to a lower sphere of reality, while "true" reality was knowable only through intellectual contemplation of its immutable and eternal end, which is thought itself. For the ancient world, "*techne* is only a superficial perturbation of nature" (Vidali 2022, 38, my translation). Moreover, such a conception of the opposition between nature and culture was isomorphic to the structure of Greek society: "ends are superior, immaterial, unquestionable: in short, noble. The means are inferior, servile, trivial. To the latter belongs manual labor that therefore remains separate from the higher activities of the human spirit and its privileged representatives" (Santarelli 2021, 30, my translation).

Popper (1994) famously advanced the theory that science was born when the encounter/clash between different cultures made the ancients discover that facts and opinions are different things, and that different cultures may have very different cultural practices (the Greeks for example burned their dead, while Callatians ate them). However, Popper again, in the second volume of *The Open Society* (1963), had explained how for both Plato and Aristotle reality is but the actualization of the potentialities of the fixed essences that lie behind, in, or beyond earthly things, determining their ends (or their destiny, as Popper put it; apart from minor alterations, "Aristotle's version of Plato's essentialism shows only unimportant differences", ibid. 1963, 5). Regardless of whether they are internal or external to things, the forms/ideas/essences of things are their true nature for the Greeks.

With the scientific revolution of the 17th century, modernity frees itself from the "classist cage of pure intellectual contemplation" (Santarelli 2021, 29, my translation). Modern science frees itself, according to Dewey, from the fixity of ends for the dynamism of nature, but with the consequence of relegating ends, this time, to a lower sphere of reality (which is Dewey's main concern, see presently). Ends and values are no more immutable, now they are considered only inventions of the human mind, only states of consciousness. Indeed, with modernity the problem of the distinction between facts and values also becomes the problem of their relation, eminently with Descartes' distinction of mind and body as two different substances of reality.

Dewey's intent was to argue against the opposition between nature and culture, just like the contemporary claims I mentioned in the introduction. But there are two possible interpretations of Dewey's argument. According to one interpretation, Dewey is saying that if in premodern times values were (what we would call) immutable facts, and if modernity separated the two spheres, expelling ends from nature, his pragmatism in turn poses facts to be "only" values. This is for example how Rorty (see Kolenda, 1986) interpreted Dewey's pragmatism, as the simple negation and opposite of modernity's theory of existence. On a different interpretation, what Dewey argued for was the claim that, far from being just inventions of the mind, values are just as real as facts. See Putnam:

A misunderstanding that his work always tends to provoke [...] is the misunderstanding that when Dewey attacks what he called “dualisms” he is thereby attacking all allied philosophical *distinctions* [...]. [...] [T]he fact/value dichotomy is, at bottom, not a distinction but a thesis, namely the thesis that “ethics” is not about “matters of fact” (2004, 9–10).

Putnam is distinguishing between simple distinctions and dichotomies (or dualisms). The difference is that distinctions have ranges of application (we can distinguish between cats and dogs as species of animals, but also between cats and dogs as pets from non-pets, and so on), with no claim of universality. A dichotomy, instead, is a metaphysical thesis according to which two things are “all-important”, “omnipresent” different kinds: if x and y are two types of things put in dichotomy, everything that exists in the world is either a x or a y independently from context, or in every context, and nothing that is a x can also be a y and vice versa. Applied to the nature/culture pair, the distinction between dichotomies and simple distinctions implies that the nature/culture problem is actually twofold: one is the metaphysical problem of the nature/culture *dichotomy*, that is of nature and culture as one or two separate spheres of reality (dualism vs. monism); another is the problem of the *distinction* between nature and culture as different things belonging to the same sphere of reality (regardless of how many spheres of reality are there).

2.2.3. Nature/culture as dichotomy and as distinction

From the above presentation, it may already be evident that the terms “facts” and “values”, and “nature” and “culture” have been semantically used in different ways. For example, in “facts are just values”, “facts” is invoked to talk about a certain kind of thing (e.g. trees, the force of gravity, chairs), while “values” is used to attribute the meaning of /non-existence/, /non-real/, to something. In “values also are facts”, in turn, “values” is used to denote a particular kind of things (interpretations, ideas, concepts etc.) while “facts” to express /realness/, /existence/. That is, the word “facts” can be used either to say that something exists, to euphorically value something (as in “values also are facts”), or to simply indicate a kind of things (facts, means, natural things, as opposed to things of another kind). “Values”, in turn, can be used to undervalue something (as in “facts are just values”) or to indicate a type of things other than facts (values, ends, cultural things).

In these examples, the different uses are discriminated through the work done, respectively, by the additional particle “also” used as an adverb, and the adverb “just” used instead to limit the importance of something. But it is possible to verify this analysis through a commutation test. Saying “values are just facts” does not seem to be semantically correct, while “facts also are values” does not retain the same euphoric sense as “values also are facts”. Which shows that fact/value can be used to mean /real vs. nonreal/.

The same applies to “nature” and “culture.” One could say, for example, “what we consider nature is just another form of culture”, meaning that nature does not

exist; or that “culture too is part of nature”, meaning that cultures are real (as Marrone, 2024 has shown, there is an implicit “axiological tension” between the terms, as “nature emerges not as a series of properties but as an accumulation of empty yet valued traits. Depth is what imposes itself as something important as opposed to a superficiality that would seem to dominate souls and things”, 19, my translation).

All this indicates that the opposition can be understood in two different ways: either to distinguish what exists from what does not (e.g. “it’s completely natural to do x” vs. “x is only cultural”), or to distinguish types of things (e.g. “trees are natural things” vs. “interpretations are cultural things”). This distinction separates the opposition nature/culture as a dichotomy (1), that is between what is real vs. what is supernatural, or non–real, or less–real (which things are considered real and nonreal changes from culture to culture and from philosophy to philosophy); from nature/culture as a simple distinction (2), that is between (in a very broad sense, see presently) human–independent and human–dependent things (2), no matter their metaphysical status:

- (a) Real vs. Non–real
- (b) Human–independent (means, facts, natural things) vs. Human–dependent (values, ends, cultural things, norms, interpretations)⁵⁹.

For example, the Greeks and the moderns used nature and culture in sense (1), although for opposite reasons:

The Greek community was marked by a sharp separation of servile workers and free men of leisure, which meant a division between acquaintance with matters of fact and contemplative appreciation, between unintelligent practice and unpractical intelligence, between affairs of change and efficiency or instrumentality and of rest and enclosure finality. [...] The doctrine that objects as ends are the proper objects of science, because they are the ultimate forms of real being, met its doom in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century [...] The doctrine of natural ends was displaced by a doctrine of designs, ends–in–view, conscious aims constructed and entertained in individual minds independent of nature. (Dewey 1929 [1925], 93–95)

The Greeks relegated nature (that is, human–independent things) to a lower dimension of reality (Non–real), while true knowledge could only be intellectual knowledge of forms (Real) – which is why, above, we said that for Greeks “values are indisputable facts”. Moderns, on the contrary, relegated culture (as human–dependent things) to a dimension of inert epiphenomena (Non–real).

⁵⁹ These two articulations are similar but perpendicular to the two individuated by Marrone (2024, 21) that distinguish “nature” as the total reality of which culture is just an internal part from “nature” as the subset of human actions, products, projects that are deemed “natural” as opposed to other actions, products etc. that are “only cultural”, that is, inferior, deteriorate, or even bad.

As a simple distinction, nature/culture divides what is independent of man from what is dependent on man, in a very broad sense. It can be understood as tree vs. chairs, according to the criterion that distinguishes what is created by man vs. what is not created by man. But also, as tree vs. “tree”, distinguishing between objects and the signs that represent them. Or it can be used to distinguish between utterances such as “trees are perennial plants with elongated trunk” from utterances that express propositional attitudes, such as “in my opinion beech trees are the most beautiful trees”, according to the criterion that separates facts from tastes or opinions. We call natural the languages that have evolved with humans in a bottom–up process (which does not detract from the fact that they are not natural in the senses just seen), while we call artificial those languages intentionally created by humans (such as the binary language of computers)⁶⁰. But in a different context we call natural simply anything that is not human or human–modified: in this sense not only would both natural and artificial languages be cultural (not natural), but fewer and fewer things are natural in this specific sense, and it is to the realization of this problem that we owe the notion of the anthropocene. Finally, the opposition can be reoriented further by taking the point of view not of humans but of other, nonhuman animals, and thus divide between, for example, cuckoo–independent and cuckoo–dependent things (nuts vs. nests, for example)⁶¹.

2.2.4. The meaning of rejecting distinctions

There are two general ways of understanding the nature/culture opposition: as a dichotomy and as a distinction. The two can be combined in various ways, depending on one’s preferred ontology. One can have a conception that wants both what is independent and what is dependent on man to be real things. This was Dewey’s position, at least according to Putnam: in his terms, both facts and values pose “matters of fact” (notice the repetition; we could say, both nature and culture are natural). The opposite position would be that neither facts nor values are real (think for example of Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo who, as an element of coherence, repeated many times that the postmodernist claim that there are no facts, only interpretations, is itself just an interpretation).

⁶⁰ A further example, from the history of semiotics, would be the distinction between natural and conventional signs, see for example Rollin (1976).

⁶¹ While I am focusing on the semiotic problem of the meanings of “nature” and “culture” as words, my analysis has many parallels with the analysis of the metaphysical distinction between human and natural kinds by Thomasson (2003). The idea that the distinction between cultural and natural things (as objects intentionally made by man vs. objects that come into being without human intervention) doesn’t imply a metaphysical deficiency in cultural objects *qua* cultural was advanced by Rudder Baker (2008). Often, the distinction between human–dependent and independent things plays a crucial role from the ethical point of view, see for example the debate on environmental restoration in Elliot (1982) and Katz (1992): according to these authors, a restored landscape is still a human–dependent object, a “fake nature”, and hence lacks the property we value the most of a natural environment. See also Vogel (2015) for a critical discussion.

If the distinction between simple distinctions and dichotomies holds, then the meaning of “overcoming the opposition between nature and culture” changes depending on what is meant by “nature and culture”. As David Graeber put it, it is not enough to say that you want to overcome the opposition between nature and culture, since “pretty much everyone claims that nowadays!” (2015, 21). What is needed is to specify what it means, whether we want “to dissolve Materialism into Idealism, Idealism into Materialism, or both Materialism and Idealism into something else” (ibidem)⁶². Moreover, the two senses (1–2) entertain a relationship of quasi mutual negation: affirming the dualism between nature and culture (to the disadvantage of one or the other) implies the impossibility of positively distinguishing between natural and cultural things, while denying the dualism between nature and culture implies the possibility of distinguishing between natural and cultural things.

For example, for Dewey both Greeks and Moderns affirmed a dualistic conception of the opposition between nature and culture, albeit in opposite ways. But this implied not being able to distinguish between natural things and cultural things in the modest sense (2), because for the Greeks only values were real in a positive sense, while for the Moderns only facts were real. In other words, they cannot be distinguished because only one of the terms enjoys real existence.

A contemporary example of this is the position defended by many anthropologists of the ontological turn who, rather than saying goodbye to nature, say that everything is nature. See how Viveiros de Castro (2015) presents the methodology of the new anthropologists, as he calls them. While old anthropologists believed that ethnographic data cannot be literally true (saying, for example, that witches, as conceived by the culture *x*, cannot literally exist), the new anthropologists instead proceed “as if” the ethnographic data were true, which serves them to bracket their own culture, their own Western ideology.

The method consists in studying a phenomenon *x* as it is conceived by a given group *y* “as if” *x* were true. But if this were only a method for understanding what a group *thinks* nature is, the new method would be no different from the old one. Instead, the new anthropologist must not ask how *y* conceives reality, but how reality must be for *y*’s claims to be true. Of course, the same applies to the anthropologist’s own beliefs. That is, he/she and the group that he/she studies live in different natures. When placed before radical alterity we must assume that they live in the world they describe, a world radically different from that of the ethnographer, just as each of us lives in the world we think we are living. Viveiros de Castro’s famous example is that what is blood for us, it’s beer for the jaguar (2004, 472). But blood and beer are not two different interpretations of the same thing, but two different things altogether, two different natures.

The ontological move consists in taking the verbal reports of a group under ethnographic analysis and considering them as true, as reality:

⁶² In this paragraph I am partly following Graeber’s analysis (2015).

Proponents of the [ontological] move usually emphasize how it gets us out of the arrogance of thinking that the people we study are silly when they say and do things that to us seem irrational. But equally it gets us out of the relativist impulse to say that what we consider rational is “just as” open to question (equally “situated,” “constructed,” and so on) [...] The ontological turn, in other words, protects our “science” and our “common sense” as much as it protects the “native”. (Holbraad, 2007, 903)

As in Dewey, here too the thesis is often set against the background reflection on the relationships between nature and culture in the history of ideas:

The Cartesian rupture with medieval scholastics produced a radical simplification of our ontology, by positing only two principles or substances: unextended thought and extended matter. Such simplification is still with us. Modernity started with it: with the massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions—that is, questions of representation. (Viveiros de Castro, 1992, 92)

So, if Dewey’s concern was that modernity had relegated culture to a sphere of supernatural unreality, according to Viveiros de Castro the negative effect of modernity, on the side of the sciences of the spirit, has been the privileging of epistemology in philosophy to the detriment of ontology (cf. Henare *et al.* 2006, 9; ontology and epistemology being yet other synonyms for nature and culture). But if modernity favored the notion of epistemology, to the detriment of ontology, the ontological turn favors the notion of nature, to the detriment of the cultural and epistemology⁶³. Contrary to what the ancients did according to Popper, when the new anthropologists encounter diversity they do not infer that things may not be as they believed to be; instead, the new anthropologists multiply natures, and the respective truths. Both “science” and the “native” are right, neither is nor can be wrong because their respective statements about a given object, though apparently contradictory, are both true for their respective worlds. It is clear, then, that to say that everything is natural in this sense is to the detriment of the notion of culture as that which is human-dependent. This position implies that one cannot distinguish opinions, theories, beliefs about how things are from how things are independently of opinions, theories, beliefs. That is, we cannot distinguish between nature and culture in the modest sense because only natural things (2) exist, because nothing is cultural.

⁶³ With results closely similar to those achieved by modernity, contrary to the initial intentions of the new anthropologists.

2.2.5. The meaning of rejecting dichotomies

In turn, to reject the dichotomy (1) between nature and culture leaves open the possibility of distinguishing between nature and culture in the modest sense (2).

To deny (1) means to deny that natural and cultural things belong to two metaphysically separate spheres of existence. There may be several reasons for rejecting the dichotomy between nature and culture. Dewey's concern, as mentioned, was that modern dualism between nature and culture led to the relegation of culture to a supernatural dimension of unreality, of epiphenomenon⁶⁴. According to Dewey and Bentley (1949, 143), all dualisms or dichotomies lead to what they call interactionism (which is the style of thought that characterized modernity) and its problem: it puts in interaction two things that cannot interact. The most famous example of interactionism is Descartes' mind-body dualism which notoriously leads to the so-called pairing problem (Kim, 2001). In other words, for Dewey to deny dualisms is to deny that there can be two separate spheres of reality that cannot influence each other, relegating one of the two spheres to an existential status of epiphenomenon. Therefore, to deny their dualism implies, rather than concedes, that nature and culture can be distinguished in the simple, modest sense, that is, as different things belonging to the same sphere of reality, since "nothing metaphysical follows from the existence of a fact/value distinction in this (modest) sense" (Putnam, 2004, 19). Under this Deweyan conception (see also Godfrey Smith, 2021), to say that everything is natural has a different meaning from that of the ontological anthropologist: here it does not mean that culture does not exist, or that there is no difference between facts and opinions. Instead, it means that both nature and culture are real, both pose substantial matters, and that neither can be reduced to the other. According to this conception, that is, culture is a second nature in Murray Bookchin's sense (1982; see also Finley, 2025); or the part of nature that becomes aware of itself (Reclus, 1905)⁶⁵. This does not mean that there is no difference between rocks and interpretations of rocks, as was the case for the ancients according to Dewey and for the anthropologists of the ontological turn. Simply, there is no difference *from the metaphysical point of view*: nature and culture are both real things, precisely for this reason distinguishable.

⁶⁴ An interesting predecessor is Proudhon's ideal-realism (1853).

⁶⁵ In French: "l'Homme est la nature prenant conscience d'elle-même". Another important example is Plumwood (1993). Today there are many examples of this extended, non-reductive naturalism; see for example Gregoratto *et al.* (2022) in political science, De Caro and Macarthur (2022) in philosophy, and Hutto (2022; 2023) in the philosophy of the cognitive sciences.

2.2.6. "Nature" in Latour

When we say that we must overcome the opposition between nature and culture we must remember the distinction between simple distinctions and dichotomies, and specify what we mean accordingly. Otherwise, as seen, we run the risk of passing off as the same theories that say opposite things.

An example of how different interpretations can be given to the claim that we need to overcome the opposition between nature and culture, depending on whether we choose (1) or (2), is Bruno Latour's hybridism. As presented in Latour (1991), hybridism is the thesis that we can no longer pretend to be able to separate (I'm using this neutral term on purpose) nature from culture. This is considered the false epistemological premise of modernity, hence the famous title *We Have Never Been Modern* (Engl. trans. 1993). Examples of hybrids for Latour are the ozone hole, the AIDS epidemic, the anthropocene, the processes of loss of biological diversity in forests. In all instances where the natural and the social are mixed, scientific propositions are found juxtaposed with political ideas, says Latour:

Where are we to classify the ozone hole story, or global warming or deforestation? Where are we to put these hybrids? Are they human? Human because they are our work. Are they natural? Natural because they are not our doing [...] There are so many hybrids that no one knows any longer how to lodge them in the old promised land of modernity. (*ibid.*, 50)

The problem is that depending on how we conceive the opposition between nature and culture the meaning of hybridism can take on opposite meanings. Moreover, without the distinction between distinctions and dichotomies an important difference is not grasped, that between saying that we cannot distinguish between nature and culture in the sense of (2), because everything is culture in the sense of (1); and saying that we cannot dichotomize nature and culture because both are real in the sense of (1), that is, both pose substantive questions and matters of fact.

Commenting on the passage just quoted, Malm (2018, 43) has recently said that it is "an admission of intellectual confusion". Leaving aside the question of who is causing confusion, whether Latour himself or his reader, what interests me is the position Malm proposes in opposition to Latour's hybridism, as well as his characterization of hybridism itself. In brief, in Malm's interpretation hybridism claims that nature and culture cannot be distinguished in the sense of (2): "because natural and social phenomena have become compounds, the two cannot be differentiated by any other means than violence" (*ibid.*, 43). To Malm, this version of hybridism leads to a form of Cartesian dualism, against its own anti-modern premises, since it is "only by postulating nature and society as categories located a universe apart", that is, as a dichotomy, that "their combination warrant their collapse" (*ibid.*, 47). Only by conceiving the demarcation between nature and culture as a metaphysical dichotomy we can be surprised at their union in hybrids and be led to conclude that nature does not exist.

To the Cartesian dualism of hybridism Malm opposes a view he calls property dualism, continuing to borrow terminology from the literature in the philosophy

of mind. Property “dualism” is a way of rejecting the dualism between nature and culture (despite the terminology, clearly property dualism is not a dualism in the sense defined here): nature and culture are not metaphysically different but indistinguishable things; instead, nature and culture “belong to the exact same substance” (ibid., 51). Still, or precisely because it is just as real as nature, culture is irreducible to nature, just as minds according to property dualism “are non-physical properties of the body” (ibidem). “The beauty of this solution is that it avoids the Cartesian impotence in the face of the causal interaction problem while preserving the distinction between body and mind” (ibid., 53)⁶⁶.

The opposition outlined by Malm is consistent with the analysis of the distinction between (1–2) seen above. Rejecting the dichotomy between nature and culture leaves open the possibility of distinguishing between natural and cultural things, while hybridism (the impossibility of distinguishing between nature and culture) makes sense only if nature and culture are dichotomized⁶⁷. For Malm, in short, Latour, by denying the possibility of distinguishing between nature and culture, is reaffirming their dualism.

It is possible that Malm misinterpreted Latour’s thought, and that Latour meant something different by hybridism than the impossibility to distinguish between nature and culture. There are other moments in his work where Latour seems to say the exact opposite from what Malm thinks, for example in his analysis of everyday objects (cf. Latour, 1988, or Latour, 2004). In his analysis of the door-closer, for example, Latour recognized that there are two “absurdities”, as he calls them, two reductionisms to be avoided, which he calls sociologism and technologism, respectively:

We can call *sociologism* the claim that, given the competence and pre-inscription of huma users and authors, you can read out the scripts nonhuman actors have to play; and *technologism* the symmetric claim that, given the competence and pre-inscription of the nonhuman actors, you can easily read out and deduce the behavior prescribed to authors and users. (1988, 307–308)

In other words, things are irreducible to human’s understandings and plans (scripts), just as humans (authors and users) are irreducible to the material affordances

⁶⁶ See also Graeber (2015) and Ingold (2022) for a similar critique of the ontological turn. Ingold, in particular, opposes his one-world view to the many-words view of the new anthropologists. Stjernfelt (2012b) also offered a related critique to the opposite extreme according to which everything is cultural (1), that is nonreal, which Stjernfelt calls strong culturalism.

⁶⁷ The possibility of distinguishing between the social and the natural is deemed crucial for Malm from a political and progressive point of view to address the problem of the climate crisis: “Only after a process of isolating the social from the natural, hard on the heels of the discovery of their dangerous material combination, could the Montreal Protocol ban companies from producing any more chlorofluorocarbons [...] Exactly contrary to the message of hybridism, it follows that the more problems of environmental degradation we confront, the more imperative it is to pick the unities apart in their poles. Far from abolishing it, ecological crises render the distinction between the social and the natural more essential than ever” (2018, 56).

conveyed by things. Applied to nature and culture, it seems that both should be conceived as irreducible to each other. In this case, Latour's hybridism would mean the exact opposite of what we have seen so far. It just means that many things are both natural and cultural, not that nature and culture cannot be distinguished (in fact, both are irreducible to the other). Certainly, it doesn't imply that we should say goodbye to nature.

Maybe Latour changed his mind about the meaning of hybridism, or he did not realize the tension between the two senses (1–2) of the opposition between nature and culture⁶⁸. Taking a famous example: it is one thing to say that nature and culture cannot be distinguished, and therefore Ramses II could not have died of tuberculosis because tuberculosis had yet to be “invented” by 19th century scientists (Latour 2000); it is quite another, opposite thing to reject the dualism between nature and culture and therefore recognize that tuberculosis has its own agency irreducible to our plans, opinions and theories about tuberculosis. In this case, saying that Ramses II could not have died of tuberculosis would be a form of sociologism about tuberculosis. Or consider the notion of anthropocene: it's one thing to say the anthropocene is a hybrid because men and the capitalist and extractivist culture caused it; another to say that the “anthropocene” does not exist outside the discourse of science.

2.2.7. The semiotic method

My aim was not to defend one approach against the other, but to pose the distinction between simple distinctions and dualisms (or dichotomies) which, in the context of the contemporary debate on the opposition between nature and culture, is of utmost importance to avoid confusing as the same theoretical positions that say opposite things. I gave the example of Latour's hybridism, but in fact the interpretation of Dewey's attack on the facts/values opposition itself depends on whether one understands it as an attack on the dichotomy between facts and values (Putnam's interpretation) or on their distinction (Rorty's).

As a final example, the distinction between (1–2) is also relevant to the two-culture debate (Snow 1961) or the distinction between hard, or natural, and human sciences, respectively (see Eco, 1984; Stjernfelt, 2012b; Cobley, 2016; Martinelli, 2016; Smith, 2017). Consider the so-called strong program in sociology of science (Bloor, 1976; 1984). One defining trait of the program was the so-called equivalence postulate, which dictates not to make exceptions from sociological explanation, and study the field of western science with the same tools and methods that sociology has used for other groups, cultures, ideologies. But another defining feature of the program was also the anti-reductionism of the social sciences and humanities to the natural sciences (versus what they called “weak” programs). Alexander (2003) expressed this point well with his definition of the “strong program in cultural sociology”. Contrary to reductionist sociology,

⁶⁸ On the relation between Latour's thought and semiotics see Peverini (2024).

according to which the “explanatory power lies in the study of the ‘hard’ variables of social structure, such that structured sets of meanings become superstructures and ideologies driven by these more ‘real’ and tangible social forces” (*ibid.*, 13), cultural sociology argues for the “autonomy of culture”, and for the irreducibility of sociological explanations to other kinds of explanations. Now, similarly to the claim that we should “overcome the opposition between nature and culture”, also the claim of the autonomy of culture can be seen in two different ways, depending on how the opposition between nature and culture is conceived: i) if as a dualism, culture would be irreducible to other non-cultural factors because there are no other non-cultural factors; ii) if as a simple distinction, culture is irreducible because it is just as real as any other non-cultural factors, hence irreducible to them.

In conclusion, I have proposed that while the words “*nature*” and “*culture*” are highly polysemic, it is possible to identify two very general ways of understanding the nature/culture opposition in the way the philosophical literature has presented the history of their demarcation from antiquity to the present day. In particular, the opposition between nature and culture can be seen either as a simple distinction or as a dualism. In the first case, separating nature and culture merely means distinguishing natural things – i.e. things independent from humans, in a broad sense – from cultural things, a distinction that may take on different separation criteria in different contexts. In the second case, nature and culture are separated based on a metaphysical criterion, with the effect of relegating one term or the other (depending on the specific philosophy) to an inferior, epiphenomenic existential status. I argued that the distinction is of major importance for properly understanding the meaning of the claim that the opposition nature/culture must be overcome. I have also shown, with examples, the different practical consequences of rejecting one or the other, emphasizing how each operation implies the negation of the other. Once the difference between distinctions and dualisms is introduced, one must specify what is being overcome: the simple distinction between nature and culture, or their dualism.

So, let me specify. The semiotics I have presented so far is closer to Dewey than to the ontological turn. In fact, rejecting the dualism between nature and culture is a consequence of defining the problems of semiotics as external problems. According to the argument presented, the very possibility of distinguishing between signs and the reality they represent implies the rejection of their dualism (cf. Putnam, 2004, 10)⁶⁹.

⁶⁹ This is also the issue that lies behind the debate on the arbitrariness of signs. As I will say in the next section 2.3., the difference between signs and their objects does not prevent signs from telling the truth; on the contrary, it is a condition of possibility for truthful texts (if there were no difference between signs and objects, there would be nothing about which signs could be true). If the principle of arbitrariness is limited to this, there is nothing controversial about it (cf. Popper, 1994, 37). However, here too it is necessary to distinguish between distinctions and dualisms: if the principle of arbitrariness also implies a metaphysical dichotomization between signs and objects, such that each belongs to a different sphere of reality, then no relation is possible between the two.

To remain within the anthropological field, Graeber (2015) considered the ontological method to be “conservative”, because it states that we must operate “as if” the concepts our interlocutors use (and ours as well) are true, however radically different from our own, with no possibility of mutual influence (a kind of inter-natural dualism). In contrast, Graeber proposes the ethnographic method. This starts with the practices from which concepts emerge, and seeks to «reexamine less apparently exotic and more familiar practices in the light of this analysis to see if our commonsense notions are in any sense partial, inadequate, or wrong» (2015, 7). Graeber’s ethnographic method is close to Popper’s (1994) conception of science as composed of two fundamental elements: the creation of stories, and the methodological comparison of those stories as an ameliorative project that aims at the truth (cf. Santarelli, 2022 for the pragmatist version of this method).

I would similarly define the semiotic method, as based on the fundamental (but modest) distinction between signs and objects (see 2.3.2.). According to this method, semiotics does not proceed as if all signs were true. In semiotics, at least since Barthes, so-called mythologies or myths are precisely those discourses that establish an equation between signs and the world, an equation that the mythologist must be able to recognize and deconstruct. If the modest distinction between signs and objects is made, then signs construct cultures, not their referents. We do not construct the Anthropocene in discourse, we construct the discourse on the anthropocene. But just as nature (as *terminus a quo* of semiosis) drives us to change the signs we use, cultures and signs can affect nature and other cultures, precisely because both nature and culture are real. So, while the reality of the Anthropocene is independent from our understanding, there would be no Anthropocene without human culture causing it.

In the next chapter I will pose the issue in cultural and political semiotics terms. Selg and Ventsel (2020) used the terms of Dewey and Bentley (1949) for the definition of political semiotics, distinguishing between self-actional, inter-actional, and trans-actional approaches in political analysis. If the analysis presented here is correct, then political semiotics, if it aims to follow a genuinely transactional approach in the sense of Dewey and Bentley, must conceive the opposition between nature and culture as a simple distinction and not as a dualism. In Dewey’s view, the transactional method implies that there is no metaphysical separation between the two terms – otherwise, nothing could “transact” from one to the other. On the one hand, this implies that political problems are external to the semiotician and that the semiotician can be wrong about them.

In turn, the advantage of this interpretation of transactionalism is that it does not diminish the importance of political semiotic analysis. If the dualism between nature and culture is rejected, then culture (and political communication) is neither an epiphenomenon that produces no effects on reality, nor the sole horizon of human existence from which we cannot escape.

2.3. Truth as *terminus a quo* of semiosis

2.3.1. Truth as *terminus a quo* and “truths” as the *termini ad quem*

Resuming semiotics’ dogma on truth, we can now see how points (1–2) with which we started in the introduction change in meaning with the theoretical background I have presented. As for (1), we have seen that the principle that we know nothing but signs in Peirce and Eco does not mean that we have no access to reality, but, on the contrary, that we have no knowledge that does not come from external facts (for Eco and Peirce, signs are external to our minds, not internal).

As for (2), if the experiential origin of contents does not imply that reality has a definite structure (how reality is structured is a question for philosophers), it does imply that semiotic systems and languages are not autonomous from reality (which is now a common assumption in cognitive linguistics and semiotics, see for example Geeraerts, 2006, 5)⁷⁰. At least, this is how we should conceive the opposition between nature and culture, as I argued in the previous section.

This is what Greimas and Courtès say about truth in their *Dictionnaire*:

The “true” is situated within the discourse, for it is the fruit of the veridiction operations: this thus excludes any relation (or any homologation) with an external referent. (1982 [1979], 353)

By postulating autonomy as well as the immanent character of every language and, by this same token, the impossibility of any recourse to an external referent, Saussurian theory has constrained semiotics to make its concerns not the problem of truth, but that of truthsaying, of veridiction. (Ivi, 367)

As mentioned, Eco (1975; 1976) too was deflationary about truth in his rejection of truth-functionalism in semantic theory. Eco further gave the famous definition of semiotics as the discipline that studies «everything which can be used in order to lie» (1976, 7). While he also added that if something cannot be used to lie, it cannot be used to tell the truth either, clearly he was, at the time, more interested in lies than truth⁷¹, a position soon to be changed in the second part of his career. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) too presented arguments against truth-conditional semantics, to which they opposed their account of meaning as metaphorically structured and embodied in image schemas. This is a critique that pragmatism shares, and one that I also share. But it is one thing to say that mental representations are embodied images (image schemas) that guide actions rather than setting truth conditions or representing the world. Quite another to say that signs

⁷⁰ In this regard Eco (1999) spoke of lines of resistance of being, of affordances, pertinences, and forbidden senses, rather than obligatory senses.

⁷¹ See for example the following passage from *A Theory of Semiotics*: «Everytime there is a lie there is signification [...] If this is true [...] then semiotics has found a new threshold: between conditions of signification and conditions of truth» (1976, 59); cf. Danesi (2017).

do not have truth conditions at all (which is not denied by the most radical of the anti-representationalists, see Hutto and Myin, 2017)⁷².

My point is not to say that meaning is two-dimensional (intensions and truth-conditions, see Chalmers, 2006). More generally, an encyclopedic approach to meaning in semiotics (sometimes called maximalist, as opposed to minimalist, see Geeraerts, 2010, 109) implies that languages are not independent from reality, and that, therefore, semiotic judgments are about external truths independent of the individual researcher.

Once we admit that semiotic judgements can be true and false, I don't see why the same conclusions should not apply to all judgments and texts that say something about the world. Anyhow, Greimas and Courtès' reasoning itself seems to imply that, should we reject the thesis of the autonomy of languages, truth could become a problem relevant to semiotics (since languages are not autonomous).

In light also of the semantic analysis proposed in the previous chapter, we should distinguish two perspectives or points of view: what signs say is "true", and how signs can aim at the truth. The first perspective concerns the problem of veridiction, the manipulative act of making someone believe something to be true (cf. Stano, 2023; Leone, 2024a), often with the aim of making he/she do something (as Vattimo said, in these cases «there is someone who in the name of truth wants me to do what I do not want», 2005, 82, my translation⁷³). The second, in turn, concerns truth understood as that which is independent of what we believe to be true.

In other words, we should distinguish between truth in the strict sense and "truths", plural, as how signs say things are. Or, borrowing from Eco's terminology (1999), distinguish between the problem of truth as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis from "truths" as *termini ad quem* of utterances.

⁷² Lakoff and Johnson also have a notion of embodied truth very close to William James' (1907) that truth is what is satisfactory, useful, instrumental. While I do think that when we use the word "truth" we mean sometimes "what confirms my prior (embodied) experience", I don't think that this is everything we can say about "truth". To be sure, Lakoff and Johnson specify that they accept both what they call experiential realism («we can have stable knowledge of [the world]»), and basic realism («there is a world independent of our understanding of the world», Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, 90), which actually is more than what I have conceded here to realism. On the theoretical side, semiotics in general rejects referentialism in semantics (Eco, 1976). But defined differently, as just the knowing what would be true if a statement is true, truth-functionalism is not incompatible with Peirce's pragmatic maxim, according to which the complete meaning of something is the list of all its practical consequences.

⁷³ In Italian: «c'è qualcuno che in nome della verità mi vuol far fare ciò che non voglio» (Vattimo, 2005, 82).

2.3.2. Signs vs. truth

In her latest novel, *Intermezzo* (2024), Sally Rooney reports on a reflection on truth by Ivan, tickled by Sylvia, whose conclusions many semioticians share. Ivan is concerned that he has lied to Margaret, however purposefully. So, he distinguishes between “all my hats are green” and “my sister is here”. If one does not have hats, asserting that “all my hats are green” is not a lie; instead, it is an empty truth, Ivan says, because it can be translated into the conditional form “for all hats, the hats that are mine are green” (hence, he wouldn’t be saying that he owns hats). “My sister is here”, however, is different. Since it is a definite description, it wouldn’t be an empty truth if said by someone who has no sisters, but a falsehood, because in this case he would be saying that there is a person who is his sister, which is false. Sylvia rightly manifests her skepticism («It’s a false statement if I just invent one sister? she asks. But if I invent more than one, it becomes true?», 263), and Ivan himself, after some thought, concludes that the difference between truth and falsehood is complicated: «reality is actually one thing and language something else».

