

Is the symbol diabolical ? Duplicity(s) of the sign in question

Introduction

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Abstract

*Is the linguistic sign, traditionally conceived as a **symbol** (from the Greek sym + bol 'putting two faces together'), **diabolical** (from the Greek dia 'to separate')? That is the question arised by this second issue of Signifiances (Signifying), which proposes questioning the duplicity or, more exactly, the duplicities of the sign. The articles presented emanate from researchers from various theoretical horizons; but the studies gathered here bear witness to the same concern: the desire to question, to challenge, what is usually considered as given. All the terms of the definition of the sign as an arbitrary union of a signifier and a signified, symbolizing a portion of reality, are here questioned, each paper being particularly interested in this or that aspect of this conception. The elements of the definition are not seen as objects with a positive existence but rather as dynamic processes (speaker experience) or as the result of constitutive points of view of linguistic entities (biased linguist), and most of the contributions are based on the signifier as a dynamic process.*

Keywords: *Symbol vs. Dia-bolical ; duplicities of the linguistic sign ; experience ; dynamic process.*

Résumé

*Le signe linguistique, traditionnellement conçu comme un **symbole** (du grec sym + bole 'mettre ensemble deux faces'), ne serait-il pas **diabolique** (du grec dia 'séparer') ? Telle est la question que pose ce numéro 2 de Signifiances (Signifying), qui se penche sur la duplicité ou, plus exactement, les duplicités du signe. Les travaux présentés émanent de chercheurs d'horizons théoriques divers ; mais les études réunies ici témoignent d'une même préoccupation : la volonté de questionner, de remettre en cause, ce qui est habituellement considéré comme relevant du donné. Tous les termes de la définition du signe comme union arbitraire d'un signifiant et d'un signifié, symbolisant une portion du réel, sont ici interrogés, chaque article s'intéressant plus particulièrement à tel ou tel aspect de cette conception. Les éléments de la définition ne sont pas envisagés comme des objets ayant une existence positive mais plutôt comme des processus dynamiques (expérience du locuteur) ou comme le résultat de points de vue constitutifs des entités linguistiques (parti pris du linguiste), et la plupart des contributions ont pour point de départ le signifiant en tant que processus dynamique.*

Mots-clés : *Sym-bolique vs. Dia-bolique ; duplicités du signe linguistique ; expérience ; processus dynamique.*

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The linguistic sign is one of the varieties of the symbol. Saussure's definition, a combination of a concept called signified, and an acoustic image called signifier, is the most generally accepted.⁴

(Mounin, 1974, s.v. « sign ». Authors' translation)

Is the linguistic sign, traditionally conceived as a **symbol** (from the Greek *sym* + *bol* 'putting two faces together'), **diabolical** (from the Greek *dia* 'to separate')? The question arises in more than one way.

Western thought is largely dominated by an approach that is defined as scientific and rational, and which postulates that the human individual himself is a preconstructed intelligent subject⁵ gifted with a central brain whose activity consists of representing the external world, the latter being thought to be given once and for all.

From a linguistic point of view, this dominant perspective, especially when it is not framed as an *epistemologic paradigm* that can be confronted with possible alternatives, naturally leads to the conception of any linguistic sign as the *symbol* of a reality considered as a basic fact. Thus, natural languages do not escape this type of analysis, and are assimilated with formal languages in which the signs symbolize pre-existing realities, and combine with each other on a syntactic level. A recent alternative in cognitive science⁶ – the *enactive paradigm* – is inspired by oriental philosophies. The latter are more aware of embodiment, are less dualistic, and highlight the coupling of life and the environment. The enactive paradigm is particularly illustrated through its questioning of the positivist framework:

One of the most interesting aspects of this alternative in cognitive science is that symbols, in their conventional sense, no longer play any role. This implies a radical abandonment of the cognitivist principle according to which the physical structure of symbols, their form, remains forever separate from what they represent, their meaning. This cleavage between form and meaning was the master stroke that gave birth to the computational approach, but it was also the cause of a weakness revealed by the deeper study of cognitive phenomena: how do symbols *acquire* their meaning? Where does this additional activity come from, an activity that, by construction, is not in the cognitive system? (Varela, 2017 : 206)⁷

