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The Role of the Imagination in Semiosis

Most accounts of semantics tend to be too rationalistic or cognitivist and to focus on problems of normativity rather than creativity. Phenomenology offers a corrective because of its emphasis on embodiment and the role it accords to the imagination. I argue that linguistic competence and semiosis require both normativity *and* creativity and that semiosis is *imaginative*. I base my argument on Kant's schematism, Gadamer's hermeneutics, and Merleau-Ponty's account of imagination. The turn to phenomenology is indispensable for providing a unified account of the role of the imagination in semiosis and intersubjectivity.

a) For Kant, the schematism is performed by the imagination and *mediates* between perception and conception; "seeing-as is the act of schematization" (Tierney 1994). According to Tierney, "The schematism structures meaning by mediating between the concrete level of perception (understood in the wide sense to include not merely sensory perception, but situational perception) and the abstract level of conception." Just as Lennon (2010) argues that imagination mediates between perception and conception, I argue that it plays a role in semiosis and in mediating between interlocutors. Specifically, the imagination's act of "seeing-as" plays a key role because reaching mutual understanding requires interlocutors to have a sense of another's perspective. They must be able to see things otherwise than from their own subjective point of view. Imagination is hence important for the development of *intersubjectivity*.

b) Gadamer distinguishes between an individualising and conventionalising tendency in language. He rejects the assumption that meaning is purely cognitive, rational, or denotative, distinct from its conative or connotative aspects. For him, a semantics that explains meaning purely in terms of substitutability and correspondence relations is limited. Whatever equivalence relations there are among expressions, they are "not unchanging mappings; rather they arise and atrophy, as the spirit of the times is reflected from one decade to the next in semantic change" (Gadamer 1999). Language is a living thing—a thing that *we live*; it is a practice.

c) Language should be conceived as not only a *practice*, but an *embodied* practice. I therefore draw on Merleau-Ponty's embodied account of the imagination to flesh out i) how perspective-taking in dialogue involves acts of imagination (but is distinct from contemporary simulation theory) and ii) how the Gadamerian tension between individualization and conventionalization in semiosis is rooted in the "to and fro movement between acquired and creative modes of embodiment" (Steeves 2001).

References

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