You think you’re fitting language onto the world in a certain way, like a child fitting the right-shaped toy into the right-shaped slot. But at times you realise that that’s a false picture too. Language doesn’t fit onto reality like a toy fitting into a slot. (Rooney, 2024, 263)

Aside from the validity of Ivan’s reasoning, the fact is that Ivan overestimates the problem of the diversity of languages from reality. Indeed, it is precisely logical paradoxes such as that of the liar (“this proposition is false” is true if false but also false if true) that make us realize that signs, opinions, beliefs are one thing and truth is another. But this is not a bad thing! It is precisely from this realization that we understand that truth exists and is important. In other words, recognizing that truth and interpretations are different things is not the same as saying that there are no facts, only interpretations.

Cantwell-Smith (2019), for instance, argued that it is precisely the awareness that truth and signs are different things what separates natural from artificial intelligence or, with his terminology, judgment from reckon, respectively. Judgment here is «a form of dispassionate deliberative thought, grounded in ethical commitment and responsible action, appropriate to the situation in which it is deployed» (xv). Reckoning, on the other hand, is the ability to compute and measure devoid of any ethical component and contextual awareness. The point is that in order to have genuine judgment, a system must distinguish between truth and signs, and know that when words and world part ways, it should choose the world, which is what current AI technologies are still not able to do («no less is required in order for it to distinguish appearance from reality, and choose reality; to recognize the difference between right and wrong – and choose right; to distinguish truth, falsity, and impossibility – and choose truth», 105).

Far from being the problem, knowing that signs and reality are different is the precondition for the capacity of judgment. In turn, if language was a perfect mirror of reality, we wouldn't even have the concept of truth as the terminus a quo of semiosis since, as we saw in 1.2.2., the word "truth" doesn't add anything informative as a property of signs.

Signs are always different from their objects, it shouldn't be surprising. Rather, the difficult part is to recognize that, since signs are different from their objects, we should care about the difference and be oriented to how things are independently of the representations we use. And do our best to change the representations we use accordingly. Sally Rooney's Ivan has the capacity to distinguish between truth and language, which is why he is worried, why he feels accountable to Margaret to whom he lied to. While reflecting on the logical paradoxes of truth, his concerned behavior shows that the real interesting issue is not the difference between signs and reality *per se*. Instead, the problem is how to respect the values of truth in communication.

Precisely because truth is independent from signs, then truth is something of value to us, and trying to tell the truth, being sincere and accurate, is not the same as not observing these values in communication. The problem with the well-known postmodernist slogan that there are no facts only interpretations is not that it is incoherent (because there would be at least one fact, that there are no interpretations – but, as Vattimo used to say, the Nietzschean principle is itself just an interpretation). The problem is rather that, strictly speaking, if there are no facts there are no interpretations either.

2.3.3. Semiotics with a conscience

I should specify that I am not denying that promoting something as "the truth" can serve those on the right side of a political power relation to maintain their hegemonic position (cf. Selg and Ventsel, 2010; 2020, 91) by obscuring alternative views. But I argue that veridiction is not the sole purpose of "truth" in language.

Even a radical alethic anti-realist as Richard Rorty didn't deny that truth could be used to say that a proposition we think completely justified today may not be true tomorrow. Rorty called this the cautionary use of truth, that he interpreted as a «gesture toward future generations» (1998, 60–61). More generally, «the notion of truth cannot simply drop out of our vocabulary. For without the idea of truth, some core practices of inquiry, belief, and assertion cannot be explained» (Misak, 2000, 18). As Eco (1999, 258) realized, «to be able to say whether and how people accept something as true, and to make them believe it is true, we must also assume that there is a naive concept of truth»⁷⁴.

This position should not be confused with that held by Habermas (1981; 1983) and Apel (1973a; 1973b), according to whom communication is a type of non-strategic action that aims at truth and mutual understanding, not at influencing

⁷⁴ On minimalism see 1.2.2.

others (Habermas, 1990, 58). According to Habermas and Apel, it is possible to offer a transcendental argument that shows that the Peircian theory of truth (in Habermas' formulation: truth is what is agreeable by all in an unconstrained ideal communication) and the democratic principles of discourse ethics (everyone has a right to participate, every participant must try to assume the perspective of all others, every participant has an equal right to make his views known, to challenge other views, express his attitudes, needs and desires) are necessary conditions for all communication. They would be always assumed a priori by anyone who wants to participate in a discussion: «anyone who seriously undertakes to participate in argumentation implicitly accepts by that very undertaking general pragmatic presuppositions that have a normative content (Habermas, 1990, 197–8).

Both Habermas and Apel presented different versions of the transcendental argument⁷⁵. One is the following. Even if you don't agree with Habermas and Apel's ethics of discourse, just by disagreeing you are implicitly committed to the ethics of discourse. In particular, to «make any assertion at all» one has to accept Habermas' principles «that validity is that which would be the result of unconstrained argument, to the claim that those results hold for everyone, and to the democratic principles of inquiry» (Misak, 2000, 39). Habermas (1990, 32) also offered a weaker version of the argument, based on (U):

(U) For a norm to be valid, the consequences and side effects of its general observance for the satisfaction of each person's particular interests must be acceptable to all. (Habermas, 1990, 197)

The problem is that in reality people can communicate with other intentions, often also to influence and manipulate others. For example, Apel (1990, 43) says that (1) constitutes a contradiction in the same way as (2) does:

- (1) I hereby assert as true [i.e., intersubjectively valid] that a consensus regarding that which I assert cannot be expected in principle
- (2) I hereby assert that I do not exist.

This version of the validity principle dictates that, in an ideal democratic situation, all members of a community must agree on what they consider to be true (it would be contradictory to think otherwise, like saying that I do not exist). But (1) constitutes a contradiction only if we define truth as intersubjective validity (“I assert as intersubjectively valid that no intersubjective validation is ever possible”), which is not necessarily what people mean when they say that something is true. In fact, we will see in 3.4.1. an example of a political debate on an issue, climate change, about which despite there being a broad scientific consensus

⁷⁵ Here I'm following Cheryl Misak's presentation of the transcendental argument (Misak, 2000, 40–43).

many people nevertheless reject its truth⁷⁶. The same goes for the other principles of discourse ethics. Someone can disagree with someone else in a variety of semiotic ways that don't respect both Habermas' ethics of discourse and (U), for example, by taking it for granted that he or she is right (negating fallibilism and the presupposition that no validity claim is exempt from critical evaluation in argumentation), by denying that other people's ideas have any place in the debate (thus rejecting the presupposition that everyone is entitled to participate, and that everyone is entitled to speak their opinions and express their desires), or by not acting accordingly to these principles (even if verbally accepted). But if so, then the democratic principles of discourse cannot be the transcendental condition of possibility for all communication.

For similar reasons, Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) oppose to the Habermasian conception of deliberative democracy an opposite condition of possibility: «the central role that the notion of antagonism plays in our work forecloses any possibility of a final reconciliation, of any kind of rational consensus [...] This is why we stress that it is vital for democratic politics to acknowledge that any form of consensus is the result of a hegemonic articulation, and that it always has an “outside” that impedes its full realization» (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, xvii–xviii). While I agree that not even in an ideal radical democracy final consensus is the end to which communication necessarily tends, I also do not believe that consensus is necessarily impossible, nor do I believe that this impossibility could be the condition of possibility of communication. Both extremes should be rejected. In particular, I do not think it is possible to ignore the importance of truth, understood as that on which the members of a community *could* reach consensus⁷⁷, for a radical democracy⁷⁸.

Conceiving truth as *terminus a quo*, again, does not mean that we have to say what is true and what is false. Lynch (2021) proposed a nice metaphor on this: thinking that one could distribute truths (true beliefs) would be like wondering what's the value of climbing a mountain and seeking the answer by asking what it feels like to be at the top. Truth is not something that can be distributed to citizens by someone. Instead, «we should start not at the top of the mountain but

⁷⁶ A weaker version of the validity principle is indeed presupposed, both logically and semiotically, if one considers truth simply as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis (Misak's interpretation of the pragmatist theory of truth according to which truth is the end of inquiry would be a good example). As seen, not only semiotic problems but all political problems are external problems, hence no one argues as if it were possible that two contradictory assertions could both be true, in a substantive way, because everyone lives in his own world. When one asserts something, he/she is asserting that that something is true, and true in this case means “independent of what we think”. While this does imply that one is accountable for what one asserts (cf. Stjernfelt, 2022), this version of the validity principle does not imply that everyone must agree, even at the end of inquiry, on what is true.

⁷⁷ On consensus and the importance of truth for democracy see Lynch (2025), and the conclusions to this thesis (3.5.).

⁷⁸ On Laclau and Mouffe's political philosophy and pragmatism see Zamora and Santarelli (2020).

with the climbing itself» (Lynch, 2021, 19), that is, not with truths (as *termini ad quem*), but with valuing truth (as *terminus a quo*).

The study of the relevance of truth for semiotic theories doesn't imply a commitment to any specific theory of truth either. Just as the mathematician can talk about numbers without committing himself to a specific metaphysical theory of numbers (one that answers the question, what are numbers?), so the semiotician can talk about truth without having to choose between, for example, correspondence and pragmatist theories of truth. The minimal notion of truth as the terminus a quo of semiosis I am arguing for only commits us to a notion of *resistance to our will*, that there is something that resists our opinions, desires, plans (cf. Williams, 2002, 136; Eco, 2015), which is just another way of saying that problems are external and “difficult”, or that truth and signs are different things. And it commits us to a notion of *alternativeness* («what can be expected to present us with the idea of an independent reality is a state of affairs *to which there is a conceivable alternative*» Williams, 2002, 137).

In this chapter I have presented an argument as to why semiotics has excluded truth from its interests (in short, mainly as a positioning strategy against truth-functional semantics, and as a consequence of the thesis that languages are independent of the world). There is still something else to be said on this front. Semiotics is often presented as a neutral method for the analysis of cultures, texts and signs. While this thesis is often legitimized by a theoretical premise about the nature of the semiotic method and metalanguage that I do not agree with (for reasons seen above in relation to the conclusions of the *Antiporphyry*), the stance itself of not distinguishing between good or bad, better or worse signs is legitimate. The best example is offered by Massimo Leone (2024b), in his contribution on the definition and analysis of semiotic ideologies. According to Leone, the study of semiotic ideologies «aims to reveal the hidden patterns of meaning-making in social life without promoting any particular set of meanings as superior» (Leone, 2024b, 8). While I share and endorse this approach myself, I believe it is ineffective, and ethically insufficient, when we move from the study of cultures and ideologies understood as systems of ideas to the study of political texts and when it comes to the possibility for semiotics to contribute positively to today's truth-crises and spiral of falsehoods⁷⁹. For this reason, in the next chapter I will for example pose the problem of ideology not as a system of ideas, but as false consciousness. Or, I will distinguish between conspiracy theories and Conspiracy Theories, as an example of the distinction between truthful and untruthful discourses, suggesting that while the former would not deserve the negative connotation with which the label “conspiracy theories” is often associated of today,

⁷⁹ In the quoted passage, Leone is contrasting two notions of “ideology”, that I will consider myself in the next chapter: ideology as system of ideas vs ideology as false consciousness. As I will make clear, I actually agree that semiotics shouldn't, in either cases, promote a “set of meanings” as superior. But, when it comes to ideology as false consciousness, and given that it's possible to distinguish false from non-false consciousness, semiotics should say what *forms*, or styles, are semioethically good and bad for the public sphere.

the latter does. In other words, in these cases we need a semiotics with a conscience, as Danesi (2024) calls it, or a semioethics (Petrilli and Ponzio, 2010) that takes a normative stance on the forms of communication in the public sphere.

I embrace in particular Danesi's project of «decoding semiotically how the tactics of mendacity work in manipulating minds, in order to come up with counter-strategies for obviating or stemming their deleterious influence» (2024, xii), and of critically addressing what he calls semiotic “diseases” (Danesi, 2024, 3). However, I am afraid that such a project is not possible without a minimal notion of truth and a theory of what non-mendacious, non-ideological, truthful discourses are from a semiotic point of view⁸⁰. That is, in order to be able to distinguish between semiotic vices and virtues in a substantive way (not just as effects of meaning), it is necessary to admit, to use James' words (1897, 17–18), that it is true that we should: “Believe truth! Shun errors!”. That is, that truth is a positive value.

In my reasoning, there are two preconditions for semioethics to be possible: i) believe that truth exists (regardless of what it is); ii) believe that aiming at truth is good. If (i–ii) are accepted, then veridiction does not exhaust the critical tasks towards the concept of truth. The study of veridiction deals with the truth as the terminus ad quem of signs (what I called the Truth in the previous chapter, the set of propositions considered true in a culture). Alongside this, we must add the study of truth as the terminus a quo of semiosis, which deals with the possibility of discourses of “telling the truth” (in the sense of Foucault's *parrhesia*, where truth is understood as that which is independent of what we believe to be true)⁸¹.

In other words, a positive contribution that semiotics can offer in relation to the concept of truth, beyond the study of veridiction, is the distinction between truthful and untruthful discourses. Even if communication doesn't naturally tend toward truth, this doesn't mean that the principles of discourse ethics aren't something we should value and promote in the public sphere. Nor does it mean that we cannot distinguish between a discursive style that respects the values of truth from styles that are indifferent to truth. In the next chapter, I will offer my contribution in this direction, first distinguishing truthfulness from veridiction, and then analyzing the ways in which texts that aim to say something true say what they say, distinguishing between non-indifferent and indifferent to truth discourses (which I will call the open and the closed styles, respectively).

In sum, I argued that semioticians should reconsider the role of truth in semiotic theories. I began with the *Antiporphyry*, showing how in the conclusions Eco reached we find an argument against the autonomy of languages from the world. I then compared Eco's version of weak semiotics with Quine and Peirce's theories of knowledge, and proposed that semiotic problems are external problems whose

⁸⁰ See Pritchard (2019). On intellectual virtues and vices see, respectively, Zagzebski (2019) and Kidd et al (2021).

⁸¹ For the importance of this notion of truth for the public sphere see Lynch (2025); Stitzlein (2024). For the distinction between veridiction and truthfulness from a discursive point of view see Piazza (2004).

truth is independent from what we believe is true or what is considered to be true *in* our respective cultures. In the second part of the chapter, I elaborated on the implications of this conclusion. If semiotic problems are external in nature, then we must distinguish between two concepts of truth relevant for semiotics: truth as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis and truths as the *termini ad quem* of texts. To be sure, the minimal notion of truth as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis doesn't mean that we can say which texts say the truth, or which texts the false. It just suggests that semiotics should not only study how signs and texts say things are (truths as *termini ad quem*) but also study the ways in which signs and texts can aim at the truth (as *terminus a quo*). I concluded distinguishing my position from that of Habermas and Apel according to whom truth is the natural aim of communication in an ideal democratic society. Seeing truth as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis doesn't lead to such a conclusion. But it does imply that truth is an important value for communication, which is why it's important to study truth from a semiotic point of view.

3. THE OPEN AND THE CLOSED – ON SEMIOTIC TRUTHFULNESS

Why does the hunter not give up? Because Holmes, although used to pragmatic ways of referring like everybody else, has his own stubborn idea of ontological reference [...] Holmes tries everything: he will always be defeated, but he will not stop searching, because he postulates the essence, that is, the Thing-in-Itself, which is not the Unknowable but the very postulate of infinite research.

(Umberto Eco, *The strange case of Doctor Jekyll and the brothers Hyde*, in *Kant and the platypus*, 1999)

3.1. On truthfulness

3.1.1. Position of the problem

In recent years, falsehood has been a popular subject of study in the humanities and social sciences. A strong push came in 2016, when the *Oxford Dictionary* notoriously chose *post-truth* as its word of the year, defining it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (and almost every contribution on the subject has debuted with this premise since)⁸². The events that motivated this “award” were political facts that are still being debated, such as the Cambridge Analytica case and Donald Trump’s first election as president. Examples of debated post-true statements were “truth isn’t truth”, said by Rudy Giuliani in defense of Donald Trump⁸³, or the case of a politician who, when asked about the size of the crowd for the president inaugural ceremony, replied «our press secretary [...] gave alternative facts to that» (an example of double-speak that, according to the “New York Times”, would have boosted sales of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*)⁸⁴.

The idea that we are living in a historical period of truth crisis is also connected to the problems of misinformation and disinformation (usually, the two are distinguished because the former is not intentional, the latter is), especially in the digital and social media sphere. Just think of the debate around the recent social media shift in the management of false information, from third-party factcheckers

⁸² See https://www.oed.com/dictionary/post-truth_adj.

⁸³ See <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/19/truth-isnt-truth-rudy-giuliani-trump-alternative-facts-orwellian>.

⁸⁴ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/books/1984-george-orwell-donald-trump.html>.

to the community notes system⁸⁵, or the spread of fakes created by AI technologies (Viola and Volta, 2025; Gramigna, 2024; Viola and Voto, 2023; Leone, 2023a).

As the science that studies anything that can be used to lie, semiotics has produced several contributions in this area (Eco, 1990a; 1990b; Polidoro, 2018; Mangiapane, 2018; Sonesson, 2018; Lorusso, 2023; Danesi, 2025). However, the study of the false is rarely accompanied by corresponding reflection on truth and on how would signs that are used to tell the truth look like, or what it means to tell the truth.

For example, Danesi, founding pseudology as the science that systematically studies mendacity, speaks of “honest communication” as its opposite, and quotes Orwell and the concept of doublethink in relation to Trump’s speech style⁸⁶:

During a speech Trump gave in Kansas City in July of 2018, he famously made the following doublespeak statement, “what you are seeing and what you are reading, is not happening”, which corresponds almost verbatim to the following statement from Orwell’s novel: “The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command”» (Danesi, 2025, 21)⁸⁷.

The problem is that Trump was saying just the same things, targeting his opponents, and his constituency thought it was the previous government that used to doublespeak (see Madisson and Ventsel 2016a; 2016b). Of course, I am not saying that this was the case, but while Trump has brought the concept of post-truth to the center of public debate, clearly there is a segment of people, inside and outside the United States, who believe that Trump is the only one telling the truth. I think most people already agree that “the Truth” that those in power try to sell (or impose) should be doubted or, as I said in 1.4.2., that it is a good thing to laugh at the truth. What is needed is to tell the truth about the truth, so to say, which is that it’s not so easy to separate politicians into the two groups, those who tell the truth from those who lie. And that it’s equally difficult to say what a truthful, or honest, communication is, in order to have the tools to respond to the

⁸⁵ See <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/07/meta-facebook-instagram-threads-mark-zuckerberg-remove-fact-checkers-recommend-political-content>.

⁸⁶ This is Orwell’s description from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: «to know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself – that was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word – doublethink – involved the use of doublethink» (1949, 32).

⁸⁷ The passage is from Orwell (1949, 134).

problems of mendacity (recognizing mendacity, promoting truth). To give another example, take Carlo Penco (2024), which is probably the most comprehensive book on what he calls the “dark side” of language from a philosophical perspective⁸⁸. The problem is that it is not obvious how the clear side should look like (a situation that reflects the fact that truthful communication is often thought of as the default situation for all communication, of which telling the false is a degenerate version). What is needed is something like, to stay with Orwell, the six rules against bad writing (Orwell, 1946), but for semiotic truthfulness.

3.1.2. Beyond veridiction

In the previous chapters, I suggested that since truth is not only an effect of discourse (neither from the point of view of the meanings of “truth” nor from the theoretical point of view of general semiotics), then veridiction does not exhaust the tasks of semiotics in relation to the concept of truth, and that it must be accompanied by the parallel study of truthfulness.

As mentioned, in Greimas and Courtès (1979), veridiction becomes, as far as truth is concerned, the sole interest of semiotics, given the argument that languages are closed systems independent from the world. This way of thinking made me say that if it turns out that languages and semiotic systems more generally should instead be conceived as open, then truth could be reinstated among the interests of semiotics. However, a false opposition must be avoided: the relationship between truthfulness and veridiction is neither exclusive nor of mutual contrariety. Veridiction is defined as the act of making someone believe something to be true. While in principle an act of veridiction can be found at any stage of the canonical narrative scheme (which divides texts narratively into four stages, Manipulation, Competence, Performance, and Sanction, respectively), it is usually found at the beginning, in the Manipulation stage, when a Destinant prompts the Subject to action (by making him or her believe something to be true), or at the end, in the Sanction stage, to judge the Subject’s actions after his Performance (whether successful or not). Apart from the few lines in the *Dictionnaire* against the notion of truth, a priori nothing dictates veridiction must be carried out with the intent to deceive the receiver or that, with all good intentions, we cannot be mistaken in judging something as true or in making someone believe something to be true. We can think of many variations, drawing on our personal encyclopedias, that an act of veridiction can be performed. I have already given the example of Ivan

⁸⁸ The philosophical literature on the problem of the false in contemporary culture is very rich. I shall limit myself to a few references. In Millikan (1986) there is an argument for the independence of truth with respect to opinions close to the thesis I defended in the previous chapter; Sher (forthcoming), Cassam (2021) and Ferrari and Moruzzi (2022), Maddalena and Gili (2020) set up a discourse, although starting from different philosophical specializations, where one can appreciate the importance of philosophical research on truth for coping with the problems of the false. Some reflections going in the same direction can also be found in Stjernfelt (2022).

from Sally Rooney's novel *Intermezzo*. In that case Ivan lied (omitting from Margaret the cruel words of Peter, his brother, about her), but for good. This did not, however, prevent his negative self-sanctioning later on (perhaps wrongly, the reader thinks, which shows that veridiction is not always deception). As we will see in what follows, truthfulness is not simply telling the truth, but something more complex (as even lying, depending on the context, can be considered a truthful act).

Including truthfulness among the interests of semiotics brings the advantage of being able to distinguish between making someone believe something to be true in a truthful way vs. in an untruthful way. The problem then will be: how do we distinguish one case from the other? Can we identify semiotic traces that a truthful linguistic act (or semiotic style) leaves in discourse?

A first clue is offered by Danesi himself (2025, 20), when he associates the notion of pragmatic truth with Paul Grice's theory of conversation. According to Grice, an effective and successful conversation involves adherence to a cooperative principle (CP):

(CP) Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (Grice, 1975, 45).

CP further implies the adherence to four submaxims:

- 1) the maxim of *quantity*, according to which the participants in a successful conversation make their contribution as informative as required (and not more than that, in relation to a context);
- 2) of *quality*, the participants are truthful to each other, try to make their contribution in the conversation one that is true, and don't say what they think is false or that for which they lack adequate evidence;
- 3) of *relation*, the participant provide information that is relevant to the conversation;
- 4) of *manner*, the participants are perspicuous, and avoid obscurity of expression, ambiguity, unnecessary verbosity.

By framing the question at the pragmatic level, we pose the problem of the effects of the truthful discourse, regardless of the actual truth of a proposition (which in the majority of cases is not a matter for philosophers or semioticians to judge *qua* philosophers or semioticians). However, we should doubt that Grice's conversational maxims are sufficient for a theory of truthfulness in language. On this, one can have different intuitions. One possible source of confirmation would come from research in the cognitive sciences on the mental energy used for lying compared to telling the truth (Vrij et al, 2006; 2011). However, this research is based on notions that are not semiotically analyzed (e.g., truth is often opposed to lying), and limited to a notion of "telling the truth" as just speaking transpa-

rently or spontaneously. Thus, it is not clear that intentionally saying what one thinks and trying to tell the truth cost less cognitive energy than lying (the real distinction seems to me to be between spontaneous and self-controlled speech; on self-control see Stjernfelt, 2021). On the other hand, Grice's scheme is about the definition of the conditions of felicity for effective communication in general. But communicating and being truthful are not the same thing, the respective theories do not have the same concerns, just as being polite does not reduce to respecting the maxim of manner (see *infra* 3.1.7.).

Grice's scheme describes what in linguistics is usually called a prototypical or basic situation, or a simplified model of communication. In the next section we see another simplified model proposed by Bernard Williams (2002) for the definition of truthfulness.

3.1.3. Williams' State of Nature

In order to identify the conditions of possibility and emergence of truthfulness, Bernard Williams paints a simplified prototypical situation (what he calls a state of nature, in reference to the homonymous mental experiments in political philosophy) that is interesting to contrast with Grice's. Williams' goal is to identify how and why the virtues of truthfulness emerge, so as to answer the question, whose importance is unaffected by the more than two decades that separate us from this work, why it is that truthfulness is something still euphorically valued, while skepticism about truth increases⁸⁹.

The basic situation is quite simple. In the state of nature, it is only assumed, first, that communication is a basic function of language and, second, a concept of a purely positional advantage (Williams, 2002, 45): a speaker can tell another member of his group something about something absent because he was in the situation of obtaining that information, while the hearer was not. Members of this simplified society can thus contribute to the common good by each taking advantage of their positional advantage and communicating the information they obtain. This is sufficient to isolate the virtues of truth: in this simplified model, the members can develop the disposition to try to obtain information that is as correct and true as possible, and a disposition to share it with the rest of society. That is, they can develop the dispositions of Accurate and Sincerity, respectively (Williams uses capital letters to distinguish the virtues of truthfulness from the folk notions of accuracy and sincerity).

The prototypical situation envisioned by Williams closely resembles Grice's, particularly with regard to the maxim of quality, or of truth, according to which speakers should try to make their contribution to the conversation one that is true. In the basic situation, it seems that being truthful and cooperating in a conversation are equivalent. However, Williams also identifies some limitations. The

⁸⁹ In 2002, Williams' reference point for alethic skepticism was philosophical postmodernism, who he calls truth deniers, but today, deniers are also to be found outside the academia and especially in politics, just think of the definition of post-truth with which I started this chapter.

first limitation is that «there is a lack of fit between the value of these qualities [accuracy and sincerity] to the community and their value to the people who possess them» (Williams, 2002, 58). From the point of view of the community, it is good that individual members contribute by trying to get information about the environment as correct as possible and to communicate it to others. But from the individual point of view, while each member will consider it a good thing that other members be truthful in the said sense, on certain occasions they will consider more beneficial not being truthful, i. e., for example, withholding certain information for themselves or saving themselves out of laziness in seeking the truth. This means that there is a difference between what is good for the system and what is good for the individual, at least from the individual's perspective. This leads to the second limitation of the model: it is not enough for truth to be an instrumental good for them to value and choose to be truthful (on truth as good in itself cf. Lynch, 2004). As long as the value of being truthful is only instrumental, a means to get at other goods, being truthful will be on the same plane as being untruthful, at least in some circumstances, since they can lead to the same results.

One case that Williams does not explore in detail is that it may be the awareness that being truthful does the good of the community that makes being truthful something of value to someone. But here we must distinguish the genealogical state-of-nature technique (which is used to explain how and why a given value emerges, or how and why it might decay) from the analysis of truthfulness as an epistemic and semiotic virtue. That a given practice is good does not necessarily imply that everyone performs it, and the fact that a practice is not performed does not imply that that practice is not good. It is one thing to explain why people are sincere and accurate (or why they are not). It is another to say what sincerity and accuracy are, which is what really interests me here⁹⁰. Once this specification is

⁹⁰ While I am not committed to the thesis that people, in an ideal condition, are truthful because truth is good thing in itself, I believe that being truthful is instrumentally good for society, and that this is a truism about truth. There is, however, a counterargument to Williams' theory that I would like to dismiss, that the theory does not hold if one assumes a pragmatist conception of truth. What Williams calls the state of nature is nothing more than an abstraction-model that is used to test, in a simplified situation, the necessary and sufficient conditions (depending on the model) for the emergence of something, in this case the notion of truth. In a review to the book (Martin, 2003) it is said that Williams' conclusions are the following: «(a) we can't get along without trust (human flourishing creates a "need for cooperation"), (b) but trust requires truthfulness, and (c) truthfulness presupposes that there are (at least some) truths»; and that while the philosopher succeeds in proving (a-b), «(c) is trickier» from the point of view of the pragmatist theory of truth. The counterexample is the following: imagine a bear which, however, is actually a man disguised as a bear, and that someone exclaimed "watch out! Here comes a bear": in this case, the speaker would be sincere, in Williams' sense, while telling the false, so Williams' theory does not prove (c). First of all, this "pragmatist perspective" is only one interpretation of the pragmatist truth theory, something that the value of sincerity Williams speaks of should lead one to mention. Aside from that, the fact is that the counterexample is a mental experiment of the state of nature type too, in which certain abstractions operate. As Williams specifies, the advantage of these experiments (but it is such

made, it can be said that the meaning of being sincere and accurate is not limited to seeking true beliefs and saying what one believes to be true for instrumental purposes (for oneself or the community). Being sincere and accurate means believing that truth is a good in itself and, to use an expression I used in the previous chapter, it means having good judgment, that is, knowing that truth and falsehood are different things (which I call semiotic humility, see below), and preferring truth when world and word part company. In other words, in what follows I'm going to treat accuracy and sincerity not as preconditions for truthfulness, but as part of the implied, pragmatic meaning of a truthful semiotic production.

Williams (2002, 79; 82) offers definitions for "assertion" and "belief", showing that the concepts imply an internal connection to the notion of truth (cf. Marsili, 2024a; 2024b). To assert something means to say what one believes to be true, and to believe something means to believe that something is true. But being truthful is more than this.

If we define the belief-assertion-communication system in the narrowest functional terms, the story so far tells us something of how that system works; it shows a role of truth as (in a sense) a value in that system; and it reminds us that a lot of the times the system does indeed work. That means, moreover, that a lot of the time people simply tell the truth and have no need for a virtue of Sincerity in order to do so [...] But as soon as a *question* comes up, whether an individual or group should on a given occasion continue to work the system [...] – whether, for instance, they should tell a lie – the sense we have recovered so far in which truth is a value gets us nowhere. (Williams, 2002, 84–85)

Knowing that truth is the purpose of beliefs and that to assert something means to say that something is true is not enough to answer one way or another to the questions "should I be truthful?" or "should I care in trying to have true beliefs and avoid false ones?". In the basic situation, the values of truth are values for the system, which doesn't necessarily imply that they are seen as such by the members of the group.

only if one admits it) is that they allow to make experiments without confusing what is true of the mental experiment and what is instead true of the world – not to confuse explanation and reduction. That is, state-of-nature arguments must also be tested and can be improved. In the case of the counter-argument of the man disguised as a bear, the fact is that his state of nature is too abstract (thus lacking in accuracy): nothing prevents that in a later situation clues may emerge that cast doubt on the "bear" nature of the danger in question (e.g: it looked like a danger, but in the end the verse is not what one would expect from a bear, whenever it approaches a house to steal food, instead of eating it immediately takes everything and runs away, and then it always steals food from everyone except x's house, so maybe the bear could be x). In this case, one would lack accuracy if he did not investigate, and sincerity if he did not report the doubt (that the bear is not a real bear) to the community. Truth cannot be reduced to justification because otherwise we would never change our beliefs. And without truth, there would be no value in being accurate (trying to improve our belief, and changing it in the face of new evidence) and truthful (communicating what is believed to be true or false in the face of new evidence).

Were the definitions of assertion and belief sufficient, and if being maximally communicative, in Grice's sense, and being truthful were equivalent, we would end up in the situation painted by Habermas and Apel (that I excluded in 2.3.3.) where consensus around what is true is the automatic fate of communication in an ideal democracy. It is not just a matter that there could be freeriders, or that someone may want to deceive someone else even in the basic situation. While similar limitations may apply for conversational maxims as well, Grice's theory describes the conditions of felicity for communication, but it doesn't tell us that the principle of cooperation is a value for speakers, nor that it is a semiotic style that can be assumed as opposed to others. But clearly individuals can choose whether to be truthful or not. That is, the disposition to truthfulness is a value, not just a property of communication.

Again, I'm not looking for the reasons why people should start being truthful in the state-of-nature mental experiment, but for the meaning of being truthful. Being truthful is not the same as contributing with a true proposition. Often, we cannot know for sure what is true. Or we encounter obstacles of various kinds that lead us or tempt us not to say what we believe to be true. Simply, being truthful is not the same as being cooperative in communication. The best we can get from the conversational maxims is the argument that, if everyone lied all the time, people would cease to communicate (as Millikan, 1984, argued). And that in order to lie successfully, it is necessary for speakers to believe that, at least most of the time, other speakers tell the truth (if one expected to be lied to, lying to him would not work). But these considerations do not tell us what the deeper meaning of being truthful and of the values of sincerity and accuracy is.

3.1.4. On semiotic humility

First, for Williams too (2002, 11), the values of truth derive from the distinction between signs and truth that I posed in 2.3.2. (distinguishing, in my case, between truth as terminus a quo and as terminus ad quem). In my view, this is a first value of truth, that I call semiotic humility, the awareness (which leaves traces in discourse) that signs, as abstractions of the objects they represent, can always be wrong.

In fact, semiotic humility is implied by Peirce's principle of fallibilism («the first step toward finding out is to acknowledge you do not satisfactorily know already» CP 1.13). While this may make the search for the relationship between signs and truth seem pointless to some, it is, on the contrary, its condition of possibility, as we saw in the previous chapter. Moreover, we could not study the false, falsification, lies, counterfeiting and so on as substantive concepts if there were no difference between signs and truth.

The fact that we can always be wrong, as the doctrine of fallibilism tells us, does not mean that every semiotic production respects the value of semiotic humility. Moreover, isolating semiotic humility as a value in its own right is useful because a) as we shall see in 3.3.1.2., it's possible to distinguish two styles of sign production (equivalence and difference, respectively) corresponding to

semiotic productions that comply with the value of semiotic humility and productions that do not, respectively; b) without the presupposition of the value of semiotic humility, the other values of truthfulness cannot be obtained. It may seem trivial that, in the prototypical situation, seeking truth and sharing information with the rest of the community are virtues and not vices. But these are values only if the notion of semiotic humility is presupposed (otherwise, being accurate or sincere would make no difference).

Importantly, while it is not necessary to have a particular theory about truth nor a strong realist conception of the structure of reality, semiotic humility is a precondition also for stating the so-called truisms about truth which, according to Lynch (2004, 19), hold independently from any specific theory of truth:

Truth is objective;

Truth is good;

Truth is a worthy goal of inquiry;

Truth is worth caring about for its own sake.

Without the notion of semiotic humility, these truisms about truth would not hold. Imagine the distinction between truth and what signs say it's true was not possible. In this case, everything that signs say to be true would be true, and there would be no point in searching for truth, in being accurate, since "truth" would already be in our possession (or it would suffice to consult a dictionary). It would be possible to communicate to someone something other than what one believes to be true, so it seems it would be possible to be sincere at least in the minimal sense of saying what one believes to be true. But it would be impossible to be wrong, that is, it would not be possible to try to be sincere without succeeding, which greatly reduces the value of sincerity. From the hearer's side, lie or sincerity would make little difference anyway, since he will interpret as falsities anything that does not correspond with what he already believes to be true, and as true everything that does correspond with his prior beliefs, without any doubt that things might be otherwise (a situation very reminiscent of the one implied by the concept of post-truth).

