Language as Semiosis—A Short Reflection on Paul Rastall's article

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Models are constructs for understanding; linguistic models are constructs for the understanding of language. Since language is a hugely multifaceted phenomenon, philosopher-linguist Paul Rastall's (2013) suggestive games with his minimal Models suggest "a view of language with multiple accreted and overlapping systems" (p. 21). Each of these systems could be studied through a (set of) small model(s) foregrounding its specific functions. The motivation for setting up a small model does not spring from a total model of language issued by a school in theoretical linguistics, but rather from a philosophical or semiotic interest in a range of functions that language can reasonably be assumed to have, and which different languages would then manage in their own differing ways.

This approach has the advantage of being pluralistic and open-minded; in a situation where linguistics still has to struggle with its mutually exclusive and conflicting schools, Rastall's suggestion offers at least an attractive philosophical therapy for frustrated scholars in the agonistic field of language studies. But if the multiple systems "overlap", the minimalistic strategy does not necessarily lead to a relativistic chaos; the systems involved may well turn out to feed into each other in a certain describable order.

If these systems are forms of *semiosis*, in the sense that they functionally relate expressions to contents, or signifiers to signifieds, or bodily engaging *forms* to mental entities, or *meanings*, then certain connections between the systems could be *semiotic*: either as (paradigmatic) relations between semioses competing for a function, or as (syntagmatic) relations between semioses that uphold structural interdependencies.

The Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1943) proposed a simple principle, or a minimal model, describing intersemiotic relations. A particular semiosis may take another particular semiosis as its signifier (form) or it may take another particular semiosis as it content (meaning). We could call this mechanism a principle of semiotic embedding. Hjelmslev further proposes a somewhat idiolectal terminology for the structural situations resulting from semiotic

embedding. He wanted to describe metalanguages, connotational languages, etc. and had specific philosophical reasons to do so. Since he saw language as the only form capable of grasping the properties of the world, linguistics was going to become the philosophical metalanguage of all (object) languages of knowledge. I consider Hjelmslev's claims on this point to be derailed. Instead, I want to find out what language is doing, exactly as Rastall does. Here is my own quasi-minimal model of basic functions in language (Fig. 1).

Table 1. Core functions of language
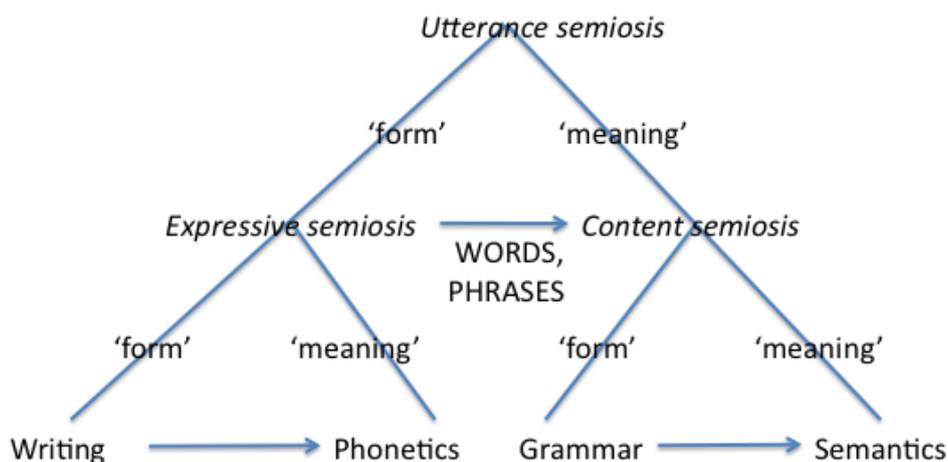
According to this model, writing signifies phonetics, and grammar signifies semantics. Languages that do not have or use writing may instead have elaborate speech gesture systems. Those which do have writing, often have more than one writing system. Grammatical constructions signify meanings but often compete with other (paraphrastic) constructions, and preferences can depend on utterance-related circumstances. Words, phrases, clauses, sentences all have both expressive semiosis and content semiosis. The superordinate semiosis here corresponds to de Saussure's linguistic sign, composed of a conceptual signifier and a conceptual signified. It also corresponds to the form–meaning pairings celebrated in construction grammar. However, each of these semioses can be considered a small model in its own right, they just happen to integrate rather nicely.