As we can see, several issues emerge from this questioning. First, questioning the computational approach of mind and cognition as “manipulation of symbols” naturally raises interrogations about the very definition of the linguistic sign. Does the conception of the sign as a symbol, not amount to *dia*-bolizing initially integrated elements: speech acting materially on the conditions of perceivability of an environment, and an environment itself modified by speech surrounding

⁴ « Le signe linguistique est une des variétés du symbole. La définition de Saussure, combinaison d'un concept appelé signifié, et d'une image acoustique appelée signifiant, est la plus généralement acceptée ».

⁵ The widely held idea that a human being is immediately constituted as a cognitive and social subject is challenged by the paradigm of enaction, which instead posits it as the simple agent of a species that is constructed as a subject only by its action and its relation to the other.

⁶ The enaction paradigm, which derives from a reflection on the very definition of life (Maturana and autopoiesis), has been constructed in reaction to that of the computational theory of the mind, whose dominant metaphor (that of the computer) tends to reduce human cognition to the manipulation of symbols.

⁷ « L'un des aspects les plus intéressants de cette alternative en sciences cognitives est que les symboles, dans leur sens conventionnel, ne jouent plus aucun rôle. Cela implique un abandon radical du principe cognitiviste selon lequel la structure physique des symboles, leur forme, reste à jamais séparée de ce qu'ils représentent, leur sens. Ce clivage entre forme et sens était le coup de maître qui avait donné naissance à l'approche computationnelle, mais il était également la cause d'une faiblesse que révéla l'étude plus approfondie des phénomènes cognitifs : comment les symboles *acquièrent-ils* leur sens ? D'où provient cette activité supplémentaire qui, par construction, n'est pas dans le système cognitif ? ».

it? If the sign is not a symbol, what can it be? What is its role, its place, its nature in the co-evolution of living human agents in perpetual construction and distinction of themselves as subjects, in their interactions with each other and with their environment? How can another general approach to cognition lead us to redefine it and according to what methods?

Secondly, if we conceive of the sign as an element that makes it possible to represent a preconstructed external world, if the sign is seen as a form (container) associated with a stylized representation of an external referent prior to any relation to an experiencer (content), then the sign may continue carrying this split between “form” and “meaning” at its level. In fact, this cleavage is regularly referred to as “signifier” and “signified.” What is the “signified” if not a representation as understood here? What conceptions of the sign, which vary according the definitions of the place and nature of the sign, has linguistics given itself? Should we inevitably maintain a separation into two facets? Is this not another form of *dia*-bolisation, source of a certain “duplicity?” This type of duplicity could be misleading with regard to what happens in the speakers’ experience of a *dynamic signifying* in which the (symbolic) *units* are not clear. In addition, it must poorly reflect the functioning of human cognition .

And finally, as explained by F. Varela in the preceding quote, the symbolic vision of the sign obscures the questioning of the way in which the genesis of meaning is played out through the sign. In other words, what is excluded when two consubstantially united objects are cleaved is the very process by which their union takes place. Indeed, it is the process by which meaning emerges through intervention of the form. Because of the original distinction, such a question has long remained in the shadows, avoided by a declaration of the union’s arbitrariness. To question the cleavage between form and meaning is thus to simultaneously focus on the construction of meaning and to question the way in which such a divide was born in order to think about the sign differently.

The enactive paradigm is only one framework that makes it possible to question the dominant approach and propose a redefinition of the linguistic sign as well as a reflection on the very conditions of its constitution. This is the position of the editors of this issue, to which some contributors also relate in one way or another – questions about the genesis of the linguistic sign, reflections on the way in which the genesis of linguistic meaning is played out by the sign bias. But the papers proposed here are not limited to this approach, since we wished to contrast different points of view.