So, the semiotic humility of distinguishing between signs and the world is not a sufficient condition for being truthful, but it is a necessary one. Interestingly, from the semiotic point of view, the notion of semiotic humility also implies a principle of *self-attribution contradiction*: in most cases, someone who claims to know the truth, to be certain of how things are, without allowing for the possibility of being wrong, is not considered truthful. Saying that something is true constitutes a contradiction of the value of semiotic humility⁹¹.

⁹¹ This may seem a superficial element of my argument, but on the contrary the principle of self-attribution contradiction is one of the profound reasons why there is no incompatibility between veridiction and truthfulness. It is often repeated that since we cannot be certain of what is true, since all our beliefs have been revised throughout the history of ideas, we cannot accept a realistic notion of truth, and that truth is in fact something authoritarian, such that

3.1.5. On sincerity

However, the value of semiotic humility is not enough to choose to seek the truth, on one hand, and to choose to communicate what one believes to be true, on the other. These two acts correspond to two other values, distinct from that of semiotic humility, which are the values of sincerity and accuracy.

Being sincere in the basic situation is simply spontaneously saying what one believes to be true. However, Williams identifies a whole series of important exceptions that show what the deeper meaning of “sincerity” and “telling the truth” is. First, it’s not enough, for a speaker to be considered sincere, to tell the truth, strictly speaking. He must also avoid implying the false or misleading information (the reference is of course to Grice’s theory of implicatures, 1989; see also Eco, 1979, 24, and Eco and Violi, 1987 on presuppositions in general). If I say: “to get to Tallinn yesterday I had a stopover in Frankfurt or Munich”, what I am implying, and what the hearer understands, is that I do not remember where I had a stopover yesterday to get to Tallinn, even though I actually only asserted that I had a stopover in Frankfurt or Munich (which is true if I had a stopover in Frankfurt or Munich). And if I’m implying that I don’t remember where I stopped because I don’t want the hearer to have that information, there I am being non-sincere despite having said the truth. In general, it is always possible to imply/obtain more information from an assertion than is explicitly asserted, a surplus of meaning that can be used by the speaker to lie, deceive, mislead.

At the same time, how open one needs to be and how much information must be communicated to be considered sincere depends on context, which brings us to the second type of exceptions. Being sincere does not always mean telling the truth and the whole truth, nor does it always mean not lying. Williams distinguishes between friendly and adversarial conversations⁹²:

when someone claims that something “is true” they are actually trying to manipulate their hearer. However, not only is this not incompatible with a realistic notion, however minimal, of truth as independent of discourse, but it is indeed necessary in order to consider as negative, something that must be unmasked, the act of saying that something is certainly true. In particular, only if one accepts the value of semiotic humility it makes sense to consider a contradiction, as well as a denial of truthfulness, to claim to know the truth, or that something is true, while ignoring alternative possibilities (see also *infra* on Eco’s definition of ideology, 3.3.1.4.).

⁹² Notably, Williams interprets conversational maxims as a theory of the presupposed rules for friendly communications (see Williams, 2002, 100; 110), while Grice’s theory is instead about the principle of cooperation as a presupposition for communication in general. This is important to keep in mind precisely because, as I am arguing, while it is perhaps enough to disregard the maxims to be untruthful, being truthful is not the same thing as simply participating in a conversation that respects conversational maxims, but something more. As I also say below, the relationship between conversational maxims and truthfulness is complex, a complexity that is primarily concerned with the question of whether it is possible to abide by the maxims, thus participate in a conversation and communicate while being untruthful. So, it is not clear whether by distinguishing between friendly and adversarial conversations

How far people may reasonably rely on the implicatures and presuppositions of assertions, and more generally on what they imply, as much as on their content, and how far a speaker has any reason to concern himself if they do rely on them, is a matter of the particular relations between these people and the speaker». (Williams, 2002, 113)

In the case of conversations among friends, for example, speakers normally respect the conversational maxims and enjoy mutual trust, but there may be cases that, in relaxed situations, it is not necessary to say everything one thinks, precisely because among friends. The concept of white lie is well known (cf. Danesi, 2025, 13). They are “pragmatic lies” told for the sake of the interlocutor. However, sometimes the line between black and white lies, and thus between truthfulness and untruthfulness, can be blurred. As Danesi says, white lies often are «prevarications about personal frustrations and setbacks, allowing people to avoid appearing in a bad light in their social milieu» (ibidem). As prevarications, white lies always risk being considered untruthful speech acts by the hearers that are lied to.

In turn, combining sincerity and semiotic humility, often it is not truthful to express certainties not only because of the self-attribution contradiction, but also because it would constitute a case of epistemic injustice (cf. Kidd et al, 2017). To be considered sincere one must be trustworthy and say what he believes to be true, but he must also respect the freedom of his hearer. And in order not to negatively manipulate nor prevaricate it is not enough to not have the intention to do so, one must also give him the opportunity to evaluate for himself the truth of the information received (for this reason it is equally important to provide the methods and reasons for believing something to be true, along with saying what one believes to be true).

Williams is rejecting Grice’s theory as a theory of communication, but the following passage on conversational maxims is worth quoting:

«More precisely, from what field are they being picked out? Do we principally have in mind a kind of society, one that is relatively well functioning in these respects, as opposed to one that is on the verge of pervasive Hobbesian conflict and mistrust? Or do we mean some relations within our familiar society, those that we have to some people (most people?) as contrasted to people whom, for instance, we have special reason to distrust? Do we mean certain situations or domains, as it is often said that no sensible person expects to hear the truth when buying a used car from a dealer? Or, again, do we have in mind certain aspects of our relations to other people, determined, for instance, by particular social roles, as when the Opposition member of Parliament who is a friend of a minister will expect him to be cagey when answering to the House [...] but would be upset if he were that evasive on personal matters? We mean all of these things, and this implies that in referring to “normal trust” we are not really looking for one particular kind of circumstances. We noticed that Grice’s implicatures are like features of the language: competent speakers can identify them when they are asked to consider a sentence as uttered in normal circumstances. In thinking about those circumstances, they are in fact imagining that they are engaged in some kind of co-operative and trustful conversation. But [...] not every linguistic exchange is in that sense a “conversation”». (Williams, 2002, 110–111)

In the case of antagonistic conversations, or unfriendly exchanges, lying is again permitted sometimes, but for different reasons. A clear example are lies told to defend oneself or others from threats. This is the case with the example of the murderer at the door (from the Kant-Constant debate on sincerity): if someone is asked by a murderer for the whereabouts of someone he wants to kill, it's not an act of insincerity or untruthfulness to lie to the murderer. In general, we do not consider an act of prevarication to lie to those who do not deserve the truth. Of course, it is not always easy to tell who does and does not deserve the truth, and one may have different intuitions, in relation to different contexts and examples, about whether it is true that always one is still sincere if he lies to those who do not deserve the truth. But this is precisely the point: being sincere is not a matter of following a simple rule like "say what you believe to be true", but depends on context and on the relationship we have with our interlocutors.

This is not to say that one cannot recognize sincerity – it's possible through semiotic inferences, from the signs available from the context. One criterion is, for example, the following. Although sincerity is not reducible to asserting something, being sincere still implies asserting something. And asserting means being held responsible for what is asserted and implied, as Peirce recognized: «an assertion is an act by which someone makes himself responsible for the truth of a proposition» (CP 5.543; see also Stjernfelt, 2024, 49). It's possible then to measure the degree of sincerity by what one can be held accountable for. Note, for example, that from the perspective of the value of sincerity one can be non-sincere by violating each of Grice's pragmatic maxims. E.g.: if H asks for directions to go from x to y, and is answered by S that to go to y he must cross the bridge while omitting, and thus violating the maxim of quantity, that in addition to crossing the bridge he must also then immediately turn right, S has been sincere in the strict sense, since he has not said something false or something that he believes is false, but he will still be held responsible for not saying an important part of the necessary information, failing to comply with the value of semiotic sincerity. With regard to the maxim of quality (which says "be sincere"), we would not hold responsible someone who lies to a murderer so as to avoid a killing. Therefore, we would not say that that person was non-sincere (despite having lied). In turn, I can be considered non-sincere if I distract my interlocutor by asserting things that are true but not relevant (maxim of relation) or by expressing myself in an ambiguous and obscure way (maxim of manner).

It is therefore possible to recognize the value of sincerity semiotically. But what exactly is recognized if it is not just the act of telling the truth? It is not the absence of the intention to deceive, which is the other part of the standard definition of sincerity in the strict sense (Bok, 1978). As we have seen, it is possible to be considered non-sincere even in the absence of the intention to deceive someone, both in friendly and antagonistic conversations. What defines sincerity is the recognition of the interlocutor's individual freedom in friendly situations, the absence of prevarications (as being non-sincere or manipulative would constitute a violation of the hearers' freedom):

We want people to have a disposition of Sincerity which is centered on sustaining and developing relations with others that involve different kinds and degrees of trust. Reflecting on that disposition, they will think about the kinds of trust that are implicit in different relations, and how abusing them may resemble other, perhaps more dramatic, forms of manipulation and domination, inasmuch as it imposes the agent's will in place of reality – the reality which all the parties equally have to live with. (Williams, 2002, 121)

3.1.6. On accuracy

Similar considerations apply to the value of accuracy. There is a sense of the concept of “objectivity” that relates to the value of semiotic humility, as seen above. The distinction between signs and the world is what suggests that there can be a difference between how things are “in my opinion” or “for me” and how things are “objectively”. But there is also another sense of the term that is more directly related to the value of accuracy. In this case, we say of someone that he/she is “objective” to positively sanction that person's doing as an inquirer. An objective person is someone who cares about reaching the truth and so chooses the truth against prior, possibly false beliefs. Objectivity in this sense doesn't mean to be always able to tell the objective truth (an objective person can still be wrong), but it does mean that he/she is truthful.

Being semiotically humble means being someone who distinguishes (and shows to distinguish when communicating something to someone) between signs and truth. Being accurate means being someone who, when signs and truth part ways, favors the truth pole of the distinction, someone who values looking for the truth.

In the basic situation, to be accurate is to find out the truth, but in reality one must include a notion of investigative investment, as how much one must look for the truth will differ in different contexts and for different people. The speaker who wants to be considered trustworthy by his peers has to try to make sure, to a reasonable degree, that he passes on information that is as correct as possible. But each time the inquirer will calculate the value of the information he might get against the cost of getting it. Above I said that semiotic humility is not enough to be truthful, that something else is necessary. What is necessary is to be accurate, that is, to have «the desire for truth “for its own sake” – the passion for *getting it right*» (Williams, 2002, 126). Of course, the notions of investment and cost suggest that often there are obstacles to accuracy, but this is precisely why accuracy is a value.

Williams distinguishes between external and internal obstacles (2002, 125)⁹³. External obstacles are all those that give the sense that the world resists our will,

⁹³ The concept of accuracy is similar to that of Quality in Pirsig's well-known novel (1974). For a beautiful depiction of the distinction between external and internal obstacles in the motorcycle maintenance (which Pirsig calls “setbacks” and “hang-ups”, respectively) and the deep meaning of being accurate, see pages 314 to 327.

that makes interpretation not immediate, discovery adventurous and our attempts to change the world fallible. But more relevant to the value of accuracy are internal obstacles such as laziness, wishful thinking, and self-deception. So being accurate concerns two aspects: a) the methods of discovery; b) the inquirer's attitudes and desires.

On (b), again favoring the truth can take different forms in different contexts. Apart from cases where caring about the truth is unnecessary or impossible (e.g., "how much hair did Garibaldi have?"), one can be deemed inaccurate, again, by violating each of Grice's maxims. For example, as any university researcher knows, research must have an end and be communicated. But one is not considered accurate if he hides, though without any intent to deceive (but for example driven by the supposed prestige associated with writing a lot), relevant information amidst a sea of unnecessary information (violating, depending on the details, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relation, or the maxim of manner). Regarding the maxim of quality, in many cases it is necessary to say also what is believed to be false to be considered accurate (as when the falsity of something is assumed as a premise of the argument). In others, it may be necessary to say what is believed to be true even if there is no adequate evidence (against the maxim of quality); but in these cases, it is probably further necessary to specify the absence of evidence.

Another important consideration is that often finding and communicating the truth is not enough to be considered accurate. This may happen both in friendly and adversarial communications, as it is somewhat independent from the degree of trust between the speakers. In these cases, it is further required to give/ask for reasons to believe what is asserted (cf. Brandom, 2021). As for the speaker, in these case he/she must not only be sincere, but also share the reasons that led him/her believe that something is true or likely true. While this aspect may seem obvious for unfriendly conversations, one might think this trait not necessary in relationships of trust. However, trust should never become blind trust, or it will be the hearer to be non-accurate.

All this indicates that "make your contribution one that is true" means, when it comes to accuracy, providing the right amount of information based on context. We are considered accurate persons when we have a good grasp of how much information is required in different contexts.

Regarding (a), one objection that might be raised is that there are no privileged methods for acquiring the truth (Feyerabend, 1975). I do not want to dwell too much on this point, but suffice it to say that, in agreement with Feyerabend's epistemological anarchism, it's possible to acquire true beliefs through various methods, disciplines and traditions (Feyerabend cited myths as a source of truth, about which I will have much to say in the second part of this chapter). But as far as truthfulness is concerned, some methods should be privileged over others, methods that I would call scientific, albeit in a different and more abstract sense than Feyerabend's. In the sense I have in mind, it is not the case that only the hard or natural sciences can discover truths about the world through a fixed and already given method. Instead, scientific is any method of inquiry that is open (as opposed

to closed methods). Open methods should be preferred when it comes to truthfulness.

This is what Lynch (2012, 84) means, for example, when he says that the scientific method consists in following a set of epistemic principles and practices (observation, logical inference, fallibilism), but that it is not possible to «show that they are reliable without employing them», that is, it's not possible to ultimately justify and prove a method over others without presupposing the method in question. Still, we privilege (and we should privilege) scientific, open methods that respect certain characteristics, such as intersubjective transparency (openness to public refutation and repeatability that allows «to produce reasons and evidence we can judge from a common point of view», 92) and self-correction (the principle that any theory is revisable, that what is considered true can change in time)⁹⁴. The opposite of such methods would be those that privilege truths already given over truths to be found, testimony and non-change over experimentation and the possibility of change.

Peirce by scientific method meant something very similar, defining it in opposition to other methods for the fixation of belief: tenacity, authority, and the a priori method, respectively. Peirce presented them in order of effectiveness. Tenacity as a method consists in «taking as answer to a question any we may fancy, and constantly reiterating it to ourselves, dwelling on all which may conduce to that belief, and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything that might disturb it» (CP 5.377). But this method will face social pressure, since people have different beliefs. The method of authority solves this problem by letting an institution above individuals dictate what is true and what to believe or what not to believe in⁹⁵. In contrast to tenacity and authority, the a priori method

⁹⁴ «In sum, then, part of what makes scientific practice distinctive is that it is comparatively intersubjective, transparent, repeatable, natural, and adaptable. These features give science its open character, and the application of its methods can be judged relatively publicly and independently». (Lynch, 2012, 93)

⁹⁵ This is Peirce's full definition of the method of authority: «Let the will of the state act, then, instead of that of the individual. Let an institution be created which shall have for its object to keep correct doctrines before the attention of the people, to reiterate them perpetually, and to teach them to the young; having at the same time power to prevent contrary doctrines from being taught, advocated, or expressed. Let all possible causes of a change of mind be removed from men's apprehensions. Let them be kept ignorant, lest they should learn of some reason to think otherwise than they do. Let their passions be enlisted, so that they may regard private and unusual opinions with hatred and horror. Then, let all men who reject the established belief be terrified into silence. Let the people turn out and tar-and-feather such men, or let inquisitions be made into the manner of thinking of suspected persons, and when they are found guilty of forbidden beliefs, let them be subjected to some signal punishment. When complete agreement could not otherwise be reached, a general massacre of all who have not thought in a certain way has proved a very effective means of settling opinion in a country. If the power to do this be wanting, let a list of opinions be drawn up, to which no man of the least independence of thought can assent, and let the faithful be required to accept all these propositions, in order to segregate them as radically as possible from the influence of the rest of the world». (CP 5.379)

gives up both the willful adherence to a belief and the arbitrary forcing of a belief upon others, as it lets individuals believe what they find themselves inclined to believe, what coheres with what they already believed. This method is «far more intellectual and respectable from the point of view of reason than either of the others», says Peirce, but still «its failure has been the most manifest» (CP 5.383; Peirce's examples are rationalist and idealist philosophical systems that try to derive all possible truths from few simple ideas – what Eco called strong thought theories, see 2.1.3.)⁹⁶. The only method that leads to “satisfy our doubts” is what Peirce called the scientific method: «its fundamental hypothesis, restated in more familiar language, is this: There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them». The scientific method for Peirce is the only one that lets beliefs «be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency» (CP 5.384).

In my terms, what tenacity, authority, and the a priori method have in common is that they are truth-presuppositionalist methods, that is, they value truth as *termini ad quem* of signs, what is already believed to be true by a group, authority or theory, over truth as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis independent of what we believe to be true (Peirce's typology also shows how much the distinction between a–b, between dispositions and methods, can be only a partial distinction, and how means are often naturally associated with values).

Peirce also added that «everybody uses the scientific method about a great many things, and only ceases to use it when he does not know how to apply it» (CP 5.384). In short, as far as methods are concerned, it is common experience to consider those who present their findings as the result of a scientific (in the sense defined here) and not presuppositionalist method, offering the hearer the reasons why they believe something is true.

To be truthful, semiotic humility is not enough, one must be sincere, that is, choose to say what one believes to be true to those who deserve the truth. Moreover, one must be accurate, that is, favor and seek the truth, using open methods of inquiry.

3.1.7. The Truthfulness Principle, compared to politeness

Being truthful is more than complying with the principles of communicative cooperation. In general, it is possible to both violate and comply with all maxims to be considered truthful, depending on the context. With respect to the maxim of quality, in particular, the notion here is complexified and enriched: it is complexified because, given a context, it is permissible and indeed required to violate the maxim of quality in order to be sincere (one chooses to violate the maxim in

⁹⁶ This method «makes of inquiry something similar to the development of taste; but taste, unfortunately, is always more or less a matter of fashion, and accordingly metaphysicians have never come to any fixed agreement [...] development, while it is a process which eliminates the effect of some casual circumstances, only magnifies that of others. This method, therefore, does not differ in a very essential way from that of authority» (CP 5.383).

order to respect a value other than communication); and it is enriched, because it is not enough to say what one thinks, in the case of friendly exchanges, to be sincere, just as it is not enough to intentionally not say what one thinks to be non-sincere. There is something more at stake, which can be (fallibly) recognized by various signs, and which is about respecting the freedom of the interlocutor by not deceiving him/her.

Regarding the values of humility and accuracy, a truthful statement is one that does not assume to have “the truth in the pocket”, and rather presents what is believed to be true as fallibly true. The degree to which it is required to explicitly include disclaimers of this kind (from premising “in my opinion” at the beginning of an assertion to making explicit the falsifiers of a scientific theory) depends on the context. But in most cases presenting what is believed to be true as true is not truthful (it is a feature of untruthful and ideological discourses, as we shall see, to present something as true while concealing alternative theories or degrees of uncertainty). Finally, often it is not only required to try to offer a true contribution, but also to point out the false, to indicate the probable, and to offer reasons for believing something to be true or probable and the methods of discovery used.

The way I conceive of truthfulness is similar to Geoffrey Leech’s (2014) politeness, that is as a style of discourse, a pragmatic function additional to the principle of cooperation, a set of non-mandatory constraints in communicative behavior. As for politeness, for truthfulness too there are various gradations (which acts are deemed truthful or not depends on the context), and both are transitive acts. In the case of politeness, the transaction is about some value: when you thank someone, you thank them for something; when you cheer someone, you cheer them for something. In the case of truthfulness, the transaction is about the exchange of information but, as seen, also about a mutual recognition of trust.

Leech identified a politeness principle (PP) to explain polite linguistic behavior (Leech, 1983, 81):

(PP) Minimize the expression of impolite beliefs⁹⁷.

Similarly, it is possible to formulate a truthfulness principle (TP) as a way to explain what it means to be truthful.

(TP) Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, in order to express truthful information.

⁹⁷ Further divided into six maxims: the tact maxim (minimize cost to others, maximize the benefit to others), the generosity maxim (minimize the expression of beliefs that express or imply benefit to self; maximize the expression of beliefs that express or imply cost to self), the approbation maxim (minimize dispraise of others; maximize praise of others), the modesty maxim (minimize praise to self and maximize dispraise to self), the agreement maxim (minimize disagreement between self and others; maximize agreement between self and others), and the sympathy maxim (minimize antipathy between self and others; maximize sympathy between self and others) (Leech, 1983; 2014, 90).

Importantly, TP does not say that it is necessary to express true information, or it would be self-contradictory, given the characterization I have given above. On the one hand, presenting something as “the truth” to the hearer is not truthful at all, because it does not respect the principle of semiotic humility, nor does it fully respect the hearer’s freedom to assess for himself the truth of what is asserted (it’s true that asserting means taking responsibility for the truth of what is asserted, but asserting that “x is true” without respecting the value of semiotic humility goes against the values of truthfulness because it means not corresponding the trust of the hearer). On the other hand, in hostile conversations telling the truth is not always truthful, as seen.

Truthfulness is a system of interpersonal relations emerged to facilitate cooperation by looking for true information and sharing the information between members of a group. At stake is not so much the exchange of true beliefs, but the mutual recognition of trust, otherwise the members would stop cooperating. As Williams (2002, 94) said, truthfulness is a type of trustworthiness applied to communication: «if we are to rely on what others tell us, they had better be not just sincere, but correct; moreover (in the other direction, so to speak) if we take care to be right, we need to be honest with ourselves».

A truthful utterance, then, is a linguistic act that implicates that signs and objects are different things (semiotic humility), and that exhibits the values of sincerity and accuracy (the former being a necessary condition for the latter two). I therefore propose the following sub-maxims of truthfulness:

- Maxim of semiotic humility: be open, remember what you say is fallible (don’t assume certainty).
- Maxim of sincerity: be trustworthy, do not prevaricate; take responsibility for what you assert.
- Maxim of accuracy: value the true and avoid the false; offer reasons for believing something and share the methods of discovery.

Of course, there would be much more to say, as much more research would be needed for the description of truthfulness as a semiotic style. One line of research that could be pursued is to specify the meaning of the maxims in different contexts. In what follows, I will distinguish more generally between open and closed semiotic styles, with some examples, but it would perhaps also be possible to specify different conditions for truthfulness in relation, for example, to Leech’s (1983) typology of illocutionary events, distinguishing between competitive, convivial, cooperative, and conflictual situations.

Another interesting investigation would be on the relations and tensions between truthfulness, politeness, and the cooperation principle. For example, while for PP speakers prefer to express or imply polite beliefs that favor hearers (more than beliefs that do not); for TP speakers prefer to say accurately and sincerely what they believe to be true, regardless of PP. In particular, it is not only permissible but sometimes required that one must disregard PP’s maxims (not

that being truthful, in these cases, implies being rude, but, for example, if I say something that, for the sake of truth, goes against H in some sense, the so-called “hard truths”, I’m technically violating the politeness maxim of agreement).

It is also interesting to note some differences between the two pragmatic styles. First, while it is possible to comply with conversational maxims and achieve an efficacious communication while being impolite, it is an open question, as mentioned, whether it could be possible to comply with conversational maxims without being truthful in the sense defined here, that is, whether it’s possible to consider untruthfulness a case of conversation in Grice’s sense (which doesn’t eliminate that being truthful is irreducible to conversational maxims). Moreover, while politeness is mutually asymmetrical, to be truthful means to entertain a mutually symmetrical relationship. In polite behavior between two parties, A and B, «whatever is felt to be polite in A’s behavior (in attributing high value to B) would be felt to convey the reverse of politeness if observed – on the same occasion – in B’s behavior» (Leech, 2014, 6). For example, in congratulating B on his promotion, A is attributing high value to B and his achievement, which should be followed by B’s self-underestimation of his own achievement. In the case of truthfulness, on the contrary, what is at stake is precisely the reciprocity between A and B: A is expected to say what it would be truthful to say according to the situation, placing himself and B on an equal footing, and while he receives the trust of B, he must match that trust by trying to be as accurate and sincere as possible, regardless of the contents of the exchange.

Lastly, there is an important difference which leads me to consider a weakness in the semiotic research on truthfulness. Leech says that PP is needed to explain why we use indirect directives, which is the politeness-specific variant of the general question in pragmatics “why do people say different things than they mean but we still understand what they mean?”. Not that our problem couldn’t receive such a formulation, but, on the one hand, the research question that pushed me into this inquiry was of a different nature, as I started not from some phenomena of language to be explained, but from truthfulness itself. While it is unquestionable that people often express themselves in an indirect and polite way in order to cooperate with their interlocutor (and if anything, a theory for the thesis that politeness does not exist would be needed), the study of truthfulness first begged the question of whether it is possible to actually be truthful and, if so, how. On the other hand, while it is possible to be polite in communication while being moved by non-genuine feelings, it is not possible to be linguistically truthful without being truthful also “inside”.

See the following example from Leech (2014, 1). A virtuoso violinist finishes his concert, receiving thunderous applause from his audience, to which he responds with a prolonged bow and a grateful smile. The pragmatic meaning of the applause is appreciation of the performance, while the violinist’s bow means something like “I don’t deserve so much recognition”. But who knows if the audience is applauding genuinely, i.e., if they really think the violinist’s performance was good, or if the violinist is really humbled by the applause he received and didn’t bow just for being, indeed, polite. There are two considerations

regarding this example: a) the first is that, as Leech says, the politeness that matters in linguistics and semiotics is observable politeness, not people's internal feelings (what people "really" feel); b) to be polite it is sufficient to perlocutively use language in a certain way: even if I do not feel esteem or respect for the violinist, as long as I applaud at the end of the concert I am considered polite.

As for (a), the same holds for truthfulness, as in semiotics we limit ourselves to the study of external signs, and not to what happens in the brain or "inside" more generally. However, moving on to (b), in the case of truthfulness it is highly doubtful that one can be truthful without also being truthful "inside". This explains why it is not easy to find isolated associates or conventionalized markers of illocutionary force for truthfulness. This could be a weak point in the research, or rather an obstacle, because it is much more difficult to study truthfulness in communication without conventionalized signs that signal truthful speech acts. In other words, there are no syncategorematic signs nor conventionalized expressions that have the pragmatic meaning of signaling truthfulness (such as "please" or "could you..."/"would you..." for politeness).

On closer inspection, this is not just a problem for semioticians, but for everyone: all we have to judge the truthfulness of our interlocutors are external signs. On these, we base our judgements in an inferential and tentative way (as Peirce said, all we have to decide these things are signs). Moreover, the fact that the recognition of truthfulness is *dificilis* can also be seen as a strength: there is less discrepancy, less distance between the signs we use and what we think, in the case of truthfulness, and therefore the signs we use reflect more directly, in a semi-symbolic way, our attitudes. We have no pragmatic signals to pick up or use to be truthful independently of what we say (or what we think). The interpretation and production of truthful utterances is complex and fallible; but at the same time, we have many resources to draw on in order to judge someone or an utterance as truthful or not. This may seem like a surprising conclusion, but I am not saying that what speakers say always reflects what they think. I am saying that since, unlike politeness, there are no conventionalized signs for truthfulness, it is not possible to be insincere or inaccurate linguistically, in speech, without also being insincere and inaccurate "inside", just as it's not possible to be truthful in language without being truthful in general.

3.1.8. Conclusions

So far, I have done my best to be truthful myself. While I think there are good reasons to pursue this line of inquiry, I have admitted that if it is not possible to accept a minimal notion of truth in semiotic theory, then it will not be possible to distinguish in any substantial way between truthfulness and untruthfulness. I have also tried to offer a definition of truthfulness that is as accurate as possible, so that it can be criticized and improved or replaced with a better one, acknowledging also some of the difficulties in such an inquiry.

It would make no sense to be open to alternative theories, or to not presume to know the truth with certainty, if we cannot admit a minimal notion of truth as

resistance to our will. As seen, this is the only premise for the scientific method according to Peirce, the distinction between reality and signs. But this premise cannot be justified except from the principles of the scientific method itself: «It may be asked how I know that there are any Reals. If this hypothesis is the sole support of my method of inquiry, my method of inquiry must not be used to support my hypothesis» (CP 5.384). In other words, we can also pose the distinction between scientific and non-scientific methods, and between being truthful and untruthful discourses, as a distinction between two ideologies about language (in the sense of Leone, 2024b, see also below 3.3.). According to one ideology, it is possible to distinguish between independent truths and what we think is true. According to the other, there is no difference or (as is the case with the a priori method, for instance) we already know what is true anyway. However, one ideology is not as good as another, and one can ask at the pragmatic and political level which is preferable⁹⁸.

Conceiving truthfulness as a linguistic ideology has the advantage of suggesting the next step in its study. We have seen that being truthful is not a matter of following one or more simple rules that apply in every context, but rather we judge humility, accuracy, and sincerity based on context. Furthermore, unlike politeness, there are no particular expressions or specific functions that can be easily isolated for the study of semiotic truthfulness. But this does not mean that it is not possible to recognize truthfulness semiotically. While we can be wrong in attributing truthfulness to someone or a text, we can make reasonable judgments based on the signs available. This brings to a more general point concerning the relationship between semiotics and epistemology: if Peirce was right in saying that we have no source of knowledge other than external signs, then the only way to judge someone or something as truthful is through semiotics. In what follows, I offer some semiotic resources that we can use to judge and analyze truthfulness in texts. I will distinguish between open and closed as semiotic styles of discourse that convey the values of truthfulness and untruthfulness, respectively. I will say more about this terminological choice in 3.3., but the reference to openness has already emerged as a feature of the scientific method, indicating the possibility for change. Open discourses semiotically manifest openness both towards the world, presenting one's beliefs as hypotheses that may be wrong (as opposed to already given certainties), and towards hearers, sincerely and accurately sharing the information one believes to be true and the reasons why something is believed

⁹⁸ This is how Peirce, for example, replied: «If investigation cannot be regarded as proving that there are Real things, it at least does not lead to a contrary conclusion; but the method and the conception on which it is based remain ever in harmony. No doubts of the method, therefore, necessarily arise from its practice, as is the case with all the others. 2. The feeling which gives rise to any method of fixing belief is a dissatisfaction at two repugnant propositions. But here already is a vague concession that there is some *one* thing which a proposition should represent. Nobody, therefore, can really doubt that there are Reals, for, if he did, doubt would not be a source of dissatisfaction. The hypothesis, therefore, is one which every mind admits» (CP 5.384).

to be true, thus inviting the hearer to participate in evaluating the truth of what is communicated (as opposed to closed discourses, which do not respect these values).

Before moving on to the semiotic resources for distinguishing between open and closed discourses, I would like to offer an example where the semiotic reflection on truthfulness is of great political importance, namely in relation to so-called “truth machines”. While my aim is to analyze the meaning of “telling the truth” in relation to truth machines in general, in the next section I will be mainly making examples of recent, AI-based truth machines that analyze facial signs to judge whether someone is truthful or not, in order to show that the reflection on truth and truthfulness is not limited to verbal signs alone.

First, I will explore the relation between making faces and truth through the analysis of polygraphs and other truth-machines. Then I will introduce Paul Dumouchel’s (2022) distinction between narrative and conversational faces, in order to show how the two relate to truth, and how it is possible to lie with faces. Based on the analysis of truth and truthfulness done so far, I will then argue that, since truth-machine work on spontaneous conversational faces, they cannot be machines able to tell the truth from faces. I will conclude with some considerations on the differences and commonalities between the recognition of truth in natural and artificial faces in relation to the values of truthfulness.

3.2. Lie detection on faces and faces as technology for lying

3.2.1. Position of the problem

Is it possible to lie making faces? Intuitively, it seems that an affirmative answer can be given. It would be enough to show a smile when sad, or to simulate an expression of sadness when happy. However, telling the false with a face or betraying, with a spontaneous sign, the intent to deceive are not the same thing. It is one thing to smile when one is sad, another to unknowingly touch one's nose when bluffing at poker, for example. In one case the facial sign deceives, in the other it reveals the deception. This distinction is trivial if we think about natural languages. It's one thing to accidentally say something in a way that reveals the intent to deceive the hearer (e.g. an oscillation in the tone of voice). Another to use signs to lie, for example by saying that it is raining when it's sunny. To use an old semiotic category, the former are instances of signification, the latter concern instead the ability of subjects to say truths or falsehoods with signs through an act of communication.

The confusion between the two phenomena when it comes to faces is demonstrated by the names we use for recent "polygraphs" that are used for the detection of falsehoods in faces, commonly called lie detectors and truth machines at the same time. However, while it is true that semantically "lie" means, vaguely, /false statement/, as Eve Sweetser (1987) has argued, lie and truth are not terms necessarily belonging to the same semantic category, as we shall see. That is, "lie detector" and "truth machine" are not synonymous.

In this paper I explore the relationship between faces and lying through the semiotic analysis of how so-called truth machines recognize acts of lying/telling the truth in faces. I will argue that a) truth machines attempt to recognize the true/false on a particular type of facial signs, that is on conversational faces, as Dumouchel (2022) called them; b) that "truth machines" are neither lie detectors nor truth machines, but, at most, machines for the recognition of the intent to deceive.

I will start by briefly introducing polygraphs and truth machines in general. I will then pose the question: what kind of signs (facial and non-facial) do truth machines operate on? To answer, I will introduce the distinction between conversational and narrative faces, offering a semiotic interpretation of the distinction based on the Peircean notion of *dicsign*.

3.2.2. From the classic polygraph to contemporary “polygraphs”

While the desire to identify a semiotic technique for the recognition of falsehoods and lies is an ancient thing (Vicianova, 2015), the polygraph originated in a specific scientific context. As Bunn (2012, 23) tells us, the polygraph originated in the context of early criminology understood as the systematic study of abnormalities and physical peculiarities of the criminal man. In this context, the attempt was to identify physical traits that indicated not crimes, but inherent criminality, the latter being treated, in turn, as a disease of the mind. In the mid-19th century, criminology laid the groundwork for the first techniques of recognition and graphical representation of emotions using machines. The sphygmograph, for example, recorded heart beats and could be used for describing emotions (under the premise that emotions affect heart beats). Other instruments that «a well-appointed laboratory might list» were: «baristhesisometer, campimeter, clinometer, craniometer, dynamometer, ergograph, esthesiometer, goniometer, Hipp’s chronoscope, olfactometer, the Schlitteninductorium, spirometer, tachyanthropometer, thermesthesiometer» (Bunn, 2012, 161). Each of these technologies recorded physical traits in the attempt to correlate them with emotions, character traits, etc. – which is the same theoretical premise that underlies contemporary techniques for lie recognition, as we shall see.

