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The “Maxwellian style” of research in cognitive semiotics

Cognitive semiotics is more or less directly involved in the discussion on the nature of subjective experiences. One way of relating the study of signs to the broader discussion on subjectivity and consciousness is offered by phenomenologically oriented cognitive semiotics (e.g. Thompson 2007, Sonesson 2012, Zahavi 2012). The project instantiates what I refer to as the “Augustinian style” of research, which consists in combining findings from different, originally unrelated, fields of study into a coherent system with the hope that such a theoretical complex will offer new insights.

This presentation sketches an alternative approach to the study of subjective experience, which has already secured its position in the philosophy of mind, but its consequences for cognitive semiotics have not been investigated so far. The style of research, which I call “Maxwellian,” attempts to develop the science of consciousness entirely within the paradigm of natural sciences, i.e. with little or no import from Husserlian phenomenology. The most vocative call for this kind of “science of consciousness” comes from Daniel Dennett (1995) and David Chalmers (1997, 2010), who also outlines its metaphysical and methodological postulates, but similar ideas appear in other corners of analytical philosophy (e.g. Tye 2000, Strawson 2006, Nagel 2012). The “Maxwellian” philosophers of mind opt for strongly non-reductive explanations of conscious experience, like property (non-reductive) representationalism (Tye), dualism (Chalmers), or panpsychism (Strawson). In this view, purely neurological flavors of cognitive semiotics are, at best, incomplete. Yet “the Maxwellian phenomenology” is still founded on general metaphysical assumptions and methodology of natural sciences.

Arguably, in “Maxwellian phenonemology” providing a scientific account of a semiotic phenomenon amounts to providing a model of this phenomenon which allows for making testable predictions about empirical data, i.e. semiotic expressions in various modalities (linguistic, visual, gestural, etc.). This presentation provides a proof of concept for a Maxwellian analysis of two research problems in cognitive semiotics: salience in metonymies and indexical signs, and properties of similarity in iconicity.

References

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