In the preamble that opens this volume, **Marine POIRIER** lays down the terms of the debate, based on an “exemplary fable,” in this case stanzas of a 14th century opus in verse among the most famous in Spanish literature, the *Libro de Buen Amor*, whose difficulty of interpretation is staged in the text itself. The famous episode of the “Dispute of the Greeks and Romans” proves to be a perfect illustration of some important linguistic principles that are underexploited in the traditional analysis: “double contingency” or the ignorance by each of the interlocutors of what the sign means for the other; the signified as constructed *ex post*, resulting from the positioning of an outside observer; the double conception of the sign, as representation and as embodied action. M. Poirier’s careful analysis of this edifying passage leads to an evocation of the different forms taken by the duplicity of the linguistic sign; the diabolical character (in the etymological sense of the Greek prefix *dia* ‘to separate’) from the linguistic sign can be investigated from a quadruple perspective:

- signifier / signified distinction;
- the separation of the sign from the perceivable world, to which it itself belongs;
- the sign as segmentation of a form in a signifying flow;

– the differentiation of interlocutative roles and their interaction through the interface that constitutes the sign.

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This second issue of *Significances (Signifying)* thus proposes questioning the duplicity or, more exactly, the *duplicities* of the sign, since there are indeed several dualities which deserve investigation. The articles presented, as we have said, emanate from researchers from various theoretical horizons: there is, therefore, not an expression of a single point of view or the adherence to the same school of thought; differences of opinion are recognized and nourish reflection. But the studies gathered here bear witness to the same concern: the desire to question, to challenge, what is usually considered as given. All the terms of the definition of the sign as an arbitrary union of a signifier and a signified, symbolizing a portion of reality, are here questioned, each paper being particularly interested in this or that aspect of this conception. The elements of the definition are not seen as objects with a positive existence but rather as dynamic processes (speaker experience) or as the result of constitutive points of view of linguistic entities (biased linguist), and most of the contributions are based on the *signifier* as a dynamic process.

Starting from the principles of a genetic phenomenology as practiced by the founders of the enaction paradigm, **Didier BOTTINEAU** proposes unraveling the objects “sign” and “word” by considering them as products generated by an observer engaged in a relationship with these objects. The author then explores the phenomenogenetic process by which the peircian semiotic sign and the Saussurian linguistic sign were constructed, and is led to question the *sym-bol* as a sign referring to an external and pre-existing referent. In an enactive perspective, both the sign and the experienced world appear as constructs that emerge in the relation with an observer. Therefore, all of experienced reality is by definition the fruit of a biosemiotic process, a “signifying” operation which makes surroundings meaningful for the agent who observes them. It is by the observation of the fruit of such an operation of *signifying* that the emergent *symbolisation* is likely to appear.

If the conceptual object that is the linguistic sign is indeed a construct, closely related to the positioning of the observer, it is essential to return to the founding texts where the conceptions of the sign are developed and which continue to nourish current reflection. Alongside Peirce (referred to several times in D. Bottineau’s paper), we must obviously mention Humboldt and Saussure. Several contributions propose a reading or a re-reading of the works of these two major figures in linguistics, in order to highlight the postulates that underlie them, the originality of their propositions or to evoke their reception and their extensions.

Thus, **Anne-Marie CHABROLLE-CERRETINI** evokes the central place occupied by the concept of the linguistic sign in any approach to language and languages, especially in W. von Humboldt (1767-1835), whose work after 1800 evolves towards a reconsideration of language as a sign (Trabant, 1992: 67). By insisting on the cardinal stage of the perception of the object, Humboldt takes a stand on arbitrariness. He cannot conceive the unity of the language with two fixed and inseparable faces. Indeed, if content is united with form, the former is not determined because meaning is private to each individual. Humboldt therefore proposes a new approach to the conventional aspect attributable to the unit: for him, there is discussion about this shared sense. Interlocution is where this happens. Humboldt thus united the place where the community’s experience is constituted, the place where this relation to the world is validated, and the place where one accepts the relationship that each individual has with language.