The turning point toward the polygraph occurs at the turn of the century with Frances Kellor and the kymograph, «the last, and perhaps most interesting test» (1900a, 541). The kymograph consisted in a clockwork base plus a drum with a roll of smoked paper around it on which the respiration of a subject was registered through a respirator fastened to the subject’s chest. Based on the discovery, commonplace for us today, that patients don’t always tell the truth about their biographies, Kellor assumed, «almost by accident [...] and only as a secondary fact-gathering exercise» (Bunn, 2012, 212), that it was possible to correlate the physical traits she was studying not only with mental states or personal traits of an individual, but with the truth of his claims. Innocently, and while she was studying something else, Kellor felt that «from such test as those for memory, association of ideas, reading, respiration, etc., I was able to judge if their statements were true» (1900b, 677).

At the end of the 19th century the idea itself that there was a separate species of people predisposed to crime was challenged. But Kellor’s work posited for the first time that physiological tests could be used to uncover, if not the criminal mind, at least secrets and lies.

The classic polygraph was invented in the early 20th century⁹⁹. The polygraph simultaneously measures «a suspect’s blood pressure, breathing rate, and electrical skin conductance as a series of questions that require yes or no answers

⁹⁹ While Bunn has questioned who should be considered the first inventor of the polygraph, usually John Larson’s cardiopneumo psychogram is considered the first polygraph, as Larson himself concluded (1938).

are asked» (Bunn, 2012, 14). While the polygraph is still in use, there are both empirical and semiotic reasons why polygraphs do not work. It is well known, for example, the case of O. J. Simpson's statement "I want to state unequivocally that I did not commit these horrible crimes". As Bunn (2012, 13) reports, that statement was judged «one hundred percent deceitful... one hundred percent lying» by one polygraph expert, but also as «absolutely truthful» by another. Same tool, same subject and same claim but two opposite results. In the literature one can also find many cases of false positives and false negatives, a situation aggravated by the obvious fact that on the one hand innocent people judged guilty may convince themselves of being guilty, and on the other that guilty people judged innocent do not eventually confess that they are guilty (National Research Council, 2003). But polygraphs also don't work for a priori semiotic reasons based on the semantic confusion of what it means to "recognize the truth", as I shall argue.

Modern technologies, based on AI and machine learning, are seen as improvements on the polygraph. Janet Rothwell's *Silent Talker*, for example, uses a video camera to record facial micro-expressions and calculate directly, i.e. without asking questions, the truthfulness of the subject. Another example that can already be encountered in several airports in Europe and the United States is *Avatar*, a kiosk that analyzes not only facial expressions, but also the tone of voice and body language to assign a "credibility score" to travelers. As shown by Constâncio and colleagues (2023), most contemporary techniques for lie detection are based on a multimodal approach. All of them use machine learning techniques; 39.5 percent of them analyze facial expressions; and all of them, explicitly or not, are based on Paul Ekman's theory of emotions. Although machine learning techniques make it possible not to have an explicit model based on rules for false/truth recognition, the Ekmanian premise (Viola, 2021) that there are minimal spontaneous signs (or a set of minimal spontaneous signs), facial and non-facial (breathing, tone of voice, blood pressure, etc.), beyond the control of the deceiving subject, that can reveal the deception make these technologies comparable to the criminological tools seen at the beginning. The common assumption is that certain emotions (fear, guilt and delight for Ekman) or mental states are associated with deceptive behavior, emotions that, in turn, can be detected from spontaneous signs of different kinds. However, and again, the reliability of these instruments has been questioned (cf. Bittle, 2020).

Despite the obvious differences between the classical polygraph and these contemporary AI-based "polygraphs", I am more interested in what they have in common. As mentioned, in both cases there is the idea that in order to detect the false one must study spontaneous signs or micro-expressions that correlate with character traits, mental states, emotions (depending on the specific theories); and that those emotions signal the deceptive behavior of the analyzed subject.

3.2.3. Making faces as Dicsigns

Limiting ourselves to polygraphs that analyze facial expressions, we can ask: what kind of signs do polygraphs work on? Let's start by considering Paul Dumouchel's (2022) distinction between conversational and narrative faces.

To Dumouchel, faces can be conventionalized representations, such as those that can be used to tell stories (both natural and artificial, see below 3.3.2.2.); or can be conversational tools used to interact, in the situation, with something or somebody. When I tell a story to someone, I can produce a face that iconically represents the emotions felt by the subject of the story. In this case, the face made does not represent the enunciator's emotions, but those of the subject in a space and time different from those of the enunciation. Moreover, the face in question does not have to perceptually resemble the one made by the subject in the story (assuming the story is about a real event). If the representational mechanism works it's because the face produced is used and recognized as conventionally a sad face, therefore suitable to represent the sadness of the subject in the story (in case the subject in the story felt sadness). Unlike faces as narrative tools, which are highly conventionalized and deposited as cultural units in the textual memory of a culture, faces as conversational tools «do not seem to have canonical expression» (Dumouchel, 2022, 636).

So, in one case, with narrative faces, the produced face has the function of saying something to someone about something else/someone absent. In the other, conversational faces serve more generally to interact with something or someone in the here and now of the communicative exchange.

Dumouchel also calls conversational faces quasi-propositions (a term also used by Peirce). The distinction should not be seen as a distinction between cultural and natural faces, nor as a distinction between deliberately produced and spontaneous faces (cf. Leone, 2021b). Still, it's not a matter of degrees of conventionality either. As we will see presently, the difference is rather *syntactic* and has to do with the different role a face plays within a proposition. I will use so-called emoticons (☺ and ☹) to reproduce in the text the act of making a face.

First, a face can be considered part of a proposition only under an extended conception of propositions, not limited to verbal language. As Stjernfelt (2014; 2018) has shown, Peirce's dicsign theory is precisely an extended theory of propositions according to which a dicsign (that is, a proposition) is a symbol¹⁰⁰ able to say something about something, hence, to be true or false, thanks to its dual structure combining a Subject/Index with a Predicate/Icon. Icons and indexes need not be verbal signs (such as nouns and adjectives), but can be any

¹⁰⁰ Well known is Peirce's triad that divides signs into icons, indexes and symbols, based on the way the three types refer to their objects. Symbols are those signs that refer to their objects by convention or natural habit. Dicsigns, in turn, are part of the triad that divides signs into terms (or rhemi), dicsigns and arguments, based on the way the sign determines an interpretant. The dicsign determines an interpretant that says that the relation between the dicsign itself and its object is a real existential relation (or genuine secondness in Peirce's terminology, that is: as an index of its object), Cf. Bellucci (2018) and Stjernfelt (2023).

kind of signs. Peirce's prototypical example is the portrait of someone plus the legend indicating the name of the person portrayed (Stjernfelt, 2014, 64), where the painting constitutes the iconic part and the legend the index part of the *dicisign* (the symbolic part of a *dicisign*, in turn, is in charge of holding the icon and the index together, what Stjernfelt calls *co-localization*)¹⁰¹.

A narrative face is thus a full *dicisign* of the type "Marco was ☺". The property expressed by the face as a sign (iconic part) is attributed to Marco (index part) as the subject of the proposition, and the resulting *dicisign* will be true if Marco was ☺, while it will be false if Marco was non-☺.

A conversational face, instead, is a quasi-proposition of the type "☺". We do not produce conversational faces just to say something about something, but to interact, more generally, with something or someone. That is, "☺" is not a full proposition unless it is interpreted as such by someone. To be interpreted as a proposition it must be joined to (or saturated by) another sign, and be taken either as the index or as the icon of the proposition. This is not to say that conversational faces are necessarily spontaneous, natural faces or exclusively instances of signification. We can make conversational faces for example to ask for help, to socially coordinate with other individuals (as in the case with laughter, for example, cf. Paolucci and Caruana, 2019), or to approve something by nodding¹⁰².

In both cases, then, «faces made are neither mere indexes [...] nor readouts that directly reveal a person's emotion or mental state» (Dumouchel, 2022, 631). Going back to lie detectors, it is clear that a) they work on conversational *and* spontaneous faces, i.e. with faces we make without the intent to say something about something else; b) the output emitted by a lie detector is a *dicisign* of the kind "☺ is false", where a conversational face (or other conversational signs e.g. the tone of voice, respiration, blood drive, etc.) is used as the Subject/Index of the *dicisign* to which the property of being "false", as the Predicate, is attached; c) "truth/false" take on different meanings in the two cases ("☺ is false" and "Marco was ☺").

If I say "Marco was ☺ is true", the truth referred to concerns the ability of the *dicisign* "Marco was ☺" to say how things are in the world (whether Marco was ☺ or not). In "☺ is true", instead, truth is, so to speak, *internal* to the *dicisign*. The word "true" is here explicitly mentioned and used as the iconic part of the *dicisign*, that is as a property not of the *dicisign* itself, but of the face referred to.

Suppose *x* is a face made by O. J. Simpson during a truth test with Silent Talker. O. J. is asked whether he committed crime *y*, and O. J. answers "no". Silent Talker then produces the judgment "*x* is false". Now, obviously "*x* is false" tells us

¹⁰¹ See Peirce (MS 1147, *Exact Logic*): «One of the simplest examples of a symbol that can readily be found is, say, the portrait of a man having printed under it: ANDREAS ACHENBACH. This form of conjunction of an icon and an index is a symbol telling me that the celebrated artist looked like that».

¹⁰² From a semiotic point of view, conversational faces are still general, if not conventional as narrative faces. Generality is a necessary property of signs (Stjernfelt, 2014). If a sign did not have at least minimal generality it would not be able to mean anything, it would just be noise.

something about x , O. J.'s face, but it tells us nothing about the truth or falsity of O. J.'s answer. Failure to immediately recognize that lie detection and truth recognition are not the same thing is due to the fact that, just like "lie", "truth" also is a fuzzy term at the level of the speakers' use of the term. As we saw in 1., "truth" as a verbal sign can be used both as the opposite of "lie" (thus as /sincerity/) and of "fake" (thus as /authenticity/), as well as the opposite of "falsehood" in the strict sense, that is as a property of propositions. But using "truth" instead of "sincerity" or "authenticity" may suggest that truth machines can recognize truth in the strict sense. To tell the truth is to say of what is that it is and what is not that it is not. Thus, by definition, to "recognize" the truth requires looking at the world and how things are, not just at signs. Instead, truth machines look only at conversational faces in isolation.

Truth machines cannot even tell if O.J. is lying or sincere, since saying something true/false is an essential part of the definition of sincerity/lying (lie, in the strict sense, is defined as intent to deceive + false assertion, see Bok, 1978; Gramigna, 2020). If I say something that I believe is false with the intent to deceive someone, but that thing is true, the lie fails. On the other hand, there is also the simpler case of errors, that is when I say in good faith something that I believe is true but it's false. In other words, if I cannot say whether a statement is false or true, I also cannot say whether someone is lying or being sincere in the relevant, strict sense¹⁰³. Hence, truth machines cannot recognize truth or falsity, nor lie or sincerity but, at most, the intent to deceive¹⁰⁴.

So far, I have distinguished between two types of dicisigns in which face-making is involved. I also distinguished two different senses, often confused at the folk level, in which a face can be said to tell the truth. In the first sense, a narrative face can be used to produce a true proposition that says something about something; in the second sense, a spontaneous conversational face can reveal the intention to deceive (or absence of that intention) if interpreted by someone (or something, e. g. a "truth machine") as part of a dicisign that says that a given face (index of the dicisign) is deceitful or not (predicate). If many have believed that faces could signal a lie it's also due to this semantic ambivalence, that allows to move, too hastily, from judging a face as counterfeited to judging someone as a liar, and from this to the falsity of his testimony.

¹⁰³ This is the standard philosophical definition of lie. Of course it could be debated, but for what matters to the current argument we just need to acknowledge the difference between saying that it's raining outside when I think that the weather is sunny and the weather is sunny (what I defined as a lie above), and saying that it's raining outside when I think that the weather is sunny but the weather is not sunny. We may call both cases a lie, but only in the first case the lie is successful. In court this distinction is of great importance, given that having the intent to do something is not the same as doing it.

¹⁰⁴ Still, it's also not obvious that truth machines can successfully recognize the intention to deceive, cf. Dumouchel (2022); Crippen and Rolla (2022); Cerutti (2023b).

3.2.4. Lie detection between reckon and judgment

Truth machines are a good example of machines that have the capacity of reckoning, but that we trust for tasks that require full-blown judgment (Cantwell-Smith, 2019). According to Cantwell-Smith, judgment is «a form of dispassionate deliberative thought, grounded in ethical commitment and responsible action, appropriate to the situation in which it is deployed» (xv). Judgment here should be taken as meaning something like “having good judgment”, not as “proposition”, which is how it is usually used in philosophy. Reckoning, on the other hand, is the ability to compute and measure devoid of any ethical component and contextual awareness. The difference is that in order to have genuine judgment, a system must a) be oriented toward what is represented by the system, not just toward the representations, i.e. it must be able to distinguish between signs and objects (what I called above semiotic humility); b) to achieve (a), the system must not only distinguish between signs and objects, but also defer to objects, it must know that when word and world part ways, it should choose the world (Cantwell-Smith, 2019, 82–89; what I called, with Williams, the value of accuracy). I should add that, since hearers are part of the world too, a system should further be considered as having judgment only if it communicates sincerely.

We should care about whether *x* really did *y*, not just about what *x* says about *y* or how he reacts to questions about *y*. What the reflection on truth machines shows is that it’s not what we say (or which signs we use) that determines what is true about the world, it’s what happens in the world that determines what is true in what we say. To recognize truth, in short, one must look at the world, not signs.

A first remark, then, is that the ability and sensitivity to look at the world and to care about the difference between reality and signs, as seen in the previous section, is precisely the thing that truth machines, as well as many AIs in general, don’t yet know how to do – they don’t know how to be truthful. Since they don’t distinguish between world and signs, truth machines lack truthfulness; and since the task of recognizing falsehoods and lies is a task that requires truthfulness, we shouldn’t rely on truth machines for those tasks.

Importantly, it follows that the difference between artificial and natural intelligence doesn’t lie in the ability to distinguish true from false¹⁰⁵, but in knowing that truth and falsity are different things and choosing truth when signs and world

¹⁰⁵ What Cantwell-Smith means by “true” and “false” is itself interesting, but would lead me too far from the conclusions of this paper. Suffice it to say that the false/fake Cantwell-Smith speaks of is somewhat opposed to “truth” as /original/ or /authentic/, but not in the same way as Eco’s (1990a; 1990b) fakes. Eco was concerned with fakes that are taken, by some, for the originals. These kinds of fakes are false-signs for Eco (if they referred to their objects, to the originals, they would no longer be fakes, cf. Sonesson, 2018). Instead, Cantwell-Smith’s false is about those things that are different from the originals but explicitly say they are not the originals. What Cantwell-Smith calls fakes here are nothing more than signs. They are called “fakes” simply because they are not the same thing as their objects: the picture of a chair is not the chair. But signs do not stand in place of their objects, but *stand for* them. These subtle differences further show how rich and complex is the semantic field of “truth”.

part company. We have just as much trouble as machines in recognizing the truth. Moreover, the confusion between different senses of “true” is our own, and equally applies to the problem of the human recognition of falsehoods in artificial faces (cf. Leone, 2021b; cf. also Bankov, 2022; Ingrao, 2024). An example of this confusion is illustrated in the way we talk about so-called deepfakes. Take the following example.

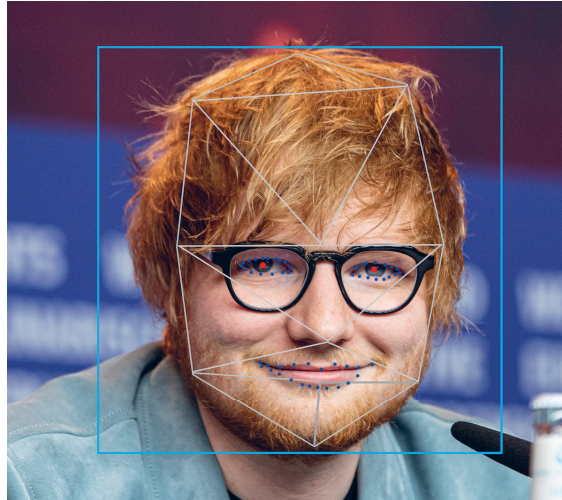


Figure 5. This is a deepfake.

Figure 5 is a deepfake produced by a deep artificial intelligence (one of the few that comes up on Google among images under a Creative Commons license). But in what sense would such a deepfake be “fake”? Deepfakes are indeed “fakes”, as the opposite of “authentic”, but, as Eco (1990a) put it, a fake ceases to be a fake when used as a sign of something (fakes are fake-signs; see also Sonesson, 2018). As a *dicsign*, the image coupled with the description “this is a deepfake” constitutes a proposition that tells the truth (had the caption said “this is a photo” it would have been false). That is, as the indexical part of a *dicsign*, a deepfake can be used both to say something false and to say the truth, as Figure 5 shows.

As for the ability to recognize the intention to deceive, I think we have more competence than artificial machines, but only with the help of experience, or of prior knowledge about the supposed deceiver and of contextual signs indicating the deception more generally. We can recognize a deception only if we know, for example, that a given person is wont to deceive in certain situations, or if we think he or she might have a return from lying. That is, only if we have some reasons for hypothesizing a possible deception. Semiotically, there are no distinguishing features that separately indicate the truth for either natural or artificial faces. And precisely because recognizing the truth in a face is a fallible but very important activity that must be done with judgment, we must distinguish between reality and signs, care for the difference, and aim at the truth, that is, it must be done in

a truthful way¹⁰⁶. These conclusions also suggest that a possible strategy to fight the current truth crisis (Lorusso, 2018; Cassam, 2021) is to not just (try to) find and avoid falsities, which will always be harder (Eco, 1990a; Leone, 2023a; Paolucci, 2023)¹⁰⁷, but to promote truthful discursive styles of semiotic production.

¹⁰⁶ Once the difference between true and false is granted, the capacity of judgment Cantwell-Smith speaks of is nothing more than the ability to make and interpret semiotic judgments, as Eco (1975) called them distinguishing them from analytic and synthetic judgments, in a truthful way. Semiotic judgments are a middle ground between the other two and are based on a theory of meaning that replaces dictionary definitions and analytic features with interpretant. The meaning of a sign is not its referent, but neither is it something conceptual or non-worldly, according to Echiian theory. The meaning of a sign is another external sign (its interpretant) among those already available in the Encyclopedia. The Echiian theory of semiotic judgments can be said to be foundherentist, from Haack's (2009) theory, in which the meaning of a sign can be given both by its comparison with dictionary elements as signs (hypostatization of experience) or with other signs coming from experience.

¹⁰⁷ Lorusso (2018) made this critique in relation to the limits of factchecking as a solution to the problems of truth and reliability of information in the digital age. Lorusso's proposal is to ask not only what is true and what is not, but to use semiotics to study the veridiction strategies of a discourse.

3.3. Semiotic resources for the open and the closed

3.3.1. Open and closed as non-ideology and ideology

I have so far proposed a definition of what truthful communication is and of what it means to be truthful semiotically, but I have also concluded that, unlike politeness, the recognition of truthfulness is extremely fallible, since it is not enough to use certain conventions to be considered truthful, but one is considered truthful or not based on what one says and how he says it.

As is known, Eco (1962) distinguished between open and closed works as types of aesthetic texts. Open works, for Eco, are those that leave freedom of interpretation to the reader, to the point of predisposing his or her active participation for the completion of the work of art itself. Closed are those texts that do not involve the reader or that, by referring to canons, known or even proverbial semiotic usages, do not invite the active participation of the reader in their interpretation. Eco's distinction between open and closed applied to aesthetic texts, while the distinction between open and closed texts I have in mind applies to natural texts (in the sense of van Dijk, 1975, see below in 3.3.2.2). In other words, here I intend to distinguish between open and closed texts in the opposite direction, so to say, thus as openness and closure not toward readers, but toward truth as the terminus a quo of semiosis.

In fact, Eco included in the second Italian edition of *Opera Aperta* his reflection *Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà*¹⁰⁸ in which he affirmed the principle that the formal choices made by someone in a sign production that aims to say something about the world, both in aesthetic and non-aesthetic texts, are the first form of commitment to reality. Simply put, the idea is that how one chooses to speak about something reflects, at the same time, a stance on, and an adaptation to, reality. Moreover, the very examples Eco gave for the open and the closed are also ascribable to the categories of open and closed as I am presenting them here – in Eco (1981), for example, Eco contrasted the openness of avant-garde works of art with the closedness of texts such as *Superman*, myths, and conspiracy theories. For Eco's later semiotic theory, all texts are open to the reader at different degrees and levels since all texts invoke the reader's interpretive cooperation as a fundamental semiotic mechanism, and already in *Opera Aperta* Eco specified that all works of art are open and characterized by a certain degree of ambiguity. So, his point was that the works of art he was studying put this function of semiosis, openness, at the center, that is, those works were maximizing this necessary aspect of semiosis and the role of the reader.

In 2., we have also seen how all semiotic systems and texts must necessarily be open to the world. Semiotic systems or paradigms are not made of simple concepts or ideas, but are the result of the action of external signs (external signs that sometimes have also the power of restructuring the systems themselves). But the semiotic phenomenon that I am trying to isolate concerns a particular kind of texts, which I call open. These are texts that *maximize the trait of openness toward*

¹⁰⁸ Translated in English as "Form as Social Commitment" in Eco (1989a).

the world, striving to be truthful, that is, striving to be accurate, sincere, and semiotically humble (while, by opposition, closed texts are those that ignore these values).

Popper defined open societies as those which, by leaving freedom of choice to the individual, are constantly changing, while closed societies are those which, based on rigid principles and taboos governing the lives of community members, do not change. Importantly, the fundamental difference between the two societies is semiotic, it concerns the distinction between signs and truth, or the distinction between truth as what is independent of the signs used in a culture and truth as what signs say is the case. As Popper said, the main element of closed societies «is the lack of distinction between the customary or conventional regularities of social life and the regularities found in “nature”» (214).

By not distinguishing between truth and signs, closed societies do not distinguish between what they believe to be true and what is true, hence they will present what they believe to be true as true and have no reason to change or modify those beliefs. In turn, the distinction between truth and signs brings open societies to the awareness of the fallibility and revisability of their beliefs. Following this line of thought, I define the closed discourse as that which does not distinguish, or conceals the distinction between signs and truth, and the open discourse as that which not only does not conceal, but magnifies the distinction between signs and truth. In other words, the open style respects, it is non-indifferent to the values of truthfulness, while the closed style does not.

Above, I suggested that we can consider both truthfulness/untruthfulness as semiotic ideologies in Leone's (2024b) sense, but also that this does not mean that one ideology is as good as the other. To substantiate this claim, I will begin in the next section by considering the semiotic literature on ideology. On the one hand, I will propose that the distinction between ideology/non-ideology should be seen as a distinction between discourses that respect the truth or not; on the other hand, I will define open/closed as ideology/non-ideology, respectively, in a sense that I will specify in the next section (and which will justify the terminological choice).

The most accepted theory for distinguishing between ideology and non-ideology is Barthes' (1957), although, as I will show, it features some limitations due to the reference to the dualism between denotations and connotations. I will argue that the way to give a solid basis to the distinction between ideology and its opposite is to consider the ideological discourse as a semiotic style that ignores the values of truthfulness. However, in Barthes we find the direct connection between concepts such as metaphorical mode, mythology, and ideology. If my reasoning is effective, after the exploration of the semiotic theories of ideology, we will have a series of additional tools for analyzing truthfulness in discourse and for distinguishing between open and closed discourses. So, I will conclude the first part by identifying open and closed with two “semantic lines”, two ways of producing a text.

All in all, what I propose is an equation between three concepts: truthfulness = openness = non-ideology. In this way, on one hand, the problem of distinguishing between ideology and non-ideology is, in my opinion, resolved in a coherent

manner; on the other, if the equation holds, the tools that semiotics has already produced for the study of ideology can be used to distinguish between open and closed discourses, and therefore between truthfulness and untruthfulness.

I will start by distinguishing between two meanings in which the notion of “ideology” is understood in the semiotic literature. Leone coins the concept of semiotic ideology from that of linguistic ideology used in cultural anthropology and by the Chicago school (Silverstein, 1979; Keane, 2018; 2025), where ideology is understood as “the hidden patterns of meaning” or, more generally, as a “system of ideas”, and linguistic ideology as «the sets of ideas a community holds about the role of language» (Leone, 2024b, 3). A semiotic ideology would then be a set of ideas about the role of signs more generally. In this sense earlier I said that truthfulness and untruthfulness can be seen as semiotic ideologies, i.e. as different conceptions of the sign-world relationship. However, in what follows I’ll be mainly interested in “ideology” understood in another sense, which sees ideology as something negative (and non-ideology as positive). Leone himself makes the distinction between the two senses when he defines the anthropological approach to the study of ideologies as “more neutral” (2024b, 4) and as not promoting «any particular set of meanings as superior» (ibidem, 8), compared other trends that instead conceive ideology as something negative, something to be unmasked, as a “system of bias” or as “false consciousness”.

Admittedly, the approach I have taken so far concerns saying what is superior and what is worse from a semioethical point of view¹⁰⁹. In the conclusions, I will argue that truthfulness as a semiotic style is good for the health of the public sphere, and that it is therefore good to promote an open political style of discourse (which, as I will conclude, doesn’t mean to promote a set of meanings as superior, only the open style as a political semiotic form). In a sense, then, I am promoting a semiotic ideology as better than others when it comes to our ideas about truth and truthfulness. However, I don’t conceive Leone’s as a distinction between two different approaches to the same object of study (ideology), but two different theories that deal with different (albeit homonymous) things. At least this is how I will argue, in the next section, the distinction should be conceived. For this reason, I conceive the following remarks as compatible to the research on semiotic ideologies in the neutral sense. Distinguishing between the two “sciences” (ideology, which studies ideas, and mythology, as Barthes called it, which studies ideologies, respectively) will in turn allow me to say that while both the open and the closed are semiotic ideologies, only the closed discourse is also ideological in the negative sense of the term.

I will then look at political semiotics as a second resource, in order to determine a) at what level the study of truthfulness is relevant and what types of text can be distinguished in open and closed; and b) what open and closed discourses are from the point of view of political semiotics.

¹⁰⁹ For a recent and very effective example of a similar, semioethical approach to the analysis of visual representations see Santangelo et al (2025).

3.3.1.1. Two senses of “ideology”

Ideology historically emerged as a discipline devoted to the study of ideas during the Enlightenment, but gradually shifted from being a term that referred to a science (the science of ideas) to referring to the object of that science (ideas), and from having a neutral connotation to a negative one.

The term was coined by Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836) as a branch of knowledge that studies ideas, as the science of ideas¹¹⁰. For de Tracy, ideology had to be an integral part of the anti-authoritarian epistemological shift made by the Enlightenment. In his mind, the science of ideas served also a political-pedagogical purpose, typical of so-called radical Enlightenment (Israel, 2010), which was to «place the moral and political sciences on their true basis, a knowledge of our intellectual faculties» (Destutt de Tracy, 1817 [2011: 10]). However, de Tracy’s approach was one that in contemporary terms we would define as foundationalist, or as an example of what Eco called strong thought theories, in which primitive and certain contents of knowledge are distinguished from contents constructed by humans from a combination of the former. In Destutt de Tracy’s case, he started from an epistemological conception inherited from empiricism, according to which knowledge starts from the certainty of our sensations. According to this conception, all sensations, individually, are true; it is humans who attach further meanings to sensations, it is our will or cultural influence that “denaturalizes” and falsifies our original perceptions.

It should be noted that this is a conception very close to Barthes’ (1957) mythological science, according to which the myth is a secondary semiotic system that associates additional meanings, called connotative meanings or connotations, to the literal denotative meanings of signs. But with Barthes, “ideology” has already come to have the double meaning of “science of ideas” and of “false consciousness,” while Destutt de Tracy kept the two things well separated, the former being the remedy for the latter: for the Enlightenment philosopher, ideology serves to analyze our ideas and distinguish those that “direct us well” from those that «form within us a false and blind consciousness [*une fausse et aveugle conscience*], which always removes us further from the way of reason, the only one leading to happiness» (1817 [2011, 255]; 1815 [2015, 254]).

As Roberts (2025) says, it is not unusual for terms that refer to a science or a “discourse” (a *logos*) to change over time and come to refer not the science in question, but to its object of study (one can “do biology” and be a “biologist”, but also “study biology” or even “study a biology”; in other cases, the transformation is more radical: for example, we can no longer say that one does methodology or pathology, but rather that one studies a pathology or applies a methodology). However, in the case of “ideology”, it is interesting to consider how this transformation took place and how the two meanings came to be associated with opposing axiological judgments.

¹¹⁰ For this section, I’m following the introduction by Simona Stano in Stano and Leone (2023) and Roberts (2025).

The negative connotation derives from what Roberts (2025) calls the conservative objection to the notion of “ideology” and against the *idéologues*, identified as those who want to replace political authority and Christian tradition as sources of truth with alternative, materialist systems based on reason and the human mind. In this case, “ideology” retains its meaning of “science of ideas”, but is associated with a negative connotation (interestingly by Napoleon, who considered his opponents’ ideas as too abstract and detached from real politics). If the negative connotation derives from the conservative objections to the Enlightenment, it is with Marx and Engels that the meaning of ideology splits in two.

Consistent with their dialectical method, Marx and Engels were ambivalent between considering themselves as the continuation of the Enlightenment or its negation (an ambivalence they will leave as a legacy to all Western Marxism). They were equally ambivalent in their use of the term “ideology”. On the one hand, they maintain the negative connotation of the term derived from the counter-Enlightenment tradition. On the other hand, ideology shifts from being “the science of ideas” to being the “false consciousness” that the science of ideas was supposed to remedy according to de Tracy. Around 1846, Marx and Engels (in writings that would be published later in 1932) and even more explicitly Engels (1886) took the notion of false consciousness from de Tracy, but the meaning of ideology changed with the identification of “ideology” and “idealism”. In this context, “ideology” come to mean the conception according to which one can deal with thoughts «as with independent entities, developing independently and subject only to their own laws». This is seen as an illusion by Marx and Engels because, instead, it’s the material conditions of the ideologist (his position in society) that shape their ideas. So, ideologist becomes synonymous with idealist, or someone who thinks with “false consciousness”, because they attribute to the internal development of ideas what is actually the product of the material development of life and of the relations of production in a society. Ideology, therefore, comes to name, for Marx and Engels, both philosophical idealism and the false consciousness of idealists. This reinforces the negative connotation associated with the term, but for different reasons than the conservative objection: ideology is not negative as a science of ideas, but as the false consciousness of those who think that a science of ideas is possible. For this reason, for Marx, ideology is not only something that leads to error because it alters or excludes part of reality, but also something that alters reality *by inversion*, like a camera obscura, because it suggests the opposite of materialism (idealism). This also explains why the two meanings of “ideology” are often confused or kept together: because in Marx and Engels’ conception, the two things *are* the same. Ideology is indeed idealism, but idealism is also a false ideology that hides, thus influencing the superstructural worker, the real forces that drive history. “Ideology” is both «the “sociological idealism” to which superstructural workers are susceptible and the superstructure itself, which explains their susceptibility» (Roberts, 2025; see also Rossi-Landi 1990).

Outside of Marxist exegesis, the two things conceptually remain different meanings of the same word, a case of homonymy. For example, in Marxist circles

it is not uncommon to refer to Marxism as an ideology, in a positive sense, understood as a key for interpreting reality and as a basis for political action. But when we hear commentators on television accusing each other of being ideological, the meaning is rather that of “partisanship” and “partiality,” if not “dishonesty”. Notice how, in both cases, “ideology” now refers to an object and no longer to a science. But in the first case it means something, if not positive, at least potentially enabling, something used by humans, while in the second case it means the exact opposite, something negative that implicitly distorts reality.

When Eco (1979) and Greimas (1987) talk about ideology (which for the former is the most abstract level of analysis, to be done at the end, while for the latter it is the deepest one, to be done at the beginning) as part of the analysis of a text, clearly by “ideology” they mean a /system of ideas/. Instead, when Barthes (1957) and Eco (1975; 1976) talk about semiotics as mythological science and as critique of ideologies, respectively, they mean “ideology” as /false consciousness/ (see Lorusso, 2017; see also van Dijk, 1998, 3, for the distinction between the two senses of ideology).

Not to say that the two things have nothing to do with each other. Simply, the study of ideology as false consciousness concerns a subgroup of ideologies in the other sense. If we distinguish between the two meanings in Ideology(1) and Ideology(2), then the study of ideology as false consciousness concerns a subgroup of ideologies(1) that are also Ideologies(2). When I said that open and closed are semiotic ideologies in Leone’s sense, I meant that they are semiotic ideologies(1), i.e., different conceptions of the relationship between signs and the world. But this does not mean that both are ideologies(2).

From here on, when I’ll use the word “ideology” I’ll mean Ideology(2). But, more generally, the polysemy of “ideology” is part of the reason why I propose the open/closed pair for ideology(2)/non-ideology(2), in order to avoid confusion. The other part is that an ideological(2) text can be recognized based on its relationship with the values of truth, as I will explain below.

In any case, this is how I conceive the distinction: my thesis is that while open texts are non-ideological(2), closed texts are ideological(2). The question then becomes: is the distinction between false and non-false consciousness possible from a semiotic point of view? Can ideological and non-ideological discourses be distinguished semiotically, or are all ideologies(1) always also false consciousness? The answer is yes and no at the same time. In the next section, I will introduce some concepts that semiotics has produced to distinguish between the two; but then we will see that, in order for these to be sufficient for the distinction between ideology and non-ideology, it is necessary to add something, namely the concept of truth as the terminus a quo of semiosis. However, thanks to this approach, we will have introduced a whole series of tools for analyzing the ideological discourse.

3.3.1.2. Equivalence and difference

How does semiotics describe ideology? Often, this is done indirectly, by defining texts such as modern myths (in Barthes' sense), propaganda, or conspiracy theories as ideological. Eco (1990a; 1990b), for example, cited conspiracy theories as an example of hermetic semiosis, a concept that refers to a mode of semiosis very similar to Barthes' myths which, in turn, are a particular object of study of mythology as the science of ideologies. More generally, it is a widely accepted position in semiotics that conspiracy theories are a case of ideological/mythological texts (cf. Leone, 2023b; Lorusso, 2023; Madisson and Ventsel, 2021)¹¹¹.

The distinction between this type of texts and their opposite is usually made through a semiotic category that contrasts equivalence and difference as modes of semiosis, an opposition that has been conceptualized in different ways by different authors. The idea that we can distinguish between two ways of producing a sign based on the opposition between equivalence and difference is an old one, as Eco (1990a, 59; 1990b, 8) has shown. On the one hand, for Greek rationalism knowing something meant knowing its cause, so that one could express the inference that if p, then q (if fire, then smoke). According to the *modus ponens*, from "if p, then q" one can know that if there is p, then there is also q, that it is not possible that "if p, then not-q", and that if "if p, then q" is true, then it cannot also be false. In turn, from the same premise you cannot infer that "if q, then p" (fallacy of affirming the consequent) or that "if not-p, then not-q" (fallacy of denying the antecedent). The rationality of the *modus* is based on criteria of empirical observation and logical inference, so that the truth of the conclusions depends on the truth, always fallible, of the premises, not just on the logical structure of the argument.