Utterance semiosis, as shown in Fig. 1, is not the ultimate and overarching semiotic function, since none of the core structures in the model account for speech acts, performative functions, pragmatic and situational constraints or discourse meaning. We need to expand the core model and add at least three more functions (we ought to add them one by one, as small models, while arguing carefully, but this is just a note in what is hopefully a debate). The functions we need to introduce are those of enunciation, rhetoric, and discourse.

In some traditions, the representation of speaker and hearer is in fact called *enunciation* (from French: *énonciation*, a notion introduced by Benveniste 1966) and accounts for the variable modes of address (assertion, suggestion, request, order, declaration, promise…) and the variations in evidentiality and voice (polyphony, irony, emotional temperature…). The pragmatic function lets the enunciative meaning of the utterance, and the utterance itself, express a situational meaning determined by the social discourse function in which the utterance is inscribed. Finally, the discursive function accounts for the ways in which certain enunciative forms signify particular socio-cultural meaning conditions. The result is now a more

complex architecture of semiotic functions, each of which may even correspond to several Rastall models (Fig. 2):

Figure 1. More functions of language
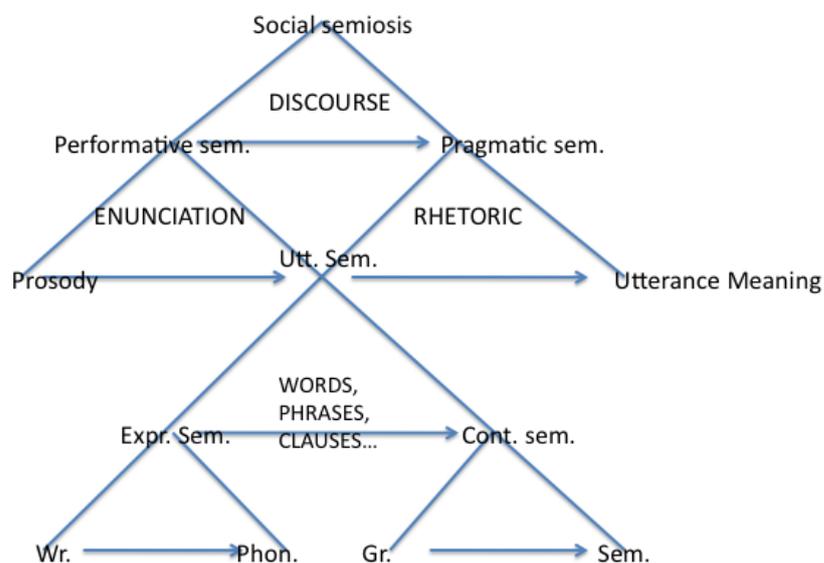
One might object that this begins to look like a total and global, maximal model again. However, it is still open to further additions and subtractions of all kinds, since social semiotics include ritualizations, iconic settings, musical framings, and complex institutional discourse formations of many kinds. Each node in this semiotic architecture is a locus of competing systems; in this perspective it seems strongly implausible that language as such should be *a system*, or a single coherent and 'immanent' structure—as Hjelmslev's glossematics and many other schools have believed—or that a particular language be such a system or structure. Other researchers, including Bakhtin ([1975] 1981) and Voloshinov ([1929] 1986), have doubted this belief. My main reason for being doubtful is that word classes and syntactic functions cannot be reduced to each other; they are not part of the same sub-system. It may be more accurate to characterize language as consisting of semiotic parts of (a semio-linguistic part of) an open semiotic network that expands in all directions without reaching any known limits; but a network containing local architectures that can be systematically studied one by one through local models that we can call 'small' if we wish to follow Rastall's inspiration. Considering language this way is what linguistics and other semiotic disciplines, including philosophy (of language), *practically* have to do, whatever the theoretical justification they prefer to adduce may be.

References

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