Anne-Gaëlle TOUTAIN, who presents the Saussurian conception of the *constitutive duality* of the sign, shows that in traditional dualism sound / meaning, Saussure opposes a radically different duality, between the sound and the sign, *i.e.* between the material sound, and “the group sound-meaning.” If Saussure puts forward the constitution of the sign rather than its decomposition, it is because the sign cannot be the starting point of the analysis: linguistic entities are not pre-existing positive objects, but result from a point of view, which constructs them as linguistic objects. This epistemological rupture goes hand in hand with the affirmation of a purely differential, negative existence of these entities (concept of value). Moreover, it can not be dissociated from *langue* (langue) distinction (activity, play of “purely negative” oppositions) / *parole* (empirical manifestation, result, effect of language), about which A.-G. Toutain emphasizes the fundamental nature and proposes replacing the symbolic / diabolical opposition. Saussurian theorization of language and *langue* supposes a plurality of objects and results from as many points of view. Therefore, the last part of the paper is interested in language in the sense of psychoanalysis. It especially focuses on language in the work of the psychoanalyst Alain Manier, whose reflection on psychosis is supported by the proposal of Saussure.

The Saussurian duality “vocal phenomenon as such” / “vocal phenomenon as sign” is also the starting point of **Arild UTAKER**’s paper. This duality marks a break with the traditional conception, which posits language as subordinate to thought or to the world. This subordination results in an opposition between the sign as a sensory part and what it means or represents. For Saussure, the question of the relationship between the physical, the material, and the meaning or between the sign and the world is irrelevant; it is based on a misunderstanding because it supposes positive entities gifted with a prior existence (ontological presupposition), whereas the sign is primarily defined by its relation to other signs. It is intrinsically double because it is both sonorous and content. This “irritating duplicity” makes it impossible to grasp. The sign is, therefore, the place of a double difference: a heterogeneous difference signifier / signified and a homogeneous difference between signs. And it is its negativity (its opposition to other signs) that founds it as a sign, and not the connection between a signifier and a signified having a separate prior existence. The Saussurian sign is differential, which has the consequence that it refers, in the word, to what it is not. A. Utaker concludes that it is therefore neither diabolic nor symbolic, because there are no positive entities to dissolve or connect.

Francis TOLLIS also reflects on Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale*. He focuses on the future of the inheritance imposed by an academic reading of Saussure. According to this, the linguistic sign was represented as a two-headed entity with two facets, inseparable but distinct. F. Tollis shows that even if the signifier of linguistic unity seems the least evanescent of its two components, it is about the notion of unitary signified, however well-established in the reflection on language, that there is debate. Indeed, the author shows how, given its inseparable dualism and the ontological perspective to which it predisposes, this notion seems to present at least as many disadvantages as advantages. Thus, by examining the approaches of different linguists, F. Tollis analyzes the delimitation of the signified, focusing on the question of the relation of the sign with its (possible) reference. He criticizes the processes that reify the sign, posited as a pre-existing dualistic entity. He contrasts the so-called analytical or fixist approaches, which he connects to the reception of the *Cours* (not necessarily in philological terms), with those, dynamic and contextualist, which put highlight the process of semiosis that takes place in the discourse.

The Saussurian doxa is also recalled in **Stéphane PAGÈS**’ paper, who proposes a critical approach to the linguistic sign, in order to bring out what he calls his “monstrous complexity.” Defending the idea that the sign is above all the result of the positioning of the analyst, he is interested primarily in the sign envisaged from a static point of view and reviews the main

conceptions that have been given (monadic, dyadic, triadic, for the most classical, with four or five elements for some of the most recent ones); he shows in particular that the question of relation to the world (*i.e.* the status of the referent) is a source of confusion, and, therefore, of duplicity. A static approach, however, by describing a structure according to the number of elements that enter it, does not exhaust the question relative to the constituents of the sign. This reifying vision of the sign as a fixed object, given once and for all, conceals the fact that it can (must) also be conceived as a dynamic unit, as the product in the making of a “complex multifactorial construction.” After evoking the historical and collective dimension (the sign inscribed in an evolutionary process that affects all languages), S. Pagès emphasizes above all the biological and individual dimension of the linguistic sign: it is the product of an apprenticeship (field of language acquisition) and mobilizes “complex physiological mechanisms underpinned by a cognitive and sensorimotor dimension.” If the sign is diabolical, it is above all because of the complexity of the signifying mechanics.