But alongside this interpretative model, Greek society also developed a second one, exemplified by the figure of Hermes («volatile, ambiguous, father of all the arts but god of thieves, iuvenes et senex at the same time», says Eco, 1990b, 61, my translation). In this case, the principles of identity, non-contradiction, and of the excluded middle are denied in favor of a different model of rationality according to which truth is something that comes before signs, but to which all signs refer in some way, even when they seem to say contradictory things. If, for the rationality of the *modus*, truth is something that is obtained from signs but independent of them (the conclusion of an argument), for Hermeticism all signs can allude to a truth that precedes signs, but remains secret, «thus truth is identified with what is not said, or what is said in an obscure way and must be understood beyond appearance and the letter» (Eco, 1990b, 63, my translation). Since every sign alludes to the same truth, then all signs are similar to each other,

¹¹¹ In all these cases, it is taken for granted that conspiracy theories are negative; I will address the problem of the meaning of conspiracy theories, and how to distinguish between "normal" conspiracy theories and conspiracist theories as examples of open and closed texts, respectively, in 3.4.1.

a universal similarity which implies, implicitly or explicitly, the rejection of the principle of non-contradiction.

The hermetic thought says that the more ambiguous and multifaceted our language is, and the more it uses symbols and metaphors, the more suitable it will be for naming a One in which opposites coincide. But where the coincidence of opposites triumphs, the principle of identity falls. *Tout se tient*. (Eco, 1990a, 64, my translation)

If the modus model describes things in the world as causally connected, and truth and knowledge as what can be obtained from these relationships, the hermetic model describes things in the world as connected in a much more ambiguous way. Everything is connected to everything else due to the fact that everything is connected to the One, to the secret Truth: «a plant is not defined by its morphological and functional characteristics, but by its similarity, however partial, to another element of the cosmos. If it vaguely resembles a part of the human body, the plant makes sense because it refers to the body. But that part of the body in turn makes sense because it refers to a star, which makes sense because it refers to a musical scale, which refers to an angelic hierarchy, and so on ad infinitum» (Eco, 1990b, 64, my translation). In this case, we can say not only that “if fire, then smoke”, but also that “if smoke, then fire”, and that “if fire, then not-smoke” and that “if smoke, then not-fire” (all at the same time). All these, while contradictory, still allude to some feature of the Truth, and are therefore considered similar to each other (the cause similar to the effect, the effect to the cause, the effects similar to each other)¹¹².

An example of hermetic semiosis are myths. Myths and mythologies are, for Lévi-Strauss, «the part of language where the formula *traduttore, traditore* reaches its lowest truth-value» (1963 [1958], 210). Myths represent mythemes (the distinctive units of mythology, which can be obtained by comparing different myths across time and space) through a series of figures placed in a relationship of equivalence. For example, the myth of Oedipus (in all its variants) concerns, for Lévi-Strauss, the problem of reconciling the idea that «mankind is autochthonous» with the fact that humans are born from the union of man and woman (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, 214). To connect the two problems (“born from one or born from two?”; “born from different or born from the same?”), the myth places them in a semi-symbolic relationship through a series of figures, presented as similar to each other, which affirm kinship relationships¹¹³, underestimate them¹¹⁴, deny

¹¹² To show how far removed the notion of semiotic humility is from so-called theory of difference, I will mention only how Eco cites Derrida’s deconstructionism as a contemporary example of hermetic rationality based not on the difference between signs and the world, but on their equation, see Eco (1990a; 1990b). Cf. also Leone (2020).

¹¹³ Cadmus seeking his sister Europa; Oedipus marrying his mother; Antigone burying her brother.

¹¹⁴ The Spartoi killing one another; Oedipus killing his father; Eteocles killing his brother.

the autochthonous origin of man¹¹⁵, and affirm the autochthonous origin of man¹¹⁶, respectively. By combining a series of contradictory images, myths convey their message. However, it is possible to connect everything only if the interpretative assumption is made that, in myths, one sign refers to another through structural or diagrammatic similarity, and that signs are «combinatorial variants of the same function in different contexts» (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, 223). In myth, therefore, the message is not explicitly expressed, but only revealed by a series of signs that refer to it semi-symbolically, by structural similarity. Importantly, for Lévi-Strauss, the purpose of all myths in general is to resolve contradictions, offering the following model of reasoning: «although experience contradicts theory, social life validates cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence, cosmology is true» (ibidem, 1963, 216)¹¹⁷.

We find the equivalence/difference pair at work also in Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy as different semiotic devices, or "semantic lines", for the production of a text (Jakobson, 1971). The two directories metaphor/metonymy are thought of as necessary conditions, in equal measure, for semiosis. Both must be present in normal verbal behavior, even if there may be cases in which one device dominates the other. Metaphor proceeds by association of signs that are similar in some respect, metonymy by association of continuous signs, respectively¹¹⁸.

Moreover, in his well-known typology of language functions, Jakobson defined the poetic function (when the text focuses on itself) as follows: «the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination» (Jakobson, 1960, 71). For Jakobson, in poetry, the combination of signs for the production of a text proceeds by equivalence and similarity between signs (contrary to texts where the referential function, «the leading task of numerous messages», prevails, Jakobson, 1960, 66; in these, the production of a text proceeds "normally", selecting between equivalent signs from the axis of selection and combining contiguous signs in the axis of combination):

¹¹⁵ Cadmus killing the dragon; Oedipus killing the Sphinx.

¹¹⁶ Through the meaning of the names that appear in the myth, for example: "Labdacos", Laios' father, which means /lame/ and "Laios", Oedipus' father, which means /left-sided/.

¹¹⁷ According to the following formula $Fx(a) : Fy(b) = Fx(b) : Fa-1(y)$. Assuming «that a relation of equivalence exists between two situations defined respectively by an inversion of *terms* and *relations*» (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, 228), contradictory figures refer to a single coherent message (for example, and simplifying: if $x = \text{good}$ and $y = \text{bad}$, a myth could resolve the contradiction between a and $a-1$, showing that the affirmation of a is to the underestimation of b as the affirmation of b is to the negation of the opposite of a).

¹¹⁸ By contiguity or continuity, Jakobson means something to Eco's semiotic conception of the *modus ponens* rationality, where inferences are based on relations found among things in causal connection.

In poetry, one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same sequence; word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with long, and short with short; word boundary equals word boundary, no boundary equals no boundary; syntactic pause equals syntactic pause, no pause equals no pause. (ibidem, 71)

Contrary to the metalinguistic function of language, which uses a sequence of signs to establish equivalences (we use this function, for example, when we define the meaning of a sign: for example, “man is the rational animal” is a text, a sequence of signs, that establishes the equation between “man” and “rational animal”), the poetic function uses equations to construct sequences of signs. In one case, one sign is associated to another in order to say something; in the other, a sign is associated to another based on a pre-selected similarity, as in “man, pan, can, clan, plan” (based on the phonetic ending -an). But the distinction between metaphor and metonymy is not limited to the level of expression alone, but can also be applied at the semantic level («in poetry not only the phonological sequence but, in the same way, any sequence of semantic units strives to achieve an equation», Jakobson, 1960, 85). Metonymy occurs when two “close” or continuous signs are associated, or co-localized. What is continuous and what is not depend on the relations among objects found in experience. For example, “fisherman” and “fish”, or “car” and “engine”, are metonymically close.

An example of a metonymic production would then be “x’s new movie is as good as all of x’s movies”. Metaphor, instead, associates two signs based on a presumed similarity between two or more things, for example: “this movie is good, since all of x’s movies are good, then this is a movie by x”.

When the metaphorical directory prevails, similarity is superimposed on continuity, and the similarity or coherence between the meanings of signs is favored to the detriment of their differences, which is why, for Jakobson, «ambiguity is an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message, briefly, a corollary feature of poetry [...] the supremacy of the poetic function over the referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous» (Jakobson, 1960, 85). Regardless of whether this is a good characterization of poetry¹¹⁹, what we obtain from this characterization is that non-poetic texts (that is, natural or political texts) that favor the poetic function of language over the others magnify the similarity between signs *regardless of the world*, or ignoring (not for aesthetic reasons but, precisely, for ideological reasons) the referential function of language (the differences between signs, and between signs and the world).

This is how Selg and Ventsel, for example, understand the opposition between metaphor and metonymy applied to political semiotics, in connection with Laclau’s (2001) opposition between the logic of equivalence and the logic of

¹¹⁹ As we shall see, Lévi-Strauss and Leone have a different take on poetry; Jakobson, 1971, himself distinguished between poetic works in which the metaphorical pole dominates from others in which the metonymic pole dominates; see also Selg and Ventsel, 2020, 207, for a critical discussion of the relation between the six functions and the metaphoric/metonymic poles.

difference: «The more metaphoric a system of meaning is, the more it is prevailed by the logic of equivalence [...] The more metonymic a system of meaning is, the more it is prevailed by the logic of difference» (Selg and Ventsel, 2020, 174). Importantly, Selg and Ventsel also recognize the similarity between equivalence as a semiotic device or semantic line and the semiotic form of mythologies where «the main feature [...] is universal resemblance of everything to everything; the main organizing structural relation that of homomorphism» (Lotman, 2000 [1978], 570). In contrast, the metonymic line presents its referents as different from each other.

Similar to the opposition between metaphor and metonymy, and hermes and modus, there is also Lotman's opposition between continuous (or non-discrete) and discrete coding systems. As with metaphor and metonymy for Jakobson, in this case too, both the continuous and the discrete are considered necessary for the production of a text. Every sign production consists «of (minimally) two semiotic mechanisms (languages), which are mutually untranslatable and yet similar to each other, since each models, with its own means, the same extra-semiotic reality» (Lotman, 2004, 641). Selg and Ventsel (2020, 148) rightly say that there is an apparent paradox, which can also be found in Jakobson's opposition. On the one hand, the two systems are thought of as untranslatable between each other and as two distinct "languages". The discrete system connects signs on the syntagmatic axis in a «linear way, causal logical, or chronological» (147), not unlike the rationality of the modus according to Eco («the basic bearer of meaning is the segment (= sign), while the text or the chain of segments (= text) is secondary, its meaning being derived from the meanings of the signs», Lotman, 1990, 36). The continuous system, in turn, connects signs following a different logic, rather similar to the hermetic style, where signs that are similar to each other are connected (following the rules of «rhythm and symmetry», Lotman says, which is the same example used by Jakobson for the poetic function of language). On the other hand, the two are said to be equally necessary for every semiotic production. In general, equivalence and difference (in their various forms) are thought of in semiotics as: i) equally necessary mechanisms for the production of texts (as functions, devices, or coding systems)¹²⁰; ii) and as different styles, semantic lines, or modes of production (i.e., when one function dominates over another).

For Lotman, equivalence and difference are fundamental in another respect as well, because they describe the two necessary features of every culture (moving from texts to cultures as unit of analysis). First, every culture is self-referential, it is a subject that has itself as its object, and that must give order to its internal heterogeneity («the key mechanism used by culture to eliminate the residues of heterogeneity is the metadescription of himself: nobody describes him/herself as contradictory; in their eyes every semiotic subject is coherent», Lorusso, 2015, 74).

¹²⁰ Think also of Peirce's doctrine of *diconsigns* (Stjernfelt, 2014), according to which a sign, in order to say something about something, must necessarily contain at least one icon, as predicate, and an index that indicates the subject of the predication

In order to present themselves as coherent, cultures must also describe and construct their external (nature, other cultures, or anything that is considered non-culture). So, on the one hand, communication would be meaningless if the systems communicating were identical – cultures and communication exist precisely because there is a plurality of codes, languages, and cultures (which is why for Lotman communication is translation between systems that are always partially untranslatable, or there would be nothing to say). But precisely because there is internal/external pluralism and heterogeneity, cultures must, at the same time, homogenize, standardize, establish similarities in order to define themselves, *and* make distinctions, pose differences, establish their own external environment.

However, presenting oneself as coherent is not the same as admitting contradictions. It is one thing to say that every culture constructs its external by establishing similarities and differences, and quite another to use a hermetic or mythological mode of discourse that resolves all contradictions (and constructs similarities and differences imposing them even on what is not similar or different). Eco was aware of this distinction: «It is indisputable that human beings think on the basis of judgments of identity and similarity. However, it is a fact that in everyday life we are able to distinguish between relevant and significant similarities, and random and illusory similarities» (1990a, 74, my translation). When Barthes (1957), for example, says that myths are a way of signifying that presents as natural things that are instead only contingent opinions, values, hypotheses, he means that there is something wrong with this, and that for this reason they must be unmasked.

If the distinction between establishing consistencies for self-descriptive purposes and the hermetic style seems subtle or vague, it is because we lack a criterion for distinguishing between truthful and untruthful ways of establishing similarities between two things – that is, we need a theory about why, in certain cases, establishing equivalences is something negative, while in others it is not. We thus find ourselves back at the starting point, wondering whether it is possible to distinguish between ideological and non-ideological discourses¹²¹. However, in this brief exposition of semiotic ideas on equivalence and difference, different levels of abstraction have been mixed together. I have written this paragraph in a moderately hermetic manner, connecting metaphor, equivalence, Hermes, myth, ideology, and continuous coding systems together¹²². Even though all these things do “talk to each other” and, in some ways, are very “similar”, it is now better to

¹²¹ This is a case where it is useful to distinguish between different meanings of “nature and culture”, as I did in 2.2. Obviously, every culture considers different things to be “natural”. In this sense, as Lotman sometimes puts it, every culture constructs not only its external in the sense of “non-culture”, that is, everything that does not belong to that culture, but also in the sense of “nature”, that which, for a culture, is “independent of man”. But if culture is understood as that part of nature that becomes conscious of itself (and therefore the opposition as a simple distinction and not as a metaphysical dualism), then it is also possible to distinguish between equivalence and difference as objective different modes of sign production, and admit that also what is independent of man plays a role in semiosis.

¹²² See also Leone (2024b, 143) for a review of the semiotic ideologies of connectedness.

proceed more accurately and distinguish between different levels of application, so as to avoid contradictions and, above all, be able to draw as much as possible from these contributions for the analysis of political discourse.

3.3.1.3. Functions of semiosis and styles of discourse

I have introduced a series of concepts that can be grouped into two sets in relation of mutual opposition. On the one hand, we have metaphor, continuous system, Hermes, logic of equivalence, and equivalence; on the other, metonymy, discrete, modus, logic of difference, and difference. As we saw, while these categories are usually presented as equally necessary for semiosis, there is also the parallel tendency in the related literature to consider, even only implicitly or at a certain level of analysis, the equivalence function of language as something negative versus the difference function as the positive pole of the category.

However, these concepts should not be considered as completely interchangeable. In particular, at least three different levels of abstraction can be identified. We must distinguish between:

- Functions of semiosis, or aspects of signs (metaphor vs. metonymy; discrete vs. non-discrete systems);
- Types of signs (icons, indexes, symbols);
- Styles of production (Hermes vs. modus, or metaphoric way vs. metonymic way).

First of all, it is important to distinguish between functions of semiosis and styles of production. We have seen, for example, that, for both Jakobson and Lotman, metaphor and metonymy, and continuous and discrete are necessary components of semiosis. The same idea is expressed by Peirce in his doctrine that *dicisigns* (a term Peirce uses for propositions, according to the triad that distinguishes signs in terms, *dicisigns*, and arguments, in relation to the type of interpretant to which they refer) necessarily have a double structure that combines an index (in the position of Subject) with an icon (Predicate). According to this version of Peirce's typology, icons, indexes, and symbols are not types of signs, but aspects present *in every sign* (except degenerate cases). At the level of the fundamental mechanisms of semiosis, metaphor and metonymy, continuous and discrete coding systems, and icons and indices as aspects of a sign are to be found in every sign production.

Different thing is when one function dominates the other. In these cases, equivalence and difference, from fundamental mechanisms of semiosis become different styles or ways of producing a text, corresponding to the two types of rationality identified by Eco, Hermes and modus. In one case, the semiotic production proceeds analogically, assuming a criterion of similarity through which select the signs to be associated in a text (equivalences first, then sequences of signs). In the other, we start from continuous signs to say something about something (sequences first and then equivalences).

The distinction between aspects and types of signs, in turn, suggests that a further distinction must be made between styles of production and types of signs¹²³. As types of signs, Peirce's triad distinguishes icons (signs that resemble their objects), indexes (in causal connection with their objects), and symbols (which refer to their objects by convention or generality) according to the different ways in which signs can refer to their objects. But a sign can be said to be similar to something else both in an ideological/hermetic way and in a non-ideological/accurate way – that is, it is one thing to say that x is similar to y in some respect, as a judgment, hypothesis, or assertion for which one takes responsibility (implying, for example, that if x is similar to y for the trait z, then x is not dissimilar to y for the trait z); quite another to presuppose an equivalence in relation to which things that are not similar can be presented as similar (for example, the two assertions “x is y” and “x is not y”).

3.3.1.3.1. *Open and closed from an ecosemiotic point of view*

The distinction between styles of production and types of signs is also useful for avoiding a possible contradiction. Recently, Timo Maran has proposed to use Peirce's typology of signs «to shed light on the dynamics of cultural texts and systems that strive to become purely arbitrary and symbolic as well as on their effects upon ecosystems» (Maran, 2020, 20). In line with Peirce's theory, according to ecosemiotics it is a characteristic of signs to form an ever-increasing number of symbols, which become increasingly abstract and detached from their objects as a culture develops and increases its knowledge of something (what Eco called the process of infinite semiosis or, in Peirce's words, the idea that “symbols grow”, cf. Nöth, 2010; 2014; and Stjernfelt, 2014, 293). To this ecosemiotic take on Peircian sign categories, icons and indexes are less autonomous, less detached from their objects than symbols. Maran defines symbols as conventional and arbitrary signs, which is only partly the Peircian definition of symbols (for Peirce symbols are general signs, and generality can be both natural, bottom-up emergentist and cultural, top-down conventional, see Bellucci, 2018, 66; see also Stjernfelt, 2016; 2022)¹²⁴. Still, it is true that «the conventionality of symbolic signs has very important ecological consequences» (Maran, 2020, 20).

One of Maran's examples has interesting connections with Eco's distinction between *modus* and *Hermes* (and with the distinction between open and closed discoursed, as we shall see). The practice of gardening (Maran, 2020, 23; also Maran, 2004) is an example of a human practice where, often, abstract symbols (think for example of the design of «Japanese tea gardens, gardens of eighteenth-century France, English and Mediterranean gardens», Maran, 2004, 123–124) are projected top-down onto nature, forcing a human order onto the complexity of

¹²³ For the distinction between icons, indexes and symbols as types and aspects of signs, see Peirce's *Minute Logic* (that he wrote around 1901) in Bellucci (2020, 87).

¹²⁴ On the distinction between two kinds of conventionality see Millikan (1998).

the living world. In contrast, icons «could be said to map the diversity of the things that are there in the ecosystem, while indexes would map the patterns and linkages between these things» (Maran, 2020, 30). Of course, it is not symbols *per se* that are problematic, just as similarities *per se* are not problematic: «Symbols in discourses, sign systems or texts are not malevolent *per se*, but only if they become over-imposed so that they suppress iconic and indexical signs» (ibidem, 51). Similarly, drawing similarities, as in the hermetic style, becomes a problem only when it is done in a prevaricative way, that is, with indifference to the complexity of the world, of reality, or by denying the difference between signs (symbols in particular) and objects¹²⁵.

Now, if I didn't distinguish between functions of semiosis, types of signs, and styles of production, Maran's ecosemiotic claim that icons (and indexes) can be means for connecting cultures and ecosystems in a more motivated and eco-sustainable way would contradict what I been said so far about hermetic semiosis and the logic of equivalence. Notice that it would be a mistake, as a way of solution, to say that there are two types of excesses, one symbolic and one iconic. The degree of motivation of the signs discussed in ecosemiotics should not be confused with the act of presenting things that are not similar as similar (which would only be possible as an effect of the arbitrary presupposition of a symbol on the complexity of the world). The better solution is to admit that the pieces of semiotic theory mentioned so far apply to different levels of abstraction, and distinguish between types of signs and styles of semiotic production.

In sum, while icons, indexes and symbols, as aspects of signs or texts, must be present in every semiotic production (and the same goes for the categories of metaphor/metonymy and discrete/non-discrete coding systems), a text can be either hermetic/ideological *or* modus/non-ideological, depending on which function dominates. In turn, as types of signs, while icons, indexes and symbols are not, *per se*, hermetic or accurate, icons and indexes hold a more direct relationship to reality, contrary to symbols, as ecosemiotics teaches us.

3.3.1.4. How to tell ideology from non-ideology

It remains to be specified why the hermetic style, or allowing the equivalence function of language to dominate over difference, would be negative, ideological.

As mentioned, the most accredited theory in semiotics holds that ideology is the contemporary version of mythologies, and that the myth is the form in which ideologies are articulated (Barthes, 1957). We saw what myths are for Lévi-Strauss: for him, mythology is a part of language, but also a semiotics in its own right which, just like natural languages, is composed of constituent units, called mythèmes, which can be detected at the syntagmatic level. For Barthes, on the

¹²⁵ Maran himself connects excessive symbolicity and closed discourses: «Is not the symbolic dominance, in fact, the very mechanism present at the center of every autocratic or extremist ideology that strives to establish a closed symbolic space and to expand it by silencing everyone and everything around them?» (Maran, 2020, 51).

other hand, myths are a type of speech, while mythologies are second-order semiotic systems, whose form is connotation, i.e., a second semiotic function added to the first, semantic level of the denotation of signs:

That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth (Barthes, 1972 [1957], 113)

Barthes' theory of myth as a second-order semiotic system therefore has a dual purpose: on the one hand, it offers an explanation of ideology as a parasitic meaning that is added to the denotative level of language; and, on the other hand, the addition of meaning empties or distorts the original sign. Taking the pair of expression and content, the ideological connotation of myth makes the first, denotative pair of expression/content of a sign become a single plane of expression for a second sign function, to which the ideological content is associated. The following example by Barthes is well known:

A young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier» (Barthes, 1972 [1957], 115).

The plane of expression of the mythical system, whose ideological meaning is the "mixture of Frenchness and militariness", is itself a (hidden) sign composed of expression and content ("black soldier giving the French salute"). In this sense, the myth is «speech stolen and restored» (Barthes, 1972, 124), except that the restored meaning is very far from the stolen one. So the myth takes a sign and transforms it into a distorted signifier, into a plane of expression for an ideological content, narcotizing or hiding the denotative content.

The problematic aspect of Barthes' theory is that ideology can only be considered negative, as something to be unmasked, if the primary semiological system, to which the ideological connotative system is associated, can be considered non-ideological. If we consider, for example, /extremity/ and /superiority/ to be the denotative content of "head", and /the most important part of the body/ as its connotation, then anyone who talks about the former will be non-ideological, while anyone who talks about the latter will be potentially ideological (under conditions that I will explicit presently). However, as we saw in the previous

chapter with Eco, Peirce, and Quine, it is quite impossible to establish a strong dualism between denotations and connotations that is not merely convenient or relative to a context, since there are no minimal units that are not interpretable or not revisable. Hence, there are no contents we can a priori know to be non-ideological.

Barthes' example is particularly effective because he took an iconic sign (notoriously for Barthes visual texts are messages without code, see Barthes, 1964) for which it is easier to identify a presumed denotative content (limited to the accurate description of the plane of expression, "a black soldier is giving the French salute"). But if we consider the soldier as the plane of expression, and not as the first denotative content, then the "mixture of Frenchness and militariness" becomes the denotative, but no less ideological, meaning of the sign function at degree zero¹²⁶.

If myth/ideology does not take the form of connotation, because a clear distinction between the denotations and connotations of a sign is not possible, what remains? What remains is the act of making something seem natural when it is not or may not be. Putting aside the distinction between denotation and connotation, Barthes too believed that a myth is not defined (only) in relation to its content, but to its form:

Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones. Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes». (Barthes, 1972 [1957], 107)

According to Barthes, myths present their meaning as "natural", with the aim of making the hearer, who is unaware of the artifice, believe something to be true: the myth «is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system», (130). The myth «transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, history into nature» (1975, 222, my translation), as Barthes says in *Barthes par Roland Barthes*. Myths then are acts of simplification, the forcing of a meaning onto the object represented, a hypostatization of one meaning at the expense of other possibilities.

Eco in *A Theory* (1976) offered a similar definition of ideology that does without the denotation/connotation category. Ideological statements are those

based on a previous bias (either explicit or otherwise), i.e. the choice of a given circumstantial selection that attributes a certain property to a sememe, while concealing or ignoring other contradictory properties that are equally predictable of that sememe [...] while explicitly choosing one possible circumstantial selection as its main premise, [the ideological statement] does not make clear that there exists a contradictory premise or an apparently complementary premise which leads to contradictory conclusions». (Eco, 1976, 293)

¹²⁶ It is useful to recall that in structuralist semiotics, denotation is not the same thing as denotation as understood, for example, by Russell (1905) or as it is usually understood in the philosophy of language, i.e., as the extension or worldly referent of a sign. On the history of the meaning of "denotation" in semiotic theories, see Eco (1987; 1989b).

Ideological, then, is a text that presents as natural what is only contingent, as true what is hypothetical, as certain what is probable, and that conceals or negates some significations/alternative significations in general, rather than only those presumed to be denotatively the correct, non-ideological ones.

How do we know what is natural and what is not without distinguishing between primary denotative meanings and secondary, connotative, ideological meanings? In most cases, or in almost all cases that matter to us, we don't know. But this does not mean that, since we can never be certain of what is true, then every statement is ideological, every utterance always the product of a false consciousness.

Eco (1976) emphasized the fact that a sememe can and often does receive alternative or even mutually contradictory interpretations in a culture, and that ideological is an utterance that says something about something hiding the possible alternative interpretations. For this reason, he defines non-ideology a meta-semiotic statement «that showed the contradictory nature of its semantic space» (Eco, 1976, 293). But this is a dead end. On the one hand, there is no guarantee that a “meta-semiotic” statement cannot be ideological, i.e., be partial asserting, for example, that two things are contradictory even though they are not (or concealing alternative meta-interpretations according to which the two things are not contradictory). On the other, it must be doubted that partiality, in itself, is sufficient for a theory of ideology as false consciousness. What is missing for partiality to be something negative is the reference to a notion of truth as terminus a quo that the ideological discourse simplifies, hypostatizes, tames, and communicates in an untruthful manner, to the damage of the hearers.

In semiotics, the solution to this problem is often to say that it is the method that makes the difference. Of course, methods make a difference, and I don't mean to pit one thing against the other. But seeing things with method does not guarantee effectiveness, just as seeing things from the perspective of a system of ideas does not guarantee that it is the only or best way to see them. This is not a problem just for semiotics, but a typical problem of our time. Without bothering Feyerabend on the method, just think, for example, of the contemporary debates on the effectiveness of vaccines (which usually pit “science” against so-called no-vax) or on the truth of climate change (“science” vs. climate change deniers). In all these cases, we can say that the conflict concerns the clash between different methods, from which usually opposing “truths” are derived. But it's not possible, a priori, to oppose good methods to bad ones, effective to ineffective ones, or distinguish between ideological from non-ideological methods. At best, each of us should try and test every method (were it possible), and choose accordingly. In other words, the methods themselves, including the semiotic one, must stand up to the test of facts, or to the court of experience (this is also what Eco meant when he said to not believe in the meta-language and that semiotics is more a field than a discipline).

The best we can do is to distinguish between open and closed methods, as I proposed in 3.1.6. Leone (2023c) raised this issue, himself searching for the opposite of ideology, when he said that the problem of ideology has to do not

with biases, but with the “bios”, that is with life, with the world, and that therefore the opposite of ideology is not the neutral or objective discourse (or nothing could be non-ideological, since nothing is ever completely neutral), but poetry. Lévi-Strauss too considered poetry to be the opposite of myths, the difference between the two having to do with the opposition between difference and similarity: if in myth translation is never betrayal (in myths anything goes, we could say), in poetry, at the opposite extreme, there can be no translation that is not also betrayal (*traduttore, traditore*).

The problem with ideology then is that it «dampens the essential singularity of life, and not only of life understood as *zoe*, but of life as the semiotic force of the world [...] which ideology forces within the procrustean bed of a-singularity, of that which does not mean because it is *different* and unusual, but because it is *identical* to itself in time» (Leone, 2023c, 446, my italics). From this point of view (and contrary to what Jakobson seemed to suggest in relation to the poetic function of language), I would place poetry in the same group with science as open methods for knowing the world (as opposed to the presuppositionalist, closed methods of tenacity, authority, and the a priori method), which we have defined as scientific with Peirce/Lynch¹²⁷ above.

Ideology is negative because it presents signs as identical to their objects which, as seen, is a trait of untruthfulness, because it communicates something as certainly true, it presupposes a truth (to which everything is forced to resemble by the logic of equivalence), denying the hearer a more humble, accurate, and sincere communication, thus preventing them from actively evaluating the truth of the statement for themselves. Denying or hiding alternative theories is not problematic because there cannot be true theories, or because nature does not exist, but because it is not truthful to sell something as “natural”, as certainly true, denying the possibility of being wrong (against the values of humility, accuracy, and sincerity).

Not only that. One is judged ideological when he/she does not mention alternative theories *when it is relevant*. And it is relevant when, by not mentioning them, the speaker is considered insincere and inaccurate (one is not asked to mention all alternatives all the time, which would be impossible anyway). And it is not just a matter of showing possible contradictions (although this is a necessary trait), but more generally of saying or implying that it’s always possible to be wrong.

Falsity and truth re, in all this, traits of the discourse or of the “consciousness” of the speaker, not the meaning of statements. Ideology is not the discourse that says the false, and non-ideology is not the discourse that tells the truth. On the

¹²⁷ This conclusion will make turn up the nose of those who do not consider poetry, and art in general, as tools for understanding the world, and that therefore cannot to be distinguished between truthful and untruthful. Personally, I would agree with distinguishing between natural and artificial texts, as I will do in 3.3.2.2.; but I believe that truthfulness is also present in artificial texts, even if perhaps less urgent to analyse. On art as continuous with the sciences, see Noë (2015).

contrary, I have said that thinking one knows the truth and can easily tell it contradicts the value of semiotic humility, it goes against the realist notion of truth as what is independent of signs. Precisely because it is independent, one cannot be certain. Presenting something as natural is ideological not because the world does not exist (if it did not exist, there would be no difference between myths and non-myths). But it is so because it is an expression of a false consciousness (better, of an untruthful attitude) that reduces and simplifies the complexity of the world, or of the truth as the terminus a quo of semiosis.

A corollary of this approach is that the mythologist is no longer someone who can always know how to debunk myths by distinguishing the contingent from the true (by consulting a dictionary). We can all be wrong. Instead, the tools available to the semiotician are of a different kind: not the ability to distinguish between primary and secondary meanings (denotations and connotations), but the application of what in the previous chapter I called the semiotic method. The semiotician distinguishes between signs and the world, therefore he/she believes that signs can always be wrong, and that presenting something as true is not truthful, is a sign of indifference toward truth as what is independent of our will. The semiotics of ideology is a science of forms that distinguishes between ideological from non-ideological texts, but this science cannot be based on the distinction between denotations and connotations anymore, instead it should be based on the distinction between open and closed.

3.3.1.5. The definition of the open and the closed

Eco (1990a; 1990b) provided a list of traits of the hermetic rationality¹²⁸. However, in that context he was mainly concerned with connecting the hermetic style with deconstructionist theories of infinite semiosis. Therefore, he was privileging

¹²⁸ The following: «a) a text is an open universe where the interpreter can discover infinite connections; b) language does not serve to grasp a single, pre-existing meaning (such as the author's intention); that is, the duty of interpretive discourse is to show that what can be spoken of is only the coincidence of opposites; c) language reflects the inadequacy of thought [...]; d) any text that claims to assert something unique is an aborted universe; e) the original sin of language [...] is redeemed, however, by a Pneumatic Reader [who knows how to read the truth behind the signs]; f) everyone, however, can become an Elect, provided they dare to superimpose their own intention as a reader on the unattainable and lost intention of the author [and] every reader can become a Superman who understands the only truth; g) to save the text [...] the reader must suspect that every line hides a secret, that words do not say but rather hint at the unsaid that they mask [...]; h) the chosen one is the one who understands that the true meaning of a text is its emptiness; i) semiotics is a conspiracy of those who want us to believe that language serves to communicate thought» (Eco, 1990a, 73–74, my translation). It should be noted that while Eco was mainly concerned with the side of interpretations, so far I've been mainly talking about sign productions instead (but according to pragmatist semiotics every interpretation already is a kind of semiotic production, as the meaning of a sign is its translation into another sign called its interpretant).

For a narrative representation of the hermetic rationality at work see also Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988a; 1989a).

the side of interpretation in his reasoning, while here I'm more interested in the side of production of a text. In my case, I intend to connect the hermetic style with the closed discourse as a semiotic form. The difference is that while theorists of deconstruction and infinite semiosis explicitly theorized that «a text is an open universe where the interpreter can discover infinite connections» and that everything is similar to anything, without distinguishing between degrees of similarities (and relevance of a similarity), in the case of closed discourses these traits are hidden, concealed.

My proposal is then to consider open/closed as the transposition of the semiotic styles of modus and hermetic semiosis, respectively, in the political sphere. Closed discourses adopt the hermetic semiotic style, typical of myths, while still claiming to care for the truth. That is, contrary to myths and deconstructionism, they conceal that they are using the hermetic style of production (it's this concealment, in turn, the specific trait of ideology as false consciousness, as we saw).

The opposition between the open and the closed that I want to outline concerns a particular interpretation of Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy. For Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy were two different ways of development of a discourse: «one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity» (Jakobson, 1971, 110). Jakobson derived this opposition from the two semiotic operations for the production of a sign, selection (from a set of signs available in a code or system) and combination (of the selected signs in a sentence), respectively. He further derived them from the study of the corresponding aphasic disorders, which Jakobson called the similarity disorder and the contiguity disorder, respectively. What Jakobson called the metaphoric way thus concerns the substitution of one sign for another by analogy or similarity, while the metonymic way operates indexically, substituting or, rather, associating one sign with another contiguous sign.

For Jakobson, aphasic disorders concern the inability to select between similar/neighbors signs on the paradigmatic axis or the inability to combine signs on the syntagmatic axis («metaphor is alien to the similarity disorder, and metonymy to the contiguity disorder» Jakobson, 1971, 109). In light of the terminology I used so far, for the category of open and closed texts when I say that the metaphorical way dominates I do not mean a lack of the faculty of similarity (nor a lack of the faculty of contiguity, for that matter), but an excess of that faculty. In particular, the closed style is the tendency to present a sign as identical to its object, substituting the former for the latter, narcotizing the differences. In turn, the open style is the tendency to present a sign as different from its object, co-localizing sign and object but magnifying the differences between the two.

In other words, moving from work of arts or myths to the distinction between two forms or styles of political discourse, the distinction between metaphorical/hermetic style and metonymic/modus style no longer concerns (only) the substitution of signs with other signs, but more generally the substitution of signs with their objects. It concerns the way a sign is presented as standing for its object. That is, it concerns the way signs are presented: whether as the same as, or

certainly true of, their objects (closure, equivalence); or hypothesis, as tentative representations, as different from their objects (openness, difference).

Jakobson put it very effectively when he distinguished between producing signs to pose equations (first signs and then similarities) and posing equations to produce signs (first similarities, then signs). In my terms, the difference is between presupposing a truth, from which then obtain as many other truths as one wishes proceeding by similarity and accumulation (and thus forcing the posited truth onto the world, including contradictory propositions), and positing hypotheses (signs) from which one can then eventually reach the truth.

As far as the sign-object relationship is concerned, therefore, the main characteristic of closed texts is that they present signs as equal to their objects, as certainties (as natural, as Barthes would have said). The closed style is a semiotic ideology (this time in the sense of a system of ideas) that presupposes a metaphysics of universal sympathy, as Eco called it, where not only do all signs resemble each other, but all signs can resemble and refer to the same truth. The hermetic style claims to discover similarities «which in reality they themselves *establish* through complex rhetorical operations» (Eco, 1990a, 90, my translation). We have further seen Lévi-Strauss' point about inversion: since everything is potentially similar to everything else, anything becomes interchangeable and confusable (the cause can be adduced as proof for the effect, but also the effect for the cause).

The open style, in turn, presupposes a different metaphysics, according to which which things are similar can only be said a posteriori and fallibly.

Table 3. Semiotic categories for the definition of the open and the closed.

	Functions of semiosis	Aspects of signs	Types of signs used/to use	Styles of production	Truthfulness
Open, non-ideological	Metaphor (or continuous system) + metonymy (discrete)	Index + icon	Symbols	Hermetic style, logic of equivalence	Non-indifferent to the values of truth
Closed, ideological	Metaphor (or continuous system) + metonymy (discrete)	Index + icon	Indexes and icons	Modus style, logic of difference	Indifferent to truth

Clearly, the two further imply two different notions of truth. Closed texts imply a notion of truth as the terminus ad quem of signs. Since the truth involved in this political style is a truth that is already given, already known (or at best hidden behind signs that, if interpreted correctly, can reveal it) and presupposed to the signs, there is no point in distinguishing between signs and objects (what I so far called semiotic humility). Closed text do present hypotheses to be tested, but combine a series of signs in a way as to represent the already known truth.

Open texts, instead, imply a notion of truth as the terminus a quo of semiosis, which is why the logic of difference, and the corresponding value of semiotic humility are preferred over certainties and the logic of equivalence.

To sum up. I proposed to equate non-ideology and ideology (in the sense of non-false and false consciousness) and open and closed, respectively, in order to avoid confusion with the other meanings of “ideology”. I then introduced a series of categories for the definition of the open and the closed, drawing on semiotic literature on ideology. At the same time, I also proposed to conceive of closed and open (and therefore ideology and non-ideology) as semiotic styles that ignore the truth and that do not ignore it, respectively. In this way, we also find an answer to the question of what would be wrong with the hermetic rationality, or with producing signs following the logic of equivalence. The answer is that this is done at the expense of the complexity of the world. The hermetic style means presenting certain signs as equal to their objects, as perfectly corresponding to the point of being confused with them, therefore as certainties from which the closed text proceeds with the rest of the discourse – in short, it is a Truth-pre-suppositionalist style. This, in turn, implies a lack of care for the values of truthfulness, and explains why it is considered something negative: presenting something as certainly true implies the self-attribution contradiction, it violates the value of semiotic humility (that states: remember what you say is fallible; signs are different from their objects), and it is prevaricative towards the hearer, who is denied a sincere and accurate communication. Instead, the open style, proceeding by difference, and therefore presenting signs as different from their objects (as hypotheses, premises that can always fail), is the style that respects the values of truthfulness.

3.3.2. Open and closed as political semiotic forms

I’ll introduce now political semiotics as a second semiotic resource for the definition of the open and the closed. So far, I have defined the open style as the non-ideological semiotic style that presents the signs it uses as different from their objects, while the closed style as the ideological style that presents the signs it uses as equal to their objects. In this way, I substantiated my claim that open texts respect the values of truthfulness, while closed texts do not.

As mentioned, there is nothing wrong with producing texts by the logic of equivalence as long as this is done in a truthful manner. The problematic part is when the hermetic/equivalence semiotic style is used to confuse, deceive, or

spread falsehoods (whether the disseminator is aware of it or not), leading the hearer to believe something is certainly true (when it may not be).

In passing, I mentioned that a text can be defined open or closed based on context, i.e., when a text proceeds by the logic of equivalence *and* claims to be saying something true about the current world. In other words, the analysis of truthfulness, and the distinction between open and closed, is relevant for a certain type of texts only, which is why it is relevant now to introduce political semiotics.

3.3.2.1. On political semiotics

Political semiotics is a branch of applied semiotics that studies the public use of signs and sign productions related to topics such as living together, the organization of states, and anything that is of public interest or concern to a community (cf. Cosenza, 2018; 2020; Selg and Ventsel, 2022). Often the scope of political semiotics is set by identifying an actor whose semiotic productions are of particular interest. For van Dijk (2008), for example, the main interest of what he calls “critical linguistics” is the study of how, through discourse, «power and especially power abuse are reproduced in society» (2008, vii). Selg and Ventsel share the same interest, that they frame in Lotmanian terms saying that a crucial task for political semiotics is «explaining how the center is constructed for a system of meaning» (2022, 2). Here “the center”, as opposed to the periphery of a semiosphere, or of a system of meaning, means the body of beliefs that underlie a given power structure and occupy not only a central position in the semiosphere, but also an apex position in the hierarchy of beliefs held to be true in a community, useful for the maintenance of the political status quo. In this sense, central to the study of political discourse is also the analysis of ideology as false consciousness (Lorusso, 2015, 32; Lorusso and Sedda, 2023) and of hegemony (Selg and Ventsel, 2010).

This perspective on the power of signs to reproduce the status quo indicates that political semiotics is not limited to the study of the effects of meaning of political discourses, but considers also the practical consequences of the public use of signs. In Selg and Ventsel’s (2022) terms, political semiotics is not only the semiotics of political discourses, but the study of semiosis *from a political point of view*.

Using Dewey and Bentley’s (1949) terminology, they distinguish between selfactional, interactional and transactional approaches to political semiotics, associating their relational approach with Dewey and Bentley’s concept of transaction. The self-actional view sees things as «acting in their own powers» (Dewey and Bentley, 1949, 108). This approach studies things, in a very general sense (Dewey and Bentley’s examples range from physics to religion to philosophy), individually and with no distinction between things and relations, nature and culture, or objects of knowledge and knowledge, «thus, substances move independently of other substances» (Selg and Ventsel, 2022, 23). The inter-actional view, in turn, sees thing as «balanced against thing in causal interconnection» (Dewey and Bentley, 1949, 132). While this approach is what allowed the scientific

revolution to take place, liberating inquiry from the self-actional view of the world, according to Dewey and Bentley the inter-actional approach separates things, «for convenience of study» (1949, 133), into many spheres posed as in causal interaction between each other but that cannot interact (Dewey's favorite example being the problem of Cartesian mind-body dualism). This is why Selg and Ventsel say that both self-action and inter-action are forms of substantialism: in both cases «entities remain fixed and unchanged [...] each independent of the existence of the others» (Selg and Ventsel, 2022, 25). In the first case, because no relation is conceived between things; in the second, because things pre-exist and, importantly, cannot be affected by the relations they take part of. Instead, the trans-actional view starts from relations and the way relations affect things, which is why Selg and Ventsel say that the transactional (or relational) approach in political semiotics considers the semiotic relations that things are engaged in as constitutive of the terms involved, and not just causal.

Importantly, for Dewey and Bentley the notion of transaction also served to characterize their conception of the epistemological relation between knowing subjects and known objects. For them, knowing objects are neither Kantian, absolutely unknowable things-in-themselves, nor internal inventions of the mind. Instead, knowers and knowns are part of the same reality¹²⁹ (in contemporary terms, Dewey and Bentley's theory amounts to a form of experiential externalism and non-reductive naturalism¹³⁰). Hence, when it comes to signs and their objects, the notion of constitution should be understood as meaning that the relation between signs and the world should not be seen as a dualism, where the relations (e. g. relation of representation) do not and cannot affect the terms of the relation. Instead, for the transactional approach both the world can change the signs we use and the signs we use can affect and change the world. Both what we say about the world and how we say it produce effects on the world itself.

The systematic study of the transactions between signs and the world is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is possible to offer a partial typology as a working tool (see also Leone, 2024b, 53 on kinds of semiotic agencies). The signs we use reflect beliefs that guide our actions, this is a shared assumption both in linguistics and in philosophy of mind that goes back to Peirce's theory according to which beliefs are habits of conduct and the practical consequences of a sign the most complete conception of its meaning (according to Peirce's pragmatic maxim, see Peirce, 1978, 132; CP 5.9). So, a first kind of effect has to do with the fact that signs can have also actions as their meanings. According to Peirce a sign has, in addition to an immediate interpretant, «which is the interpretant as it is revealed in the right understanding of the Sign itself, and is ordinarily called the

¹²⁹ «What we call “transaction” [...] is, therefore, in technical expression, neither to be understood as if it “existed” apart from any observation, nor as if it were a manner of observing “existing in a man's head” in presumed independence of what is observed» (Dewey and Bentley, 1949, 131).

¹³⁰ Which, indeed, usually present Dewey's pragmatism as a predecessor, see Heft (2001); Chemero (2009).

meaning of the sign», also a dynamic interpretant «which is the actual effect which the Sign, as a Sign, really determines» (CP 4. 536), as the notion of sign is taken «in so broad a sense that the interpretant of it is not a thought, but an action or experience» (CP 8.332). For example, imperatives or directives are a type of signs with an explicit dynamic interpretant (Peirce's own example is the command "Ground arms!" whose meaning is not only the state of affairs desired by the speaker, but also the subsequent action of the hearers of the command). But all signs can have dynamic interpretants of some kind. Marcel Danesi (2023, 4; 2025, 19) has proposed to call this effect of signs the Korzybski effect, after the Polish-American scholar Alfred Korzybski who, the anecdote wants, during a lecture offered biscuits to his students only to reveal, after they had eaten them, that they were eating dog biscuits. The immediate change in reaction shows that different signs (the lie and the dog biscuit label, respectively) «bring about cognitive and behavioral consequences» (Danesi, 2023, 4; cf. also Di Caterino, 2026).

Closely related to the first, a second kind of effect concerns the fact that our actions, in turn, modify the world. Our reactions to signs affects the world. An example of this power of signs is what Eco called the power of falsehoods (2004 [1993b]), a dramatic example being that of the *Protocols of the Elder Saviors of Zion* which, despite clearly being a forged text fabricated by the Russian secret police in the early 20th century, helped determine the second world war and its horrors. Importantly, Eco's idea was not that the *Protocols* created a social reality where the conspiracy theory that all wars and crisis where due to a small religious group of conspirators was true. Eco's point was that false signs, just like true signs, can affect the world (just like, at the microlevel, both the false and the true caused different reactions in the students in the Korzybski effect example).

This clarification is relevant because a third effect of signs is what still Umberto Eco called negative realism (2015)¹³¹. Believing false things can lead to bump one's nose against reality. In the dog biscuit example, when students discover the truth, they get grossed out; if I leave the house without taking the umbrella because I act under the belief that it is not raining outside, but it is raining outside, I simply end up getting wet. The problem is that some falsehoods can last for a long time before they are dismissed for what they are. The whole debate about conspiracy theories, as we shall see below, shows that many false beliefs are not easy to disarm, especially when the "bumping of the nose against

¹³¹ The concept of negative realism allows me to reiterate an important point that underlies all of my research, and which I have repeatedly expressed with regard to truth (particularly in 2.3.): it is not necessary to commit to a specific theory of truth in order to study truthfulness in language, even though truthfulness implies a minimal notion of truth as what is independent of what we believe. The same applies to the question of realism: it is not necessary to commit to a specific metaphysics or to an orderly structured reality that makes our statements/beliefs true (so-called truthmakers, see Stjernfelt, 2020). The notion of negative realism does not require such a commitment. Williams (2002; 137) expressed the same idea with the notion of resistance to one's will, which he derives precisely from a reflection on the limits of our desire and on the concept of possible alternatives (for a something to be alternative, it must be alternative to something).

reality”, instead of being a possible source of doubt, is instead tamed as coherent with the theory. Again, in the biscuit example the students believe the truth because they have all the sufficient signs to believe it (the flavor itself, the trust, despite everything, in the Professor, the absence of any reason or hint that the Professor might be doing the double-double, etc.), but this is, unfortunately, an increasingly rare situation today, when phenomena such as disinformation, AI recommendations, digital manipulation of images, etc. contribute to never dissolving the belief in false theories.

As the examples show, reflecting on the effects of signs on reality leads very spontaneously to reflecting also on the difference between having true beliefs and having false beliefs. But while semiotics need not concern with the problem of assigning truth values to beliefs or utterances, if one accepts that having true beliefs is better than having false beliefs (what we called a truism about truth), then it is important to distinguish between political texts that try to tell the truth from texts that are instead indifferent to this value (in turn, if there were no practical difference between having a true belief and a false belief, then the study of truthfulness in semiotics would also not be important).

For now, the result is that the “political” in “political semiotics” stands for a point of view rather than an object of study of semiotics, a point of view that considers signs as part of the reality they represent and as having effects on it (transactions).

Apart from metaphysical and epistemological considerations, the distinction between self-action, inter-action and trans-action was seen as a distinction in «procedures of inquiry» (131) by Dewey and Bentley. Selg and Ventsel too conceive the transactional approach a way of seeing reality from a social and political perspective. Although in different forms and degrees, all texts have, or can have, a political-public dimension in this sense. As Orwell said, «there’s no keeping out of politics [...] all issues are political issues» (1946; see also Lynch, 2025, 49). See also Robin Lakoff (1990, 17), one of the first linguists to systematically study language from a political point of view:

We are always involved in persuasion, in trying to get another person to see the world or some piece of it our way, and therefore to act as we would like them to act. If we succeed, we have power [...] From the most intimate tête-à-tête (micropolitics) to a speech aimed at millions (macropolitics), the aims are the same, and the techniques closely related.

From this perspective, persuasion, just like manipulation in Greimassian semiotics, aims not only at transforming the beliefs of the interlocutor, but also at making him/her do something. In a sense, this whole chapter is devoted to distinguishing between different ways of persuading people, that is between truthful and untruthful ways. In any case, I take this statement by Lakoff to indicate that it is possible to study any sign production from a political perspective.

That everything can be studied politically doesn’t mean, however, that it’s interesting to study any text in this way.

3.3.2.2. On natural and artificial texts

While at the level of the system all signs can be analyzed from a political perspective, at the pragmatic level a distinction must be made between texts or utterances that aim at saying something about the actual world and texts or utterances that instead refer to invented, fictional worlds.

This distinction does not always play an explicit role in semiotic theories. In the Greimasian tradition, the tendency is rather to posit an equivalence between the two types of text, in order to show how in both cases the fundamental semiotic mechanism is the narrative organization of meaning, bracketing the relations between texts and reality. A stronger argument against the distinction can be found in Searle (1975): since fictional texts present, as assertions, the same characteristics of any assertion, then it is not possible to distinguish between the two types of speech acts, the only difference concerning not linguistics, but the speaker's intentions (in one case one is committed to the truth of what is asserted, while in the other she is not). Consequently, the distinction between asserting and pretending would thus concern phenomenology or the theory of social cognition, not semiotics.

Eco (1979, 120), quoting van Dijk's (1974) distinction between natural and artificial narratives, argued instead in favor of the possibility to semiotically distinguish between the two. Recalling the distinction between natural and artificial languages, van Dijk's distinction identifies different pragmatic conditions (in Grice's sense) for each type of narrative, the main one being that while natural narratives are expected to say something true, artificial narratives don't have to meet this pragmatic condition. Natural narratives are «those narratives which occur in our normal, everyday conversation, in which we tell each other our personal experiences». Artificial narratives «have a “constructed” nature and occur in specific “story-telling” contexts» (van Dijk, 1974, 285; being interested in the explanation of narratives as speech acts, in the paper van Dijk distinguishes between narratives and assertions, even though narratives may contain assertions which could themselves be distinguished between natural and artificial; here I will just use “natural texts” and “artificial texts”¹³²).

However, Eco himself did not elaborate on the distinction, choosing to focus on the similarities between the two types of texts rather than their differences, advancing a general model of text analysis that would work for both. But recognizing similarities between two phenomena is just as important as establishing their differences. Now, there can be specific co-textual and contextual signs that mark one case from the other, that is, when a text is to be interpreted as natural or as artificial (van Dijk makes the example of the introductory formula “once upon a time” for artificial narratives). However much we may concede that there may be instances of ambiguity or misunderstandings (when one for example jokes, or pretends, but is taken seriously, or vice versa), nothing detracts from the fact that there is a difference between the two types of texts and that we can often catch it, if not first try at least along the interaction. At the textual level, the fundamental

¹³² Following semiotics' extensive notion of text, see Lotman (1988).

difference between the two types of texts is that they construct two different model readers. In the case of artificial texts the reader is required to suspend disbelief and bracket that what is being said is not how things actually are, while in natural texts the reader must interpret what he or she is told as true not of a possible, fictional world, but of the actual world. Moreover, on the sender's side, in the case of natural texts asserting something, or making someone believe something as true, means taking the responsibility for what is said.

Other differences can be found. For example, Guido Ferraro (2019) identified two alternative narrative architectures to the canonical Greimassian narrative scheme. Of these, Gamma class narratives (as opposed to Alpha and Beta narratives), in particular, are those that enact «some form of truth-seeking» (Ferraro, 2019, 112, my translation)¹³³. In Gamma narratives, the performance of the Subject is not oriented toward changing himself or the state of things, but “only” toward understanding what has already happened (in the case of detective stories, which Ferraro examines as an example of Gamma narratives, this understanding occurs through the unmasking of an AntiSubject, but Ferraro himself says that, more generally, Gamma narratives are about the resolution of uncertainty, not unlike Peirce's theory of doubt). Importantly, significant traits of these texts are: the implicit responsibility of the enunciator, the involvement of the receivers of the narrative, and a notion of “truth” as something external to the Subject's beliefs and as something that must be, fallibly, attained, found.

The two notions of natural texts and Gamma narratives are partly perpendicular to each other, however similar. One could either think of Ferraro's Gamma narratives as divisible between natural and artificial (in order to distinguish, for example, between detective novels and scientific or journalistic articles, respectively), or conceive van Dijk's distinction as superordinate with respect to Alpha, Beta, and Gamma architectures (understanding the latter as different modes or styles in the production of natural and artificial texts). What I am interested in here is to distinguish, more generally, between texts that are about the world, and thus engage in truth-telling, and texts that instead pretend or talk about an alternative fictional world and thus enter into a different relation to truth, both pragmatically and in terms of their narrative architecture (on truth in fictional texts, see Santangelo, 2012).

The analysis of truthfulness as a semiotic form is primarily a problem for political semiotics and for the study of natural texts. In the case of natural texts, in other words, it is relevant to study how signs relate to the world and, being defined as signs that want to say something true, it is for natural or political texts that it is relevant to analyze the ways in which they do so.

¹³³ While Alpha narratives (the canonical Greimassian narrative architecture) focus on one or more Subjects and their relationship to a value system, which may change in the narrative through the conjunction/disjunction with an object of value; and Beta narratives concern not so much the position of a Subject in relation to a value system, but the value system itself, or the different ways in which the world can be valorized, given order to and semiotized, as in myths or in many science fiction narratives that reflect on the origin of the world or alternative orders the world might have.

3.3.2.3. On problems and “problems”

One of Selg and Ventsel’s most interesting contributions is the introduction into semiotics of the notion of political problem and the typology that distinguishes problems into simple, complex, non-problems, and wicked problems (Selg and Ventsel, 2020, 55).

As presented, the typology distinguishes between kinds of agreement/disagreement. Simple problems are those where the parties affected agree both on the definition of the problem and the possible solution. Problems are complex, in turn, when the parties agree on the definition of the problem, but not on the solution. Importantly, Selg and Ventsel say that although the disagreement is substantial, complex problems «are by their nature solvable», and their difference from simple problems is «quantitative, not qualitative» (2020, 57). Finally, wicked problems are those where the parties don’t agree on the definition nor on the solution to the problem, while non-problems concern the ideological situation where two or more parties agree on a ready-made, one-size-fits-all solution even though they don’t share the same definition of the problem.

Wicked problems in particular are a privileged object of interest for the political semiotician (see also Selg et al. 2023) given that the disagreement is not substantial in these cases, but semiotic, that is it’s related to differences in the ideologies, cultures, systems of meaning that determine the differences in interpretation of the problem (while non-problems are more about indifference toward the problem, with wicked problems there is the clash between two different ways of representing the problem).

Now, Selg and Ventsel do not explicitly distinguish between problems and “problems”, that is, between how problems are regardless of how they are presented in discourse, and “problems”, with quotation marks, how problems are presented in discourse. They stress in several places that their political semiotics studies “the political world itself” (e.g. Selg et al, 2023, 2), and that its purpose is to offer an explanation of the constitution, in communication, of power relations, governance, and democracy in a given culture (Selg and Ventsel, 2022, 2). From this perspective, discourse becomes «the primary terrain of objectivity as such and the problem of the constitution of social reality becomes the problem of the constitution of *discourse*» (Selg and Ventsel, 2023, 2; see also Laclau, 2005, 68). However, the distinction between problems and “problems” is legitimate, as the authors themselves acknowledge. Moreover, it is necessary for the study of truthfulness.

Consider the following example of disagreement on a current political issue in Italy, concerning the citizenship law. This is how the Italian journalist Michele Serra framed the problem in a recent newsletter (the English translation is mine)¹³⁴:

¹³⁴ See <https://www.ilpost.it/ok-boomer/fare-gli-italiani-e-le-italiane/>.

In the coming weeks, the referendum aimed at shortening the time for granting citizenship will bring back to the forefront the now decades-old debate on immigration and related problems [...] Like many political debates of the present, it is not a debate [...] The issue touches deeply different worldviews [...] that not even the most patient and skillful negotiator could yield a shared “migration plan” that could be subscribed to, if not by all political parties, at least by a large majority. I mean: this is not an issue, that of so-called “national identity,” that allows for “technical” solutions. It is an ideological and cultural issue that grants no respite, and perhaps does not even provide it [...]

Prima facie, it clearly seems a wicked problem precisely in the sense just defined, since the parties do not agree on either the definition of the problem nor the solution. Serra even reaches the conclusion that the problem in question has no solution, which is precisely one of the characteristics of wicked problems that Selg and Ventsel consider definitional¹³⁵. But what exactly is the problem, the management of migration flows in Italy, or the disagreement between the two sides? Note that in the example, the parties in question do not pose the problem as wicked. According to Serra, the problem is that two opposing conceptions of what a nation is are clashing: «the very concept of nation, of Italy, of ‘national identity’, is radically different depending on whether one considers it as a well-defined, and essentially unchanging, ethno-cultural garrison, or a changing, permeable community, completely indifferent to its ethnic and religious composition and attentive only to the rules of concitizenship» (my translation). For one side of the dispute, the problem of managing migration flows is a simple or complex problem; for the other, it is not even a problem (deproblematization). We might even say that the sides implicitly agree that the problem is not wicked. What this seems to imply is that it is rather their disagreement, regardless of who is right, that is a wicked problem. But then we need to distinguish between the types of political disagreement that can occur between two disputing parties and the *styles of positioning a problem* in discourse.

In the example we have (a) the political problem of managing migration flows; (b) the disagreement between the two sides (a wicked problem) on how to manage the problem; and (c) the respective ways of posing the political problem in their discourse (as a “simple” or as a “non-problem”, respectively; in this case we are talking about the problem of migration flows in Italy, but the sides may also disagree on the characterization of their dispute itself).

In our example, Selg and Ventsel would consider both the disagreement and the problem on which the parties disagree to be wicked, which is why the parties cannot agree on a solution (there is no solution) and both cannot be wrong. But if

¹³⁵ Selg and Ventsel quote Peters’ (2017, 388) list of properties: wicked problems are 1) difficult to define; 2) have no stopping rule; 3) their solutions are not good or false, but good or bad; 4) don’t have an ultimate test for the solutions; 5) their attempted solutions have effects that may not be reversible; 6) they don’t have clear solutions; 7) they are unique; 8) can be the symptom of another wicked problem; 9) they have always multiple explanations; 10) the policy-maker has no right to be wrong.

a distinction is made between problems and “problems”, then nothing precludes that when someone poses or describes a problem as a “wicked problem” he cannot be wrong, just as much as someone can be wrong in posing a problem as “simple”.

Nothing precludes, further, that there may be ontologically wicked problems, that is problems that have neither a clear definition nor a clear solution, regardless of one’s views of them. So understood wicked problems are more of the nature of Gabriel Marcel’s (1952) mysteries (as opposed to problems, which can have a solution; see also Chomsky, 1976). But if we stick to the definition of wicked problems as a type of disagreement between two parties in dispute (when the parties disagree both on the problem and on the solutions), wicked problems pose no more problems for the semiotician than the other types of agreement/disagreement¹³⁶. The elegance of the distinction is that it allows to identify two kinds of contributions that semiotics brings to the analysis of political discourses: i) the explanation of political disagreements, distinguishing between simple, complex, non-problems and wicked problems (e.g. Campana Piva, 2024); ii) the analysis of different styles of *problematization*, that is, different ways of posing

¹³⁶ The distinction between problems and “problems” is the political version of the distinction between signs and objects made in 2.3.2. But it also concerns the question of the nature of semiotic problems. If there were no distinction between problems and “problems”, then it would only be an internal question within the framework chosen by the semiotician of analysis what is true, hence the semiotician could not be wrong – but this would apply to all types of problems, not just wicked ones. Recently, Leone (2024b) posed the problem in the most sincere and accurate (truthful!) way: when the semiotician studies a phenomenon, why does he study that particular phenomenon?

The semiotic analyst must deal with the even more paralyzing question of the representativeness of the analytical corpus. In simpler words: if culture is a semiosphere and if its internal dynamics supposedly work exactly like those of language, then how can the cultural semiotician select a point of departure of the analysis? (Leone, 2024b, 35)

From here, Leone develops his Lotmanian theory of the fractal nature of cultures (diagrammatic isomorphism of texts and cultures), but there is also another problem: what prevents the semiotician’s tools from being, in turn, determined by a culture y and, therefore, unsuitable for studying other cultures? The usual answer is that semiotics has a method based on a metalanguage that is at a higher level than the cultures it studies, and is therefore capable of studying those cultures. This solution was possible in the sense of generativism and the idea that there were semantic and syntactic universals in language, common to all languages and cultures, from which all languages and cultures are then generated through composition and complexification. However, after the *Anti-porphyry*, this solution is no longer viable: there is no metaphysical difference between the elements of a language and the metalanguage of semiotics, just as there are no simple or primitive linguistic concepts that are different from or that underlie the elements of the languages and signs we use manifestly (in short, there is no distinction, except a purely instrumental one, between deep and surface levels). A more immediate, and almost commonsensical, answer is then that the semiotician simply puts forward a hypothesis, using a part of the language to study another, which the community will then judge how useful it is, what truths can be obtained from it or whether it does hold or not, in the hope of gradually coming closer to understanding culture x.

“problems” in discourse¹³⁷. Both (i-ii), in turn, would provide the semiotician useful tools for the analysis of open and closed texts.

3.3.2.4. Open and closed as political forms

Selg and Ventsel distinguish, starting from Jakobson’s six functions of language (1960), between six political semiotic styles, each one associated with a style of problematization (Selg and Ventsel, 2020, 178; Selg, 2021). They are:

- Radical Democracy (which they also call Agonistic, after Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of democracy): here the metalingual function of language prevails, as communication is oriented toward the code, or in political terms toward discussing the underlying values, principles and aims of the community;
- Deliberative Democracy: here the public code is given, so the political discussion focuses on the problems themselves, and the referential function prevails (orientation toward the context of discourse): the parties are depicted as equal and legitimate voices in the solution of the problem;
- Clientelist Democracy: the conative function prevails, and the focus turns toward the addressee of communication, often depicted as a passive receiver of orders and policies (less importance is given to the problems and to the context of the problem);
- Democratic Populism: the prevalence of the poetic function leads to a focus on the messages that are being sent, opposing “good” vs “bad” policies almost independently of the problems;
- Authoritarian Populism: de-problematization here goes a step forward, as the communication style is more oriented toward keeping active the contact with the addressee (depicting an “us” vs “them” situation), independently of both problem and message; the phatic function prevails;
- Totalitarian populism: here, the appeal to emotions (euphoric or dysphoric) and the emotive function prevails, negating or delegitimizing any alternative position from that of the addresser (depicting a “People-as-one” situation).

The typology is a complexification of the two aspects of language of metaphor and metonymy (Jakobson, 1971) applied to the political discourse, and along the categories of democratization/de-democratization and problematization/de-problematization¹³⁸. The theory, that Selg and Ventsel call political form analysis, is

¹³⁷ Importantly, the distinction allows also to include the semiotician in the picture. When semioticians do (a) they are describing a given problem x as a “problem” of some kind. In doing so, he can always be wrong in his analysis.

¹³⁸ Respectively: wicked problematization for Radical Democracy; complex problematization for Deliberative Democracy; simple problematization for Clientelist Democracy; de-problematization through cynicism for Democratic Populism; de-problematization through stoicism for Authoritarian Populism; and de-problematization through constructing threats for Totalitarian Populism (Selg, 2021, 11).

meant to describe different semiotic forms, or styles, in political communication – that is, the theory does not exclude that an authoritarian content or policy could be conveyed in a deliberative democratic form, nor that a democratic content could not be conveyed in a totalitarian populist form (following the Deweyan principle that it is possible to study things separately even if they are not separate; in this case, the study of semiotic forms separately from the contents conveyed).

Accordingly, it is a defining feature of semiotics, and particularly of cultural semiotics, the identification of invariants in semiotic forms *and* their correlation to contents. To temporarily bracket the content plane of political texts serves as an exercise in abstraction to pose the problem of political forms regardless of the topic being discussed. Selg and Ventsel, as seen, specifically want to identify totalitarian populist, authoritarian populist, etc. as political forms regardless of whether the contents are totalitarian, authoritarian, etc. Then, I think that there could also be phenomena of semiotic magnetism, whereby certain contents attract, or afford, one style more than another, which is a further semiotic hypothesis (following another Deweyan principle, according to which it's possible to study together things that are conventionally seen as separate, Dewey and Bentley, 1949, 120). But if this exercise is interesting, it's because it is possible to correlate styles and forms to contents of a different kind, which pragmatically we call the dynamic interpretants of signs, that is their pragmatic content or the practical consequences that a style has for readers, regardless of the propositional content conveyed (immediate interpretants). More simply, the idea is that the same content can be conveyed in many different ways which, in turn, are interesting to isolate because they produce important political effects on the readers.

In the same spirit, I propose to distinguish between *open* and *closed* styles as general categories to describe different ways of posing political problems from the perspective of the relationship between “problems” and problems, or between signs and truth as the terminus a quo of semiosis. Similar to Selg and Ventsel's approach, this distinction also does not concern particular contents, that is it's not a distinction between open and closed propositional contents. As we will see in 3.4.1., for example, the problem with conspiracy theories, which we often associate with a negative connotation, is not conspiracies *per se*, but how the conspiracy is presented and the role it plays in the theory.

Moreover, the category open/closed is not meant to distinguish between texts that say the truth and texts that say the false, but it is about two political forms and the way natural texts relate to truth. As we saw, the opposition between the open and the closed that I've outlined concerns a particular interpretation of the opposition between metaphor and metonymy, from which Selg and Ventsel themselves start for their theory. But unlike Ventsel and Selg's typology, the distinction between the open and the closed distinguishes political forms based on their relationship to truth. The open is therefore a style of political discourse that distinguishes between problems and “problems”, while the closed is the political discourse that equates the two or that makes no distinction. However, open and closed political forms can be analyzed with the tools of political semiotics, Jakobson's typology of language functions, and the styles of problematization.

3.4. Semiotic infallibilisms

So far, I have argued that if the truth exists, if there is a complexity to be respected, as Leone (2023c) put it, and if signs are different from the truth, then it is good to (try to) have true beliefs, avoid false beliefs, and be always open to change the signs we currently use.

At the same time, and precisely if we wish to be truthful, and therefore humble, sincere, and accurate, we must also avoid what I would call semiotic infallibilism, that is, we must not exclude certain things as certainly false, nor take others as absolute certainties, because if it is true that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt in our philosophies, it is also true that we have often dreamed about things that are neither in heaven nor earth (as the Italian saying goes).

As said, we shouldn't think that there can be a specific method for not being short-sighted or immodest. However much Feyerabend's epistemological anarchism may be debated in terms of its contribution to the philosophy of science, it is nevertheless a positive contribution to have emphasized that not only what we academically call the hard sciences can tell us what is true about the world, but true knowledge can be attained through a plurality of methods, often with the help of serendipity, and often precisely by hypothesizing that some things that were believed to be true and certain up to a point may not be so. There is therefore no specific method, but we can distinguish between open and closed methods more generally (what Peirce called the scientific method vs. the methods of tenacity, authority, and a priori), and between semiotically open and closed discourses, which are essentially distinguished by the concept of truth they presuppose: whether as that which resists our will and is independent of our beliefs (from which the values of truthfulness are derived) or as how signs say things are.

The relevant difference, when it comes to the open and the closed, is therefore not between telling the truth or not, but between trying to tell it and not caring about it. The statement that "Marco is 5'11" is not ideological if Marco is only 4'11, nor is the statement "Marco is 4'11" non-ideological. No: ideological statements are those that say that something is the case without taking into account how things are, presenting as coherent (as similar) things that are not, taming counterevidence, excluding alternative interpretations, or denying that there may be alternative interpretations.

In what follows, I present some examples of semiotic infallibilism. I will analyze a conspiracy theory related to the debate on the existence of climate change. I will show that what I will call *conspiracist* theories (as opposed to regular theories that have a conspiracy as their subject) are an example of the closed style, and that this justifies the negative connotation associated with the expression "conspiracy theory". Finally, I'll present a typology of ways of denying the world in relation to the styles of problematization that I have presented above.

This is only a preliminary proposal, that almost takes the form of notes on a line of research to be pursued in the future, but that still aims at showing the usefulness of the analytical tools I have presented in this chapter.