As for **Federico BRAVO**, he confronts the hypothesis of anagrams and the principle of the linguistic sign as a “two-sided psychic entity.” He thus questions what becomes of the signified in Saussure's work on anagrams, paying particular attention to the “theme-word,” that is to say the name whose phonic paraphrase is essential as constraint to the poet, the anagrammatized name. In the choice of the term “theme” to designate a form and not a content, F. Bravo sees a reversal that can be considered the “second Saussurian revolution” and which must be interpreted as a rehabilitation of the signifier. In particular, this involves paying special attention to the literal nature of texts, subject to a quantitative analysis of the phonic framework of words, which seems to evacuate any semantic dimension. F. Bravo's hypothesis is that Saussure's work on anagrams is in fact a means to reproduce, in an experimental way, the conditions of emergence of meaning. Moreover, in Saussure's delinearization of signifiers, F. Bravo discovers the premises of a submorphemic approach to language, at the same time a means of uncovering the reticular organization of the text and the way of access to the subconscious.

Other contributions question the status of the signifier and the signified, putting the phenomenological dimension of speech at the heart of their reflection.

Yves MACCHI evokes the well-known paradox of St. Augustine about time to illustrate the difficulty experienced by speakers to access the proper meaning of certain words despite their mastery of this vocabulary. The ease of use and even the ease of learning among young speakers contrast with the difficulty in which the informant is placed when he is put in a situation of “giving the meaning” of an isolated word (instruction proposed by the author to his informants). And it is that, in fact, the reification of the signifier, considered as an isolated or isolable object of which it is a question of restoring a possible “content” of its own, breaks with what are the usual conditions of *experience* of the *signifier* as a phenomenon: the flow of the sentence. Therefore, the author proposes making a clear distinction between the *signified* as a *posterior* theoretical construction, and *signifying*, with which it can not be confused, and by which the meaning emerges to the consciousness of the speakers and interlocutors when the signifiers are apprehended combined with each other in phrases.

This distinction between signified and signifiace is also proposed by **Michaël GRÉGOIRE**. The author draws on D. Bottineau's approach to rethink the linguistic sign, particularly in order to reintroduce a dimension that was forgotten or hidden by structuralism: the corporal dimension of language conceived as an activity. He then proposes a synthesis of the biosemiotic literature in order to highlight the distinction between “first order” (centered on the activity) and “second order” (centered on the meta-observation of this activity, meta-observation creating objects). Noting that in the first order, the distinction between signifier and signified appears irrelevant, he proposes to substitute for it the unique notion of “signifiace” (signifying). It is in second order that the objects “signifier” and “signified” become relevant, and it would probably be

appropriate to consider them as meta-objects (meta-signifier and meta-signified). Considering an utterance a succession of actions in the first order, he proposes the name *saillance* for some of these actions. “*Saillance*” (*saliencing*) allow the emergence of semantic effects associated with behavioral models that link series of signifiers together.

In the same way, **Marine POIRIER and Didier BOTTINEAU** redefine the signifier and speech as embodied actions. They show that an utterance, understood as a vocal tirade, is organized, during interpretation by a spontaneous analysis. The latter consists of producing unbundlings and groupings of segments called “signifiers.” The authors explore a range of linguistic productions that are considered deviant from the point of view of academic prescription in the segmentation of the signifiers. Through this exploration, the authors bring to light the potential effectiveness of these deviances as traces of motivated acts of spontaneous analysis. They also show the potential relevance of segments that originate these (re)analyses : namely, « ghost » segments superimposed on or interposed between those expected by a conventional analysis. The relevance of these segments may depend, in particular, on their inclusion in signifying networks of morphemic or sub-morphemic level. The authors’ purpose is to observe how, behind the apparent fixity of a symbolic signifier (reified as a stabilized entity), a dia-bolic signifier may lurk, resulting from a process of analysis and construction, reconstruction, reassembly with variable geometry.