3.4.1. On conspiracy theories and Conspiracy Theories

In the literature on conspiracy theories, there is a debate about whether conspiracy theories are something positive or at least potentially useful for society or not. Usually, proponents of the former position argue from the fact that a) real conspiracies exist or have existed; b) even if they can often be the product of a paranoid rationality, conspiracy theories at least promote alternative narratives, hence they are an example of critical thinking.

Arguments such as (a–b) are not difficult to find in the literature. Even those who do not explicitly argue that conspiracy theories are something positive for society, often acknowledge that conspiracies do exist and that conspiracy theories cannot therefore be completely negative. For example, from the introduction of their handbook on conspiracy theories, Butter and Knight admit: «conspiracies do actually happen. We are thus not dealing with a way of thinking that is inherently flawed, even if many examples seem far-fetched and unwarranted» (2020, 4).

The problem is closely connected to the issue of the definition of “conspiracy theories”. On one hand, dictionaries say that a conspiracy theory is just «the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties» (Oxford English Dictionary)¹³⁹. On the other, the expression “conspiracy theory” is increasingly coming to have a negative connotation, implying that there is something wrong with being a conspiracy theorist. According to Karl Popper, for example, the «conspiracy theory of society» is something that implies «exactly the opposite of the true aim of the social sciences» (Popper, 1963, 165), that «comes from abandoning God and then asking: ‘Who is in his place?’ His place is then filled by various powerful men and groups» (166).

Yet, Popper didn’t deny the existence of real conspiracies. Umberto Eco, who dealt with the topic in his novels, particularly in *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1989a), in a talk titled *Conclusioni sul complotto: da Popper a Dan Brown* (2017b) distinguished between real conspiracies, defined as conspiracies that are immediately detected, no matter if successful or failed, from the conspiracy syndrome, which instead concerns invented conspiracies that cannot be resolved. More recently, Quassim Cassam proposed to distinguish between conspiracy theories and Conspiracy Theories, arguing that «A Conspiracy Theory isn’t just a theory about a conspiracy. There is more to it than that» (Cassam, 2019, 13). Conspiracy Theories «are speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish and premodern» (35). Yet, several works on conspiracy theories have questioned whether it’s possible to distinguish between the two (Pigden, 2006; Bratich, 2008; Dentith, 2016; Rääkkä and Ritola, 2020).

In this section, I will offer a semiotic argument in favor of Cassam’s distinction between conspiracy theories and Conspiracy Theories. I will start introducing the problem of the distinction between real conspiracies and hallucinated conspiracies. I will mainly consider the arguments proposed by philosopher David Coady against the distinction. Coady shows, convincingly, that no philosophical

¹³⁹ See: <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=conspiracy+theory>

distinction is possible between real and hallucinated conspiracies. But I will argue, through the analysis of a conspiracy theory, that it is possible to distinguish the two phenomena *semiotically*. That is, while there cannot be a priori criteria for distinguishing between good and bad conspiracy theories, it's possible to distinguish between two semiotic forms or styles of theorizing about conspiracies through the distinction between open and closed texts. On this ground, I think that a distinction between regular theories about conspiracies and, what I would call, conspiracist theories (as products of a closed semiotic form, more than a conspiracy syndrome) is warranted.

The distinction between two senses of “conspiracy theory” is necessary to answer the question of whether conspiracy theories can be useful in any sense. If reasonable conspiracy theories and conspiracism (or conspiracist theories) could not be distinguished, then real existing conspiracies will remain counterexamples against those who claim conspiracy theories are harmful to society. Moreover, if a conspiracy theory is just a theory that hypothesizes the existence of a conspiracy behind some event, then we must admit that conspiracy theorizing counts as an example of critical thought, if sometimes aberrant, that questions the so-called mainstream discourse¹⁴⁰.

But, as we will see, often conspiracy theories are not just that.

3.4.1.1. Position of the problem

It would sound strange hearing someone calling himself a conspiracy theorist. It sounds strange because in folk usage the expression is associated with a negative connotation, so much so that most people, while believing that conspiracies do exist, don't think of themselves as conspiracy theorists. This seems to show that a conspiracy theory is not simply a “theory” about a “conspiracy”. Yet the distinction between simple theories about conspiracies and conspiracy theories (or conspiracist theories) is not immediate. Many philosophers define a conspiracy theory simply as «a theory which posits a conspiracy», and the conspiracy theorist as «someone who subscribes to a conspiracy theory» (Pidgen, 2006, 157). According to this definition, any theory that posits a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory¹⁴¹.

¹⁴⁰ According to a philosophically stronger, anti-realist position, all discourses are in fact ideological, and a possible distinction of degrees between more and less ideological discourses does not detract from the fact that all discourses are arbitrary with respect to reality. In this case the argument wouldn't just be that we cannot distinguish between conspiracy theories and conspiracist theories, but that both are just ideology anyway.

¹⁴¹ Not only that, but we are actually all conspiracy theorists. This is how David Coady (2007, 193) reconstructs Pidgen's argument:

Premise 1: Unless you believe that the reports of history books and the nightly news are largely false, you are a conspiracy theorist.

Premise 2: If you do believe that the reports of history books and the nightly news are largely false, you are a conspiracy theorist.

Conclusion: You are a conspiracy theorist.

A common reply to such definitions is to invoke psychological traits and epistemological fallacies that would characterize conspiracy theorists, such as the fundamental attribution error (see Clark, 2006), or intentionality bias, which is the error of overemphasizing dispositional explanations (which was notoriously also Popper's account against conspiracy theories). Others say that conspiracy theorist's reasoning is characterized by the presence of logical fallacies like the confirmation bias or by the prevalence of emotional language over rational language (as argued by Lakoff, 2004). The problem with these kinds of explanations is that it's very easy to find counterexamples in science or in supposedly non-conspiracy discourses¹⁴², as we are all

by nature conservative reasoners; if new experience comes along that seems to challenge one of our core commitments, our first reaction won't be to give up that core commitment. Our first reaction will be to question the experience and new information, or to alter *other of our beliefs* so that we can retain the more central ones. (Lynch, 2012, 33–34)

The reason has to do with the so-called Quine-Duhem hypothesis, says Lynch, according to which our beliefs form a network such that changing the beliefs that are at the periphery of the network doesn't cost a great effort, while changing the beliefs that are at the center of the network implies restructuring the entire network. This is a representation of how knowledge works that could be fruitfully compared with Lotman's theory of culture and the distinction between center and periphery of semiospheres (see Lotman, 1978). There is a debate about whether such mechanisms should be considered rational or not, but still the point will hold: if that is true of everybody, rational or not it's not possible to distinguish between "regular" theorists and conspiracy theorists on those grounds¹⁴³.

The same point can be deduced from Peirce's theory of the fixation of belief (CP 5.416), according to which beliefs are habits of conduct and we tend to believe what best accords with our prior experience, until we are elicited by true doubt (opposed to Cartesian methodological doubt, which «has nothing to do with

Since history books and the news report the existence of many conspiracies, you can either believe in the existence of those conspiracies, and be a conspiracy theorist according to definition, or don't believe them. In the latter case you would still believe in the conspiracy that led to the falsehoods in the history books and hence be a conspiracy theorist.

¹⁴² Coady (2006, 10) adds that the debate lacks balance because there is also the opposite error of being excessively unwilling to believe conspiracy theories. However, this consideration would benefit from the ability to distinguish between conspiracy theories (which it is an intellectual vice to reject a priori) and conspiracist theories (which it is an intellectual vice to believe; cf. Cassam 2019, 43–73). See the conclusions below.

¹⁴³ See the debate on the rationality of heuristics between Daniel Kahneman (2011) and Gerd Gigerenzer (2016). Floridi (2019), further argued that certain logical fallacies such as affirming the consequent and denying the antecedent could be seen as rational inferences for the subject in the concrete situation (in Peircean terms, they could be seen as abductions based on past experiences).

any serious business»). That is, until we stumble against reality that forces us to revise our beliefs.

From this point of view, the only thing that would separate conspiracy theories from the rest is the set of beliefs and epistemic principles that lie at the core of the network (Lynch, 2012; Ferrari and Moruzzi, 2023). But we are all reluctant to change our beliefs and principles. Psychological and epistemological criteria are neither sufficient, for the reasons just stated, nor necessary for the definition of “conspiracy theory”, since one can be a conspiracy theorist even in the absence of the proposed psychological traits.

Often it is true that the basic beliefs of the conspiracy theorist differ from others. In particular, it seems safe to say that a conspiracy theorist believes in the existence of at least a conspiracy. Maybe we would more easily consider someone a conspiracy theorist only if he/she believes in (vaguely) several conspiracies, or if he/she believes conspiracies are a good explanation for many political and social events. Popper was the first to state that conspiracy theorists overestimate the efficacy of conspiracies. Following this intuition, Brian L. Keeley (1999) proposed to distinguish between conspiracy theories and unwarranted conspiracy theories, the latter being excessively skeptical of official theories, and excessively suspicious of “errant data”, data unexplained or inconsistent with official theories (we will see an example of this epistemological vice in the next section). However, conspiracy theories cannot be distinguished on the basis of basic beliefs either. In itself, each theory deserves to be considered, if only to rule it out¹⁴⁴. The theorist who believes that a conspiracy is behind most of what happens will perhaps be often wrong, but he will also be right at least sometimes. Moreover, as Coady and Corry (2013, 43) have shown, there is nothing wrong, from the point of view of the philosophy of scientific progress, with investing in bizarre or implausible theories, even when they later turn out to be false¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴⁴ Coady further argued, against Popper, that it is not enough to say that conspiracy theorists overestimate the capabilities of conspiratorial behavior, because even a failed conspiracy can play an important explanatory role in a theory. Moreover, even if unsuccessful, an attempted conspiracy is still a conspiracy (Coady, 2006, 4). Although correct, I don't think this argument faithfully represents Popper's interpretation. I think that Popper's reasoning was that only in a world where conspiracies are successful at least 51% of the time would it be reasonable to conspire a lot, first, and hence to theorize that most events happen behind conspiracy, second. This is what Popper called the conspiratorial view of society understood as a philosophy of social sciences. So much so that this point follows the discussion on the nature of cultural institutions in general, whether they are conventional in the simple sense that they could be different or not exist, or conventional in the sense of having been conceived at someone's desk (what Marx considered a form of psychologism). Therefore, even the point about the failure of conspiracies should be seen in a different light: for Popper, it served to establish the point that what the social sciences must study are not human intentions, but the practical effects of human actions and intentions (what Popper calls Marx's pragmatism). In the case of conspiracies, the idea is that, whether successful or not, they produce effects that are largely independent and not intended by the conspirators.

¹⁴⁵ «Science is a community activity and cannot advance if everybody has to start from scratch. An ideal scientific community, then, will have to strike a balance, ensuring that some scientists,

Interestingly, Coady (2006, 3) seems to be of the opinion that it is mainly leftist politicians and activists who are labeled as conspiracy theorists by their opponents¹⁴⁶ – against the opinion of others who have claimed that conspiracy theories are primarily a right-wing thing (Hofstadter, 1965; van Dijk, 2024; see also Madisson, 2016). This seemingly superficial difference actually conceals a profound one in the approach to the study of conspiracy theories. On the one hand, Coady is interested in defending the merits of theories that differ from official histories and mainstream narratives, and considers conspiracy theories as a kind of these alternative theories. In this sense he also incorporates the political opposition of conservatism vs. progressivism: for Coady, conspiracy theories, as alternative theories, can be instances of progress¹⁴⁷. On the other hand, philosophers such as Popper and Eco conceived conspiracy theories as aberrant theories, useful only for the forces of conservation against the possibility of progress.

The easy solution would be to just say that it depends on case to case whether a conspiracy theory is useful or not. The Watergate conspiracy theory was a useful theory, for example, while the pizzagate theory was not. But this would mean that the defenders of conspiracy theories are right: if they can be useful in some cases, then they cannot be always non-useful.

Following this line of reasoning, Coady (2007; 2023) concludes that we should change the way we talk about conspiracy theories, and stop associating to “conspiracy theory” the negative connotation (see also Dentith, 2020)¹⁴⁸. Coady (2012, 130) even sees in the debate between conspiracy theorists and “institutional theorists”, as he calls them, the opposition between revolutionaries and moralists, respectively, discussed in Orwell (1961, 48).

at least some of the time, but not all scientists all the time, sacrifice their individual epistemic interests by putting aside the views of their peers». The presupposition is that it's the personal interest of the individual scientist to take the view of the expert community on a given topic into account. It's good for the community if some scientist some time inquire into alternative theories instead of the shared view of the expert community (when such a shared view exists), but they can do that also for personal career interest (questioning the majority view is risky but has a high return in prestige if successful). See also Lynch (2012) and Ferrari and Moruzzi (2023) on the problems related to the justification of core beliefs and principles.

¹⁴⁶ «A great deal of contemporary political debate consists in attempts by conservatives to portray those on the Left as conspiracy theorists, and attempts by those on the Left to refute the charge. Both sides assume that there is something wrong with conspiracy theories: that they are always or at least usually false, or that those who believe them or seek out evidence for them are being irrational».

¹⁴⁷ He cites as an example this passage from *Manufacturing Consent* by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky: «Institutional critiques such as we present in this book are commonly dismissed by establishment commentators as ‘conspiracy theories’, but this is just an evasion. We do not use any kind of “conspiracy” hypothesis to explain mass-media performance» (1989, xii).

¹⁴⁸ I do not discuss whether conspiracist theories are rational or not. Instead I pose the question of whether they are useful or not. In this way I avoid the use of psychological terms, and distinguish instead between useful and non-useful types of discourse regardless of the intentions and the psychology of the subject.

The problem then is to see if it can be shown that the Watergate case and the pizzagate are different things, and that a conspiracy theory is not merely a theory about a conspiracy.

If philosophers like Coady deduce the linguistic revision position from the impossibility of distinguishing between real and hallucinated, or between good and bad conspiracy theories, from the semiotic point of view I am more interested in taking for granted the semantics of the expression “conspiracy theory”, and then question whether it’s justified to associate a negative connotation to the expression for some conspiracy theories. Although Coady (2012, 113–125) has shown that no genuine distinction is possible from the point of view of the contents expressed, of their probability, and of the mental attitudes presiding such theories, I still think that a distinction is possible on a semiotic basis, that is, through the analysis of the respective styles of discourse. When we talk about the Watergate and pizzagate, although we call both “conspiracy theories”, we are talking about different things.

3.4.1.2. The Climategate Scandal

The Climategate Scandal is an example of a conspiracy theory that I think deserves the negative connotation associated with the expression.

In 2009, 160 megabytes of emails from the Climate Research Unit (CRU) server at the University of East Anglia were hacked. The emails contained evidence, according to the theory, proving the conspiracy by CRU members and climate scientists more generally about the existence of climate change. The contents of the emails were immediately published online. Watts (2009), for example, reported on his blog a list of «interesting issues» identified and summarized by the Bishop Hill blog in a series of points. Here’s an example:

Phil Jones says he has use Mann’s “Nature trick of adding in the real temps to each series”... to hide the decline”. Real Climate says “hiding” was an unfortunate turn of phrase.

The reference is to scientists Michael Mann and Phil Jones, while the “decline” refers to a hot issue in 2009 involving the supposed findings of Steve McIntyre (a mining consultant, usually presented as a statistician, and founder of a famous blog among climate change deniers that comments on climate data) about errors and problems in the procedures that produced the so-called hockey stick graph, first proposed by Mann et al (1999), that pictured a sharp increase in global mean temperatures starting from the year 2000 and that was presented as evidence of the global warming.

The most cited (cf. Monckton, 2009; Bolt, 2009; Palin, 2009; Bishop Hill, 2009) are the emails that Phil Jones wrote to Michael Mann, that would be the «proof of a conspiracy which is one of the largest, most extraordinary and most disgraceful in modern science, given the stakes» (Bolt, 2009). For example:

I think the skeptics will use this paper to their own ends and it will set paleo back a number of years if it goes unchallenged. I will be emailing the journal to tell them I'm having nothing more to do with it until they rid themselves of this troublesome editor [Chris de Freitas], a well-known skeptic in NZ. (1047388489.txt)

The “skeptics” are Soon and Baliunas (2003), who argued in a paper against the existence of climate change from the incompatibility of a number of local proxies that were used to infer the existence of global climate change. The same argument is repeated by all the skeptics mentioned. In another email Jones wrote that: «I can't see either of these papers being in the next Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. Kevin [Trenberth] and I will keep them out somehow – even if we have to redefine what the peer-review literature is!» (1089318616.txt)¹⁴⁹. In other words, the emails are taken as evidence that McIntyre was right and that scientists are plotting and hiding data inconsistent with the climate change thesis.

There have been eight independent inquiries on the scandal (Biello, 2010), and no one found evidence of the conspiracy. The treatment of the skeptical articles was, instead, «based on a belief, for which evidence was adduced, that the science was poor» (Muir Russell et al 2010, 65; cf. Coady and Corry, 2013, 39).

Even if the emails may be evidence of personal interests that scientists Phil Jones and Michael Mann defended while defending the theory of the human causation of climate change, such interests do not make the theory false. As Coady and Corry (2013, 42) say, science is always driven also by external interests. In semiotics, this is a well-established point since Latour and Fabbri's paper (1981) on the semiotics of the scientific text. But external interests don't make scientific theories false. Rather, Michale Lynch (2012, 92), for example, interpreted the scandal as evidence that science is expected to be transparent. Surely, the scientists called out by the emails were not transparent about their external interests. If not a conspiracy, it was a) a defense of their own theories; b) an attack on theories deemed false and dangerous. But transparency in science shouldn't be confused with total transparency. Although there are always external interests, including political ones, scientists are not supposed to explicitly argue from their external interests, which would be irrelevant and useless from the point of view of science and of the community of interpreters. People shouldn't reject a theory on the basis of preference or sympathy, but on the basis of evidence.

Scientists are supposed to be truthful, that is, semiotically humble, sincere and accurate. That is, they should know that signs and truth are different things, and that it is better to prefer truth when signs and truth part ways, even when external interests may be at stake (preferring truth is a value precisely because external interests, or internal obstacles, are always involved). These values are then expected to be reflected in their writings, as scientists should communicate information

¹⁴⁹ This is how Bishop Hill summarized the content of this email: «Jones says he and Kevin will keep some papers out of the next IPCC report».

accurately and sincerely, offering the *relevant* reasons and methods for believing that something is true.

Interestingly, Coady and Corry's argument is that it's rational to hold the consensus of a community of scientists as evidence for a specific thesis (in this case the climate change). This is only apparently in contradiction with the previous one about the merits of alternative theories. The ideal, for a scientific community, would be that «some scientists, at least some of the time, but not all scientists all the time, sacrifice their individual epistemic interests by putting aside the views of their peers» (Coady and Corry, 2013, 44).

However, I don't think the latter is a good description of the case at hand and of conspiracy theories in general. Even if the emails demonstrated the presence of interests external to the arguments relevant for believing or not believing in the existence of climate change, these external interests are not proof that scientists are conspiring against the people, nor that climate change does not exist. This is a way of reasoning, and of producing a text, that belongs to the semiotic style I have defined as closed, based on a hermetic rationality, in the sense of Eco (1990a), which, to use Jakobson's (1960, 71) effective formula, posits equations first in order to then produce statements, instead of producing statements and then hypothesize equations.

3.4.1.3. A conspiracist theory

The Climategate scandal is interesting because it's not immediately clear whether we are dealing with an unwarranted conspiracy theory or a reasonable theory involving a conspiracy. There are no aliens nor flat earths. Instead, there is some evidence that motivates if not the accusation of conspiracy against the scientists, at least the hypothesis that there may be a conspiracy. However, from a semiotic point of view, the cited texts show clear differences with the transparent style one would expect from a scientific theory.

Take Monckton (2009). The text is presented as a «paper on temperature trends» (40) and a «SPPI original paper», where SPPI stands for “Science & Public Policy Institute”, an organization that promotes climate change denial. The subtitle shows a stronger tone: «Cold facts about the hot topic of global temperature change after the climategate scandal». Aside from the wordplay with “cold” and “hot” (cold appears in blue color and hot in red, respectively), this subtitle introduces an ambiguity that, as we shall see, will not be resolved by the rest of the text. The ambiguity is between the “facts” about the temperature change that would be proof of the conspiracy, on one hand, and the conspiracy that would prove that the non-change in temperatures is a fact, on the other.

The narrative schema is rather heroic. The inquiry is justified by the contribution of the whistleblower who hacked the emails, «unnamed hero» (3), offering the tools for Monckton and the “people” to reach their object of value, the truth. The entire text is devoted to the revelation of the “truth” from the emails. However, the text is very ambivalent about the content or even the scope regarding the truth to be achieved. Already in the title of the first chapter (“The whistle blows

for truth”) “truth” is presented as the goal of the inquiry. However, throughout the text many “truths” appear to already be on the narrator’s hands – falling into what I called above the self-attribution contradiction. Two in particular: the «known to be the non-problem of man-made global warming» and «the innermost workings of the tiny international clique of climate scientists, centered on the Climate Research Unit» (3). Consequently, the anti-Subject is once the scientists (called “The team”) who manipulated the data to get the «politically correct» results (9), the other the «naive and untutored» politicians (23) who believe the scientists’ lies. Chapter by chapter, one truth becomes evidence of the other, and vice versa.

The second chapter (“Revealed: The abject corruption of climate science”), for example, offers a list summarizing the content of the emails. Here are a few examples:

- A tiny clique of politicized scientists, paid by unscientific politicians with whom they were financially and politically linked, were responsible for gathering and reporting data on temperatures from the palaeoclimate to today’s climate. The “Team”, as they called themselves, were bending and distorting scientific data to fit a nakedly political story-line profitable to themselves and congenial to the governments that, these days, pay the bills for 99% of all scientific research.
- The Team had conspired in an attempt to redefine what is and is not peer-reviewed science for the sake of excluding results that did not fit what they and the politicians with whom they were closely linked wanted the UN’s climate panel to report.
- They had tampered with their own data so as to conceal inconsistencies and errors. (Monckton, 2009, 4)

Leaving aside the fact that it’s difficult to derive these conclusions from the content of the emails, the problematic aspect is not so much the correctness of the reasoning, but the semiotic style of discourse. The emails are not quoted directly, the reasoning that leads from the emails to those conclusions is not explicit. These summaries are given as certainties, not as hypothesis or theses to be proved. That is, the list is a list of “facts”, a series of declaratives, not arguments. Neither the premises are made explicit (because they coincide with the conclusions), nor possible alternative interpretations are mentioned.

In the next paragraph of the text (“Breaking the broken code”), lines of code found in the hacked emails are mentioned that would reveal the scientist’s conspiracy. Again, it’s not clear whether the author is quoting or if it’s a reconstruction; in any case, it doesn’t seem possible to conclude, from how the author himself presents the emails, what he wants to conclude. For example, the following note, found in the graph plotter program, is supposed to reveal «the true meaning of Professor Jones’ “trick” to “hide the decline”:

“NOTE: recent decline in tree-ring density has been **ARTIFICIALLY REMOVED** to facilitate calibration. THEREFORE, post-1960 values will be much closer to observed temperatures than [should be “than”] they should be which will incorrectly imply the reconstruction is more skillful than it actually is. See Osborn *et al.* (2004).” (Monckton, 2009, 9)¹⁵⁰

Monckton gives the following interpretation of the note: «the real purpose of Michael Mann’s *Nature trick* [...] was to “incorrectly imply the reconstruction [from the three-ring proxies] is more skillful [i.e. accurate as a representation of pre-industrial temperatures] than it actually is”» (9). The word “skillful” that appears in the note is interpreted as admission that the graph is not accurate. See also how Monckton comments on the following line of code contained in the hacked emails:

```
‘yrloc=[1400,findgen(19)*5.+1904]
‘valadj=[0.,0.,0.,0.,0.,-0.1,-0.25,-0.3,0.,-
0.1,0.3,0.8,1.2,1.7,2.5,2.6,2.6,2.6,2.6,2.6]*0.75 ; fudge factor (Monckton, 2009, 8)
```

The words “fudge factor” after the semicolon (a remark left by the programmer) indicate that a factor (the second part of the code) was used for the years between 1400 and 1904. This would show that «the programmer was recording his own admission that he was tampering with the data by multiplying it by what he himself was calling a “**fudge factor**”. No true or honest scientist would apply an undeclared, undisclosed fudge factor» (8). However, what this line of code shows is the opposite, if anything, namely that the programmers in question didn’t attempt to hide the fudge factor. This is an example of a semiotic trait present throughout the whole text: only the worst possible interpretation of the evidence is offered, while neither more charitable nor alternative interpretations are contemplated.

Here is another example. In the chapter “Terrestrial vs. satellite temperatures records”, after showing how by removing a number of factors, deemed invalid (which, to be sure, is itself a manipulation of the graph), the graphs show that the planet is not actually warming, it is claimed: «the truth, as yet another revealing email between members of the Team privately admits, is that global temperatures have been falling for almost a decade, and the author of the email bewails the fact that he and his colleagues are unable to explain the fall. So they decided merely to conceal it» (Monckton, 2009, 20). But no email here is even mentioned, let alone quoted. In this case, the falsity of climate change is taken as proof of the conspiracy, while the more reasonable, or at least alternative, interpretation would be that the scientists tried to make their theory, which they believe in, appear more convincing and more persuasive by intervening in the graphs. To say that a graph

¹⁵⁰ I leave bolds, quotation marks, capital letters, and parentheses as they appear in the quoted text.

is not “skillful” enough, as it is said in the hacked email, doesn’t mean that the graph is not a good representation of reality, only that it isn’t good enough.

On the other hand, in several passages we also find the exact opposite inference, where the falsity of climate change is inferred from the emails. But the only way you can conclude, from the emails, that climate change is not real is if you think scientists are plotting against humanity for some reason. However, the conspiracy is what was supposed to be argued for by the conspiracy theory, not the proof in favor of another thesis. Here is an example:

If the global temperature datasets have been tampered with by the scientific-technological elite to demonstrate a false warming where far less warming truly occurred have national and regional datasets been tampered with as well, particularly in countries whose governments are of a political stamp likely to find the “global warming” scare expedient as a method of increasing the taxes and regulations and controls and rationings that they like to inflict on the little guy? (32)

In fact, this isn’t a real research question, but an insinuation. The answer is already given thanks to the findings of “Richard Treadgold” (whose work, however, is not cited), which is not only that it is probable, but that it is certain – hence the conclusion that New Zealand does not need an emissions-trading scheme (ibidem). Clearly, here the conspiracy is taken for granted and used as evidence of further conspiracies and of the falsity of climate change: «this startling result gives the lie to claims from the UN’s climate panel and many other corrupt scientific sources that the country has been part of ‘global warming’ over the past 100 years» (ibidem).

Throughout the text theories, testimonies or events are mentioned without any citation of sources. In the conclusions, the text does not strictly defend any thesis, but proposes a set of “policies”, moving from the semiotic genre of the scientific text to the political. These are not presented as suggestions on how to act should the hypotheses presented be confirmed and the arguments proposed valid, but as imperatives given that the conspiracy is true, and climate change is false¹⁵¹. In the conclusion, no bibliography is presented, only a list of *Essential readings* almost exclusively published in the same blog where Monkton’s article is published.

¹⁵¹ In any case, in the chapter “What is to be done?”, the author moves quite explicitly from the discursive genre of the scientific text to the political one. These are the 4 policies: «First, there is now a need for a standardized, international network of [...] temperature monitoring stations [...] Secondly, all those whose emails have demonstrated that they have acted maliciously [...] should be dismissed from any publicly-funded scientific post [...] Thirdly, all public policy measures to address what is now known to be the manufactured non-problem of “global warming” should be put on hold forthwith [...] Fourthly, all “global warming” profiteers who are making money [...] should be warned [...]». (39–40).

3.4.1.4. Conspiracist theories as closed texts

The question of the distinction between normal theories about possible conspiracies and conspiracist theories, or between conspiracy theories and Conspiracy Theories, to use Cassam's distinction, is related to another, semiotic question: whether we can distinguish ideology from non-ideology in texts (that I treated above 3.3.1.4.). In semiotics it's agreed that conspiracy theories are examples of mythological/ideological discourse (Leone et al, 2020; Madisson and Ventsel, 2021; Lorusso, 2023; Danesi, 2023). See also Cassam (2019, 57): «the conspiracy mindset is an ideology rather than a personality trait». That conspiracism is an ideology suggests that we can semiotically analyze conspiracy theories, and identify its distinctive features, regardless of the psychology of the subjects who produce and consume conspiracy theories. In turn, I think that the distinction between open and closed conspiracy theories (ct and CT), can be seen as an example of how to distinguish between ideology and non-ideology.

Although still committed to the existence of truth and its dissemination, the discursive style of Monckton's conspiracy theory reveals an approach toward truth and its values (in the sense of Williams seen in 3.1., see also Wrenn, 2023) different from that of normal theories.

At one point, Monckton even mentions Popper and his theory of the scientific method:

The scientific method was codified by Karl Popper in a landmark paper of 1934, in which he said that any scientific hypothesis – such as the hypothesis that the Middle Ages were not, after all, warmer than the present, or that global temperature during the 20th century rose as fast as th Team's global-temperature datasets were pretending – followed a repeated, step-by-step process of scrutiny. (Monckton, 2009, 12)

However, the 1934 paper is not cited, nor are any passages from Popper's work in general quoted in the next two pages of reconstruction of his thought. In any case, the text leaves no indication that Monckton used the same method he describes.

As seen, the text is only minimally a theory concerning a conspiracy. The emails are introduced, but not quoted, at the beginning of the text not as clue for a theory to be defended, but as evidence of something the author already knew. In the rest of the essay, the revealed truth of the conspiracy moves from being the object of research to a premise for other inferences (other conspiracies, the falsity of climate change). The paper favors only the worst possible interpretation of the evidence (the emails), alternative interpretations are excluded, and there is a manifest disregard for citing neither the sources nor the possible alternative interpretations of the phenomena in question.

My claim is that any conspiracy theory that exhibits these traits is also a conspiracist theory in the negatively connoted sense (a Conspiracy Theory, to use

Cassam's terminology)¹⁵². Moreover, we can distinguish the two types of "conspiracy theory" through the distinction between open and closed discourses. The open discourse starts from hypothesis in order to arrive at the truth (a truth that, according to Popper, we never definitively reach). The closed discourse starts instead from a presupposed truth, a certainty, and then goes in search of whatever corroborates it, ignoring the rest, which is the trait that defines ideology as false consciousness (as Eco, 1976, put it, ideology is when only one possible interpretation of something is presented as the true one, excluding alternative theories).

From the point of view of semiotic analysis, the semantics of "truth" is a first clue. Closed texts are indifferent to truth understood as /how things are regardless of our beliefs/ or /what resists our will/¹⁵³. If one believes that truth exists, then one also believes that it's possible to be wrong and improve on theories and beliefs, and that it's better to have true beliefs and to avoid false ones (James, 1897, pt. VII, 17–18). Sensitivity or non-indifference to truth understood in this sense, in turn, is what motivates the traits of the open discourse (logic of difference, style of the modus). In contrast, the closed discourse is defined as a semiotic style that exhibits the opposite traits of indifference toward truth. In the text, Monckton mentions the word "truth" numerous times: «the truth [...] is that global temperatures have been falling for almost a decade» (2009, 20); «in truth [...] it was always the temperature that changed first» (36); «the shocking truth is that the oldest readings have been cranked way down» (34) «the true meaning of Professor Jones' "trick"» (9); «the true direction of temperature trends» (27); «the true rate of observed warming in the 20th century» (19). Evidently, in these passages truth is not understood as the goal of inquiry, but as something already given (a certainty), a revealed secret¹⁵⁴.

Here is a list of traits found in Monckton's text that refer to the closed style:

- First of all, the self-attribution contradiction which, as we have seen, is a trait of untruthfulness, because one of the values of truthfulness is instead the semiotic humility of knowing that signs are always different, and therefore that it is always possible to be wrong; theories that seek the truth should manifest, explicitly or implicitly, that we can never be certain that something is the case, so the discourse that recognizes this principle will tend to say as little as possible that something is definitely true, already known to everyone, a certainty, etc.

¹⁵² As argued also in Cerutti and Campana Piva (forthcoming).

¹⁵³ Truth should not be confused with the phenomenon of veridiction, which is the act of making someone believe that something is true. See Leone (2024a).

¹⁵⁴ See Eco on the ermetic style: «thus they identify truth with what is not said, or what is said obscurely and must be understood beyond appearances» (1990a, 62–63, my translation); «but [...] whenever one thinks one has discovered a secret, it will be such only if it refers back to another secret» (64, my translation). It is the certainty of the secret (in our case of the conspiracy) that ensures that, in the closed style, every phenomenon is tamed and reduced to yet another secret or part of the same secret, with nothing able to deny its existence.

- Even more important is the principle of *post hoc ergo ante hoc* (instead of the classical *post hoc ergo propter hoc*), typical of the hermetic semiotic style where, without saying it explicitly, and often without the author even realizing it, the cause, once revealed (the conspiracy) is thought of as proof of the effect (the emails), but also the effect as proof of the cause at the same time – or rather, from one case to another the same events (the emails and the conspiracy, the conspiracy and the falsity of climate change) can swap roles and be one the evidence of other.
- Furthermore, only in the worst interpretation possible of the data, denying the possibility of alternatives, is given (which is precisely Eco's, 1976, definition of ideology).
- In the case of closed discourses, unlike the myths studied by Lévi-Strauss, for example, or the theories of infinite semiosis considered by Eco, we do not have here the explicit coincidence of opposites, but we do find the deduction of a truth, which is actually premised to the text, starting from signs, adduced as evidence, which refer to it only by similarity (the not entirely transparent behavior of scientists with the non-existence of climate change, for example).
- Finally, the construction of a model reader who must receive the premised truth and accept it without reservation, as a certainty and not as a thesis/theory to be explored, and who in any case is not provided with the tools to evaluate for themselves the truth of the revealed “truth”, so to say (the reasons for believing in that truth) – and those who do not accept it are simply not part of the Elected group.

In the specific case of conspiracist theories, it's the concept of conspiracy itself, premised as a certainty, that determines many of the traits of the closed discourse. First, the certainty of the conspiracy is what leads to the logic of equivalence or hermetic style. If the conspiracy is true no matter what, any new data, event or phenomenon will not be considered as a possible falsifier of the theory, instead it is tamed and incorporated into the theory: any new element is either (often forcefully) tamed as coherent with the conspiracy theory (that is, as similar to the theory, logic of equation), or disqualified because part of the conspiracy itself (hence, not valid as counter-evidence). Second, the conspiracy motivates skepticism toward the possibility of climate change (not the other way around). Without the conspiracy, the emails would only prove that the scientists made mistakes or were, at most, opaque in their behavior. But even if Phil Jones had explicitly stated that he thinks that the climate change isn't real, this wouldn't count as evidence that the climate change isn't real.

3.4.1.5. Why conspiracist theories aren't useful

Starting from the analysis of a conspiracy theory, I have identified some traits that distinguish reasonable conspiracy theories from conspiracist theories. The former are theories that attempt to prove the existence of a conspiracy. The latter take for granted the existence of the conspiracy in order to infer other facts through an hermetic style of reasoning. I proposed to interpret this opposition through the distinction between open and closed discourses. Openness to truth is what determines the open style, that is, it's what leads one to assume a semiotic style where alternative theories are cited, the possibility of being wrong is contemplated, it's explicit that things could be otherwise, and all the passages of the proposed arguments are made explicit (so that the arguments can be reproducible, transparent, and adaptable) – that is, it respects the values of truthfulness. Closeness to truth is what leads to ignore the values of truth and these traits.

According to this distinction, nothing prevents there could be open conspiracy theories, where the conspiracy is presented as a possibility to be verified and not as a certainty. In other words, there is nothing wrong with talking about conspiracies *per se*, and, in agreement with Coady, there is no way of distinguishing, *a priori*, when it is good to talk about conspiracies and when it is bad. But this does not mean that we should change the way we talk about “conspiracy theories”, nor that the negative connotation associated with the term is not justified. If “conspiracy theory” has come to mean something negative, this is not only due to the implausibility of many conspiracy theories, but also to the way in which conspiracies are discussed in many of those theories. By placing the distinction at the level of semiotic forms, the advantage of this solution is that the reverse is also possible, i.e., there can be “scientific” theories that are not semiotically scientific or open, even if they do not talk about conspiracies.

In conclusion, when we say that a text is a conspiracy theory, we can either mean that it's a theory about a conspiracy, or that it's a conspiracist theory. If that's the case, then we should conclude that both believing in conspiracist theories and not believing in normal, open conspiracy theories are epistemic vices. On one hand, conspiracist theories are not useful. As George Orwell wrote in his essay on Dickens, «the moralist and the revolutionary are constantly undermining one another» (1961, 48). The point is that it's not only the state and the official media, as for Coady (2012, 130), that often abuse their power by spreading moralistic and dogmatic theories (through closed texts), but also many conspiracist theories. Using Orwell's language, conspiracist theories are equally moralistic and dogmatic. But, on the other hand, the converse is also true: conspiracy theories, as long as they are not conspiracist, can be revolutionary.

3.4.2. Forms of semiotic infallibilism

Conspiracist theories are a kind of ideological, closed texts that premise something as certainly true or false in speech, putting their Truth before the world and reducing any signs that would contradict the theory to fit their own ideology, ending up simplifying, if not distorting, the complexity of the world.

But the opposite extreme, that is assuming something as certainly false, could be an equally problematic form of the closed discourse.

Often the two things go together. Above we saw how in the case of conspiracist theories about climate change the certainty of the conspiracy is taken as proof of the falsity of climate change. If semiotic infallibilism is a case of ideological *inventio*, to use Eco's terminology, as the act of positing something as certainly true, this act must often be matched by a parallel and opposite act of infallibilism towards something else, denying possible reasons, evidence, and signs that could indicate that things are otherwise.

This can be done in different ways. We have seen above, for example, and to stay on topic, that the opinion of the majority of scientists is a good argument for believing something to be true, and that it is therefore a good reason to give in a veridiction act to make someone believe something to be true in a truthful way. That is, if too much similarity (simplifying the world) is problematic, we must not fall into the opposite extreme of too much "difference", or the vice of pavidity, of never believing anything could be true. Examples of semiotic pavidity could be hiding the good reasons to believe something is true, or putting a methodological, rhetorical (i.e. inauthentic) doubt before every question.

Every voice has legitimacy and every opinion is useful to the community, as I said above, but one is not considered truthful if argues that climate change does not exist while concealing that there is a scientific consensus on the issue, in a form of rhetorical agnosticism which, while saying that everyone can be wrong, implicates a position that leads, at best, to the immobility of the hearer. In this case, in order to have a truthful conversation, one should simply give his reasons for believing that something is true, or for doubting that something is false, while mentioning that, at least at present, the scientific consensus lies elsewhere. On the other hand, one is considered truthful only if, in a conversation between speakers in a relationship of mutual trust, he says what he believes to be true (sincerity), while still being semiotically humble. A text does not need to tell the truth in order to be open, but it must avoid semiotic pavidity, that is, the failure to give expression to what there are good reasons to believe is true.

3.4.2.1. Ways of denying the world

In what follows, I take climate change as a good example of a debate on an issue where there are good reasons to believe that it is true, that the problem exists, using it as an example to offer a first, admittedly partial, typology of ways of denying the world.

We have seen that Williams called those who do not believe in the existence of truth itself “deniers”. Here we see some ways in which something is denied in an untruthful way, that is, by ignoring the values of truth of semiotic humility, accuracy, and sincerity. On this, I am following a semantic use that associates a negative connotation to the word “denialism”, even though I think Coady and Corry (2013, 3) are right when they say that it does not deserve it, just as “skepticism” doesn’t probably deserve the positive connotation with which it is usually associated (while science denialism plays «an important role in scientific progress», 2013, 4; science skepticism is, at best, an interesting philosophical challenge or, worse, an obstacle to inquiry). Still, “denial” means also “the refusal to believe something one wishes were not the case”, which captures better the aspect of the closed style that we are dealing with here. Moreover, I shall follow Vidali (2024, 18) and specify that in what follows I am referring to the semiotic traits of what could be called ideological denialism, as opposed to “negation” or individual acts of denial, which is the semiotic disposition of denying pieces of evidence, signs, alternative interpretations in a closed way, often for strategic reasons.

I use the typology of political problems introduced in 3.3.2.3. to distinguish four general ways of denying the world through the closed style. Having distinguished between problems and “problems”, and between functions of semiosis and styles of discourse, we do not need to distinguish between open and closed styles of problematization, instead all styles of problematization (simple, complex, wicked, and de-problematization) can be used in an open or closed way (while Selg and Ventsel use the typology, together with Jakobson’s six functions of language, to distinguish between six forms of political discourse).

The result is a semiotic square that intersects the axes that distinguish the way a problem is posed, as clear or undefined, and the discourse on solutions, as simple or complex/multiple, respectively. Not that I believe that the four resulting combinations exhaust the space of possibilities of the closed discourse or semiotic infallibilism. In general, I conceive the semiotic square as a tool (among many), for the derivation of semiotic types (of concepts more generally). Furthermore, as will be seen, the combination of the two problem/solution axes does not convey, by itself, the full meaning of the four types of semiotic denialism that I’m presenting; rather, it is the four types that modify the meaning of, for example, posing a problem as simple or stating that there are no solutions to a given political problem.

3.4.2.1.1. Simplification

We saw that framing a problem as simple (simple problematization) means saying that a given problem is well defined and there is a simple solution, and that the parties agree on the solution (at most there may be external obstacles to the solution). Apart from the obvious fact that it would not be truthful to present a problem that is complex as “simple”, or to present all parties as agreeing when there are different opinions on the solutions (but there can be real, i.e., non-ideological, disagreement even on the status of a discussion), simple problematization

can be used in an untruthful, closed way to gain some kind of advantage over the hearer. In these cases, the goal is not so much to convey accurate information, but to take advantage of the problem to satisfy one's own interests, while also simplifying the problem (regardless of whether the problem is actually simple or complex). These interests may be one's own laziness, economic gain, or the dissemination of a "truth" at the expense of both the complexity of the problem and alternative opinions. In short, it means not being truthful even if telling the truth.

A well-known example of this type of untruthful problematization is the act of cherry-picking, which refers to the act of selecting data, examples, or cases that support one's thesis while intentionally ignoring possible counterexamples or, more generally, the rest of the information available on something that would lead to conclusions different from those one wishes to promote. A particular type of cherry-picking is what Vidali (2024, 148) calls the appeal to negative consequences, an argument that can be used rhetorically with the aim of leading the hearer to inaction or to focus on something else. It involves selecting from the practical consequences of something only those that support one's own thesis. An example of cherry-picking in this sense would be saying, in relation to the option of reducing carbon emissions and the use of fossil fuels, that the social and economic costs of decarbonization would be too high, omitting the costs that not decarbonizing would have, thus preventing a reasoned calculation of what should be preferred.

From this point of view, it is equally problematic to acknowledge the truth of climate change in a closed way. A well-known example is so-called greenwashing, a concept used to accuse someone of not being truthful in their communication and of strategically exploiting the popularity of a cause to promote a brand. The existence of climate change is not denied, but, being driven by other values than accuracy, the result is a (convenient) partial, simplified information communicated in a non-sincere way.

In all these cases, it is a matter of not being truthful even if telling the truth (or not telling falsehoods). The point is therefore to analyze the implicit and implied meanings of these texts, and the type of model reader that is constructed. Furthermore, as regards the hermetic style, in this case it is not so much a matter of presenting one's message as consistent with contradictory signs coming from the world, but of presenting one's opinions as equal to those, for example, of science (or of presenting possible solutions as all equal, all in agreement with each other), ignoring the plurality of positions and relevant elements of complexity. In other cases, untruthfulness is due not so much to a failure to respect the democratic value of giving voice to all positions, including those of so-called climate change deniers, or ignoring the scientific consensus on the anthropic origin of climate change through a style of problematization that presents the problem and its solution as simple; but in denying its readers correct (or as correct as possible) and sincere information. In turn, a public that uncritically accepts the truth of something, including climate change, is perhaps as harmful as its a priori denial.

3.4.2.1.2. *Pavidity*

Similar considerations apply to complex problematization, which is when a political problem is presented as well defined, but its solution as unclear or that there are different opinions about it. While it may seem less closed, because it does not deny the complexity of a debate or the existence of alternative theories, this style can be used in a closed way when it leads to linguistic pavidity, or to a strategic pavidity that aims at immobilizing the hearer by arguing not that the solution is easy and therefore nothing should be done, but that, since there are no obvious solutions, nothing should be done.

An example of complex problematization is the discourse of those parties in the climate change debate who, while not denying the existence of the problem, question the possibility of solving it, pointing to the lack of agreement in the scientific community as proof. The problem is not so much, or not only, that such a consensus does exist, as I mentioned above, but that the disagreement on something should, if anything, be a reason to take action and try to form an opinion, seeking to understand the positions in the debate, to the best of one's ability and within the limits of internal obstacles (such as competence and education) or external obstacles (such as inaccessibility of information or time constraints), rather than a good reason, as Peirce would have said, to block the way of inquiry.

In this case too, the result is a form of untruthfulness even if telling the truth strictly speaking. If in the first case, the closed, hermetic discourse manifested itself in superimposing a simple solution, presented as the only one available, on a complex problem. Here it manifests by suggesting inaction, since the problem is too complex, when the presence of alternative and plural solutions, and the urgency of the problem, should instead be a stimulus to seek information and take action.

3.4.2.1.3. *Negation*

Conspiracy theories are an example of this type of denialism (deproblematization). As we have seen, in these cases a certain truth is placed before the complexity of the world and the existence of alternative theories not by saying that the problem is simple, but that the problem does not exist (in the specific case of conspiracy theories, because problem x is only the invention of a conspiracy by science or politics against the people).

3.4.2.1.4. *Relativism*

Above I said that in addition to the problem of too much similarity, there is also the problem of too much "difference". But we must not make the mistake of thinking that too much difference is too much openness. I wrote "difference" in quotation marks precisely to avoid confusing difference understood as semiotic humility, a prerequisite for open discourse, and "difference" as a mode of closed discourse. In this case, saying that nothing is true (everything is different), according to a sort of horseshoe effect is equivalent to saying, on the one hand,

that everything is similar to everything else (what all things have in common is that they are all different from each other; nothing resembles anything else in any way); on the other it equally denies the possibility of the world, of truth, of playing a role in semiosis. Saying that there is no truth denies the complexity of the world, to use Leone's words, just as much as saying that something is certainly true.

This type of problematization is similar to the complex one, except that by placing not only the debate on solutions but also the nature of the problem as something undefined, the wicked problematization takes on not the traits of pavidity (strategic or otherwise) but of derailing the conversation or, worse, of a kind of nihilism. Unlike de-problematization, here it is not said that the problem does not exist because its opposite is true, but that the problem exists only for someone, within one framework, but not in others, and that it is therefore a matter of perspective. This attitude can be also used as a form of strategic "what-aboutism".

I believe that theories that deny climate change based on arguments that rely on notions such as post-truth, alethic relativism, or perspectivism, some of which have been discussed in this thesis, should be included in this category. In this case, as Eco (1990a) and then Leone (2020) pointed out, the similarity is imposed by asserting that similarity and difference do not exist without us, that there are no similarities or differences that are not subjective similarities and differences, just matters of opinion or taste, with the result that believing one thing or its opposite makes no difference, because there is nothing to which those "truths" correspond.

3.5. Conclusions – Truth, semiotics, and the public sphere

Lynch (2004; 2021; 2025), has shown very convincingly that truth is important for democracy (see also Kitcher, 2001; Misak, 2000, 102). He starts with a basic question: «what is the point of having an idea of truth in the first place?» (2004, 160).

We need truth because it is necessary to distinguish between good and bad opinions, and to have a minimal understanding of what it means to be wrong about something. Lynch further argued that truth is a good in itself, but we don't need to go that far here: simply put, if beliefs guide actions, then the belief that “it's raining” is better than “it's not raining” when it is, in fact, raining outside, because in the first case we might bring an umbrella with us and avoid getting wet. Or, as William James put it, it is better to: «Believe truth! Shun error!» (2006 [1987], 17–18). Therefore, in an ideal radical democracy – completely unconstrained and where power is fairly distributed among its members – truth remains an important value, at least instrumentally.

At least a minimal notion of truth is also necessary to distinguish between facts and interpretations, as I have argued, and for the very possibility of disagreement. If truth were merely an internal matter, no one could fail in being right, and there would be no point in disagreeing with others about anything, because there would be no “something” independent of the parties involved in the discussion to disagree about. Lynch (2004, 161) asks us to imagine a city called Orwellia¹⁵⁵, where all its citizens believe that true is what the Authorities say it's true. They cannot grasp the thought that the Authorities could be mistaken or say something false. The point is that this notion of “truth” «undermines the very point of having the concept» (Lynch, 2004, 162). A fundamental aspect of any democracy (radical or moderate) should be the possibility of disagreeing with those in power. But if truth is not independent of opinions, then it is not possible to disagree with those in power. This is why Laclau and Mouffe's notion of conflict also needs a minimal notion of truth (cf. Zamora and Santarelli, 2021). Rorty's opposite substitute of truth, solidarity, also needs truth, for specular reasons. As we saw, it's precisely the recognition that truth and opinions are different things what teaches the value of tolerance and solidarity toward views that differ from our own. And if there were no real disagreement, I don't see how one could truly claim to be tolerant: real tolerance requires the awareness that one can be wrong, otherwise it is just paternalism (just like the notion of doubt, which for Peirce is the real driving force behind human inquiry, cannot be premised by a methodology, but must be true, spontaneous doubt). In turn, the usefulness of truth in a democracy is also that it allows us to think that something might be

¹⁵⁵ Lynch (2025) proposes the same mental experiment, this time called after an invented group of people, the “tweetbookinas”, who believe only in the truth as the terminus ad quem of signs. That is, they believe that truth is the same as what they believe is the truth.

correct even if others disagree. This is what grounds the validity of both concepts of conflict and solidarity for democracy.

If this is the case, then democracy should neither be conceived as the space in which communication necessarily leads to universal consensus, nor the arena where antagonistic groups confront each other without any possibility of real mutual understanding or problem-solving (or worse, where each group has its own truth). Rather, it should be the space of reasons that Dewey spoke of – where the aim is to *get things right*, for the benefit of all members of society. Where «the essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion» (Dewey, 1927/2016, 224).

All this to say why it is important that semiotics studies truth. Not only is truth as *terminus a quo* important, but the very distinction between truth as the *terminus ad quem* of a text and as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis is a crucial democratic value for the health of the public sphere and the space of reason. Different people believe in different things, but nobody is incapable of being wrong. As seen, acknowledging this is the first step for being considered truthful (what I called semiotic humility). When this distinction is accepted, we can confidently say that truth (as *terminus a quo*) is a value for democracy, and that democracies must, as Lynch says:

encourage, protect, and fairly distribute access to reliable *social-epistemic practices*. These are practices that (a) aim at producing true belief; (b) are, overall and in the long run, more reliable than not in accomplishing that aim; and (c) are distinctively social in that they involve public interactions between agents. (2021, 21)

The purpose of this chapter was to contribute if not to the promotion, at least to the understanding of a social-epistemic practice of this kind, namely the meaning and requirements of truthfulness in discourse. Obviously, there would still be a lot of work to do. In particular, I believe this line of research should, in the future, also lead to the formulation of a series of “survival” tools, if not resistance tools, to navigate the crisis of truth we are experiencing. Here too, semiotics has already produced some results, especially with regard to the analysis of so-called fake news and the limits of fact-checking as a solution to the crisis. However, most of these proposals concern truth as the *terminus ad quem* of texts, which is only one of the critical tasks of a semiotics with a conscience; the other is the study of the ways of producing and interpreting truthful texts.

In my analysis, truthfulness is conveyed primarily by three semiotic traits, three semiotic virtues: semiotic humility, or not claiming, genuinely or otherwise, to have ‘the truth in your pocket’; accuracy, i.e., respect for the complexity of truth and sharing the methods and reasons for believing that something is true; and sincerity, i.e., telling what one believes to be true to those who deserve the truth. In most cases, it is not possible to distinguish between truth and falsehood using semiotics alone. Often, it is not even possible, for those who consume information today, to distinguish between truth and falsehood with the competences

we have at our disposal. However, it is possible, albeit difficult, to semiotically recognize the three traits of truthfulness, as long as we pay attention to them. For the semiotician, the take-home message is that it is possible to study the truthfulness of a text as an objective semiotic effect, that produces real effects on the world we live in, without falling into the trap of having to say that, since we cannot know for sure what is true and what is not, then we cannot distinguish between positive and negative uses of signs.

I began embracing Danesi's (2024) approach, according to whom a semiotics with a conscience is needed to identify strategies to fight the spread of mis/dis-information, conspiracy theories, and, more generally, the spread of untruthful communication, especially on social media. Beyond the semiotics of the false, I then posed a parallel (if not propaedeutic) problem, that has to do with Eco's (1997) admission that, in order to study the false, it is necessary to first have a minimal notion of truth. But once this notion is isolated, which is what I did in the previous chapters, one may ask how signs can "tell the truth", and how signs that tell the truth can be recognized. Given the very definition of truth as what is independent of signs, the answer must be that we do not know, and that they cannot be recognized a priori with the tools of semiotics alone. As Eco (1990a) concluded in his analysis of the types of falsification and the criteria for recognizing authenticity:

The current notion of fake presupposes a "true" original with which the fake must be compared. But we have seen that all the criteria for determining whether something is a fake of an original coincide with the criteria for determining whether the original is authentic. Therefore, the original cannot be used as a parameter for exposing its counterfeits [...] (Eco, 1990a, 247, my translation)

The original (or rather, a presumed original: «we do not blindly assume that what is presented to us as the original is indisputably so», *ibidem*) cannot be taken as absolute parameter for its falsifications, because we can never be absolutely certain that something is the authentic original. Similarly, one can never (nor should) be certain of knowing the truth. Not only is it impossible to identify the original, but, as Leone (2023a) has suggested, the recognition of falsehoods created by digital and artificial intelligence technologies will become increasingly problematic, as it will become increasingly difficult to provide evidence for the falsification of something.

But if we strive to falsify things it is because we believe that an original exists, even if we do not know where, and the same applies to the minimal notion of truth as the *terminus a quo* of semiosis.

If it is not possible to distinguish between signs that tell the truth and signs that tell the false semiotically, what can be studied is the distinction between truthful signs (i.e. signs that value truth), and untruthful signs (signs that ignore, are indifferent to truth). That is, what we can do is to distinguish two semiotic forms in the production of natural or political texts, which I have called, respectively, open and closed, regardless of the actual truth or falsity of their content.

From this point of view, while I agree with Lorusso (2017, 136) that «the fractalization of truths, the emptying of the role of spokesperson for truths, the flattening of the public arena onto immediacy» (my translation) should be of great concern for semioticians, I do not think that truth is only discourse, agreement, a possible lie, or a convincing story, as she contextually argued (101; see also Lorusso, 2025, 193). These notions, admittedly fundamental for semiotics, capture only one aspect of the meaning of “truth” as the terminus ad quem of signs or texts, i.e., what signs say is true. There is also another, different notion of “truth” as the terminus a quo of semiosis, a notion that is just as important from a critical point of view, and that poses a completely different challenge for semiotics¹⁵⁶.

Therefore, while I believe it is essential to focus on the study of the acts of veridiction of political texts (what and how texts say something is true, often for strategic purposes), I do not think that this exhausts our tasks in relation to “truth” – semiotics should also distinguish between truthful and untruthful ways of making someone believe something is true.

In this chapter I defined truthfulness and provided a truthfulness principle (TP), along with three submaxims, drawing inspiration from the pragmatics literature on conversational maxims and from Williams (2002), so as to introduce the notion into semiotic theories and distinguish truthfulness from veridiction. This allowed me to identify a path to follow for the semiotic description of the open and the closed, defined as the semiotic form that respects the values of truthfulness (semiotic humility, or fallibilism, sincerity, and accuracy) and the form that denies those values, respectively.

I then explored the distinction in more depth through some semiotic resources already available in the literature which, although they do not take into account the notion of truth, offer suitable tools for distinguishing between the open and the closed. I started considering the semiotic literature on ideology. As is well known, for Barthes and Eco ideology was a science of form rather than a science of ideas. However, in order to establish the distinction between open and closed, I first had to distinguish between two meanings of “ideology”. I showed that the semantic bivalence of the term has historical origins, due to the vicissitudes of its use, especially in the Marxist sphere, from which Barthes and Eco also drew inspiration, and that a distinction must be made between ideology as the science of ideas which, for its coiner, Destutt de Tracy, was a tool to fight dogmas and

¹⁵⁶ The same one that Lorusso herself uses in the following passage, which I have italicized: «Let’s go back to the example of the cormorant covered in oil [...] That image was used to express the harmful consequences of the Gulf War, including the consequences for the natural ecosystem, but in making this judgment, it expressed a *falsehood*: it was an incorrect predication, because there were no cormorants in the Gulf and the photo was not taken there. Was the photo therefore *false*? No, because the cormorant had actually been photographed; it was not a photomontage! [...] Yet the truth did not depend on the reality of the cormorant. It depended on the judgment about that cormorant: on how it was placed in a predication about causes and effects» (Lorusso, 2017, 103, my italics and translation). Evidently, a notion of truth as independent from discourses is necessary to inter-define truth as dependent on discourses, what is true according to a discourse.

prejudices of thought, and ideology as false consciousness, that is as that which ideology in the first sense was supposed to fight. As Leone (2024b) recognized, the study of ideology as false consciousness implies an approach in which certain practices are identified as semiotically better for society than others (distinguishing between ideology from non-ideology). However, I have argued that the most widely accepted theory in semiotics for this distinction (better/worse practices), that is, Barthes' (1957), is based, at least in part, on a strong distinction between denotations (primary meanings of signs) and connotations ("parasitic" semantic surpluses added to primary meanings) that is no longer acceptable after Eco's *Antiporphyry*, and therefore that the denotation/connotation pair should be replaced by the open/closed pair. The ideological discourse is indeed the distorting discourse that promotes only certain interpretations as natural, true, established, concealing alternative theories, signs, and interpretations, but this concealment is not achieved by superimposing an ideological connotative meaning on the correct denotative meaning of signs, but by superimposing a given meaning (denotative or connotative, depending on the context) on the complexity of the world, or on truth as the terminus a quo of semiosis. This, in turn, also offers an explanation of why the ideological discourse is something negative for society: because it is not truthful.

At the same time, shall one accept to identify ideology (as false consciousness) with the closed discourse and with untruthfulness (and non-ideology with open discourse and truthfulness), then it is possible to use the tools that semiotics has produced for the study of ideology for the study of truthfulness. I have cited in particular the semiotics of myths and a series of categories which, however different, all point to similar semiotic phenomena: Eco's distinction between interpretative rationalities of modus vs. Hermes, metaphor and metonymy in Jakobson, continuous (or non-discrete) and discrete systems in Lotman, equivalence and difference.

As a second resource, I then introduced political semiotics, and in particular the theory of Selg and Ventsel (2020). This allowed me to specify a type of text for which the analysis of truthfulness is particularly relevant (or more immediately urgent), namely, borrowing the terminology of van Dijk (1975), taken up by Eco (1979; 1981), for natural texts, which are those texts that say something about the world we live in, not about a fictional world. Since being truthful is a matter of semiotic form rather than content, I defined the open and the closed as two political forms: a discourse is not truthful or untruthful based on what it says, or on the truth of what it says, but based on how it says it.

The closed discourse, therefore, concerns the superimposition of a given "truth", a belief, an ideological content, over truth as terminus a quo (or over the world, as it is said in ecosemiotics), and this is done through a semiotic style of sign production that places signs in a relationship of similarity (logic of equivalence) with each other and with the world, including signs that could invalidate a belief or theory. This happens not only by presenting something as certainly true, but also by concealing or denying possible counterevidence and alternative theories, as I concluded through the analysis of a conspiracy theory and by pro-

posing a typology of ways of denying the world (dividing simplification, pavidity, negation, and relativism).

It would be untruthful if I did not say that this research is only my attempt to contribute to the debate on the problems of truth in the public sphere and to the promotion of social-epistemic practices. Much research is still needed, but I think this research is necessary to address the problems of falsehoods and the crisis of truth we are experiencing. And I believe that Peirce was right when he said that we have nothing but signs to know and evaluate the world. In order to judge a text or someone as truthful, we can only rely on signs so semiotics, as the discipline that studies signs, should not shy away from studying truthfulness and from distinguishing, semioethically, between better and worse semiotic practices from an epistemic point of view and for the public sphere to become as truthful as possible. In this work, I have laid some foundations for semiotics to go in this direction.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Tõest semiootilisest vaatepunktist

Minu doktoritöö tõukub üldisemast küsimusest: kas tõe probleemi on võimalik käsitleda semiootilisest vaatepunktist? Seetõttu käsitleb käesolev uurimus tõe nii laiemas mõttes, lekseemi semiootilis-semantilise analüüsi kaudu, kui ka sügavamalt, tõe ja tõepärasuse rolli semiootilistes teooriates ümber mõtestades. Esimese uurimuse puhul olen peamiselt inspireeritud Eve Sweetseri (1987) tööst „vale” mõistest, mille eesmärk on pakkuda lihtsat „tõe” määratlus. Vastust teisele uurimusele otsin dialoogis varasemate semiootikaalaste töödega tõe kohta andnud. Keskkel kohal on siin Umberto Eco lähenemine, kelle seisukohad tõe kohta, kuigi mitte süstemaatiliselt esitatud, on minu arvates üldise semiootika seisukohast kõige arenenumad selles valdkonnas.

1. peatükis pakun välja lekseemi „tõde” analüüsi semiootilis-semantilisest vaatepunktist. Esmalt eristan „tõe” semantilisi analüüse ja tõeteooriaid (eristades märki objektist), et selgitada semiootilist lähenemist „tõe” suhtes. Pärast seda pakun välja „tõe” tähenduse analüüsi, kasutades algstrateegiana Peirce’i eristust objektide, märkide ja kõnelejate vahel, mis võimaldab analüüsida, kuidas „tõe” tähendus muutub seoses sellega, mida peetakse „tõeks”. Ma näitan, et a) „tõde” tähendab „sõltumatust”, isegi kui sõltumatuse liik ja sellest, millest sõltumatu ollakse, varieerub kolmes juhtumis; ja et b) koos selle esimese „tõe” tähendusega on olemas ka teine, peaaegu vastupidine tähendus, mille puhul me nimetame „tõeks” mitte omadust olla tõene, vaid asju, millel on see omadus. Selles teises tähenduses hakkab „tõde” tähendama peaaegu vastupidist tõe kitsas mõttes, st „kindlust” või asju, milles ollakse kindel sisu süsteemis, ideoloogias või diskursuses.

Selle kahe moto „räägi tõtt” ja „naera tõe üle” analüüsi valguses, millega ma tegelen punktis 1.4, jõuan järeldusele, et veriditsioon ei ammenda semiootika kriitilisi ülesandeid tõe suhtes ning et veriditsiooni kõrval võib semiootika uurida ka tõepärasust (veriditsioon ja tõepärasus vastavad vastavalt eespool mainitud kahele „tõe” tähendusele, sõltumatusele ja kindlusele).

Veridiktioon ei ammenda „tõe” tähendust – kui inimesed ütlevad, et midagi on tõsi, ei taha nad alati panna kedagi uskuma, et midagi on tõsi, vaid ka seda, et midagi muud võib olla vale; et on hea olla siiras, et võib eksida jne (juhtumid, mis viitavad olulisele, kuigi naiivsele tõe mõistele), ei tähenda siiski, et märkidega on tegelikult võimalik tõtt rääkida. Ma käsitleb seda probleemi 2. Peatükis, milles esitan semiootika raames argumenti, mis näitab, miks semiootika jaoks on vajalik sisuline, mitte diskursiivne tõe mõiste, näidates, et vastupidine seisukoht on vastuoluline ja problemaatiline. See on eelkõige Eco argumentatsioonistiil tema teoses *Antiporphyry* (1983b; 1984a; 1984b), mis välistamise teel näitab nn sõnaraamatumanüümi (mis käsitleb teadmiste struktuuri Porphyrian puu kujul ja märkide tähendust reaalsusest sõltumatusena) võimatust. Eco artiklit peetakse õigustatult üheks olulisemaks panuseks arutelusse sõnastiku ja entsüklopeedia kui semantikavahenditesse. Siiski jäetakse sageli tähelepanuta, kuidas semiootiliste süsteemide entsüklopeediline struktuur tähendas Eco jaoks seda, et märgid ei ole

mitte ainult reaalsusest sõltumatud, vaid on osa samast reaalsusest, mida nad esindavad (märgid on välised märgid).

Alustades *Antiporphyry* argumendi rekonstrueerimisest ja Eco nõrga semiootika võrdlemisest Quine'i ja Peirce'i epistemoloogiaga, väidan, et a) semiootika probleemid, kuigi need puudutavad (tekstide) tõlgendamist, on siiski välised probleemid, mille tõde on väljaspoolne ja sõltumatu sellest, mida semiootikasüsteemis peetakse tõeks; b) kuna märgid kuuluvad olemuslikult kokku ülejäänud reaalsusega, nad on materiaalsed, peaks semiootika looduse ja kultuuri vastandust käsitlema lihtsa eristamisena, mitte metafüüsilise dualismina; ja seetõttu c) peame eristama kahte tõe mõistet: tõe kui semioosi *terminus a quo* ja tões kui tekstide *termini ad quem* (laenates terminoloogiat Eco, 1999).

1. ja 2. peatükis esitatud argumendid õigustavad ühtlasi, miks tõe uurimine on tähtis semiootilisest vaatepunktist. Seetõttu teen kolmandas peatükis mõned esimesed sammud selles uurimissuunas. Eelkõige pakun välja tõepärasuse määratluse pragmaatilise stiilina, lähtudes Grice'i vestlusmaksimidest, Williamsi (2002) mõiste analüüsist ja võrdlusest Leech'i (1983; 2014) viisakuse teooriaga. Seejärel pakun välja mõned semiootilised vahendid, et eristada seda, mida ma nimetan avatuks ja suletuks diskursiivseteks vormideks, mis näitavad tõepärasuse tunnuseid (ja seega austavad tõe väärtust), ning vorme, mis neid ei austa.

Esimene ressurss pärineb ideoloogiat käsitlevast semiootilisest kirjandusest. Siin eristan esmalt „ideoloogia” mõiste kahte tähendust, nimelt ideoloogia kui „ideede süsteem” ja „vale teadvus”. See võimaldab näidata, et kuigi nii avatud kui ka suletud stiil on semiootilised ideoloogiad esimeses tähenduses, on ainult suletud stiil ideoloogiline ka teises tähenduses. Teiseks tutvustan Selgi ja Ventseli (2020; 2022) poliitilist semiootikat ja väidan, et i) avatud ja suletud eristamine on poliitilise semiootika jaoks oluline eristus ning seega määrav ka loomulike tekst (või Ferraro, 2019 terminoloogiat kasutades Gamma narratiivide) analüüsimiseks, mille eesmärk on öelda midagi tões maailma kohta; ii) avatud ja suletud on kaks poliitilist vormi, mistõttu poliitilisi diskursusi saab eristada avatud ja suletud diskursustena mitte selle põhjal, mida öeldakse, vaid selle põhjal, kuidas seda öeldakse. Lõpuks pakun välja mõned näited nende kategooriate rakendamise kohta (eelkõige analüüsin vandenõuteooriat punktis 3.4.1 ja esitan esmase tüüpoologia maailma eitamise viiside, st suletud diskursuse kohta punktis 3.4.2).

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- (2024) *L'estinzione del futuro? Semiotica della verità in Extinction Rebellion*. "Lexia", 43–44, 2024, pp. 213–235, <https://doi.org/10.53136/979122181418713>, with Zengiaro N. and Cristofari G.
- (2023) *Diagrams as Centerpiece for an Enactivist Epistemology*. "Semiotika", 18, pp. 118–140, <https://doi.org/10.15388/Semiotika.2023.18.4>.
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Publikatsioonid:

- (forthcoming) “Lie Detection in Faces and Faces as Technology for Lying”. In
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del magico”*, “Sinestesie online”, <https://hal.science/hal-05128051v1>,
koos Corosaniti V., D’Amelio C., Flecchia A., Giribuola A., Lorenzin B.,
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Everything is Connected. Signs of a Conspiracy, koos Heidi C. Piva, Tallinn, Eesti 13.06.2025. XIV NASS konverents *Creativity – Complexity – Intelligence*.

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On Truth from a Semiotic Point of View, Varssavi, Poola 05/09/2024. IASS-AIS-i 16. maailmakongress.

Why Conspiracist Theories Aren't Useful, Varssavi, Poola 04/09/2024. IASS-AIS-i 16. maailmakongress.

Intervento su Bruno Latour, "Il chiudiporta è in sciopero, per amor di Dio tenete la porta chiusa", koos Karina Abdala, Asia Bertoli ja Pietro Lana, Torino, Itaalia 13.03.2024. *Seminari di semiotica 2024 Oggetti, tecnica, senso / Objects, Technique, Meaning*.

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Two Approaches to the Embodiment of Language From a Semiotic Point of View, Thessaloniki, Kreeka 02.09.2022. 15. semiootika maailmakongress / IAS-AISS *Semiotics in the Lifeworld*.

Diagrams as centerpiece of an enactivist epistemology, Vilnius, Leedu 06.11.2021. XII NASS konverents *Meaning in perception and the senses*.

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