Régis MISSIRE’s paper also treats a phenomenological problem. He proposes examining what happens to semioticity according to the level of language at which it is considered. In his framework, he adopts the distinction between system / norm / speech, by studying the forms that semiotic relations take at the level of speech (*el hablar* de Coseriu). In particular, he wonders if there are intermediate magnitudes between the “magmatic” psychic flow and the discretized and stabilized signs and units. Based on linguistic works inspired by the Gestalt, he defends the idea that the level of signifieds and that of signifiers must be analyzed in terms of substance and form. The distinction made by R. Missire between theme-forms (*per se* entities, constituents of discourse) and scheme-forms (grammatical schemata but also semic molecules that do not necessarily receive a denomination or designation) enables him to identify two types of semiosis preferentially attached to the level of concrete speech: the *expression*, for the scheme-forms, and the *designation*, for the theme-forms. These two semiotic relations are added to *signifiance* (signifying) and *signification*, which respectively characterize the level of the system and that of standards. The paper also emphasizes a dissymmetry in speech: the signifier is doomed to fade out, while the signified, which occupies the center of the attentional field, is extended. The dissymmetry is repeated at the level of the signified, between the scheme-forms and the theme-forms. The latter are primarily the object of the attentional focus. R. Missire does not, however, neglect the modulations that the various linguistic practices bring to this initial disposition of the attention field.

François NEMO is also interested in the different levels of semiosis. F. Nemo proposes adopting a stratified (and plurisemic) conception of the signified. He equally postulates a plurimorphic conception of the signifier as a combination of an external form and an internal form. He presents a detailed description of the plurisemy on the one hand, and of plurimorphy and polymorphy on the other hand, before discussing how the two logics reinforce each other. Thus, he treats the morpheme / lexeme distinction, the plurisemy of lexemes and prosody. He then contrasts the nonlinear and archiphonemic nature of the morphemes – which appear mainly as thematic indicators – and the linear and phonemic nature of the lexemes. He concludes that what ultimately appears to be the most remarkable is that the question of the signifier / signified relation and the question of the relation of signs to each other are in fact the same question.

Finally, two contributions explore the margins of the topic: one is interested in the motivation of the sign by showing that it is based on a more general mechanism, not exclusively language,

that of transmodal correspondences; the other exploits a method resulting from the “linguistics of the signifier,” one of the approaches that questions the traditional conception of the sign, and puts forward the dynamic and processual dimension of the word.

Fanny BOUDIER offers a review of literature on phonetic symbolism. The aim is both to give access to these works, which are essentially available in English up to now, and to propose a synthesis of the phonosymbolic correlations now attested. From F. Boudier’s article, we see that these are not solely based on intuition, but on psycholinguistic experiments. To show that these correlations between form and meaning exist from a phonosymbolic point of view is to move towards a redefinition of the signifier. Indeed, the signifier can no longer be seen as an entirely arbitrary object returning by pure convention to a signified, but on the contrary, it must be conceived as a materiality evoking the meaning that it contributes to building by its very form.

Through the study of an archaic verb form of Spanish – the subjunctive *-re* form –, **Mary Catherine LAVISSIERE** treats the articulation between signifier and signified. She questions the opinion widely held by many grammarians that different signifiers could be associated with the same signified, which would justify recommending the abandonment of forms deemed unnecessary. She seeks to bring out the specificity, both from the point of view of the signified and from the point of view of discursive uses of this form, a specificity which blocks its assimilation with the other forms of subjunctive of Spanish (especially the *-se* form). To do this, she proposes an alternative model of the subjunctive mode, then analyzes the alternation between *-re* and *-se* forms in conditional subordinates in legal texts. She suggests applying the concept of chronosyntax to the legal texts (the sentence is a process, a temporal being) as it was conceived and applied by Y. Macchi to poetic texts. This analysis is fruitful because of the similarities between the two textual genres (deviation from the “standard” language and especially the attention paid to the signifiers). M.C. Lavissière shows that the structuring of information in legal texts is based on chromorphosyntax, which guides the reader through the sentence, and even beyond it, through the entire text.

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