

Process semiology: a simple version

For S, who might enjoy the clues

A cunning former student asked me for a simple version of process semiology. Sensing a trap, I recoiled at first, but since without dogged students philosophy would barely have started, here is a barebones version of the sign as process.

Process semiology is a method for the study of any sign as a process rather than a static identity. Imagine you are staying with playful hosts who like to play get-the-guest. Their home has many rooms and the first game is to open the door of each bedroom and, thanks to different clues, to guess which is to be yours.

You might think that the clues are a sign, fixing you to a room, at least for the time of your stay. According to process semiology, this way of approaching signs is wrong. It is mistaken because it abstracts from two process aspects of signs: how they work and their ongoing effects.

To lead to a correct guess, the clues must let you distinguish between different rooms. They therefore work by making things stand out; they emphasise some things and discard others. Signs work in this way when you open and close doors and take in differences in information. Importantly, this is a dynamic process. It shimmers. Some clues come to the fore and others are relegated to the background.

Kitten wallpaper and curtains? Nope. Jack Vetriano painting? I don't think so. Curl-toed slippers? For Alisdair, but not for me. A navigator's hat? No unnecessary travel, thanks very much. A room of lime greens and fluorescent oranges? No, nostalgia, ever. Ketchup in the fridge? Never. A room of mirrors? Yes, yes, yes...

The point is that the each sign does not work in isolation, but rather works by *standing out* from others. In selecting some things rather than others, the sign gives them different values. It highlights some and allows others to blur into the background. In order to work, each sign has to stand out and this is a process of valuing.

So a sign is a complex change against a background, like a whiff on the wind or an inflection in a voice. It appears among other things and interacts with them. You have to work at signs, as a hunting dog might work to distinguish a faint scent or as an investigator works to detect a lie among easy truths. The scent and the lie appear gradually as shimmering outlines over a fluid context.

Your playful hosts go through lists of possible signs, with varying excitement and disappointment at how well they fit different guests. The selection and excitement attach different values to different things. Recall how children move through a menu before giving you the sign for their preferred meal. *Yuk. Bleurgh. Meh. Yum.* Settling on a selected sign involves an ongoing process of assigning value – drawing some things to the fore and dismissing others.

Instead of defining a sign as a fixed relation of symbol to meaning, or signifier to signified, the process semiology of signs defines the sign as a process of selection, the selection of a set against a background. This is the first step in writing any process sign. The method of the process philosophy of signs starts with the selection of a set: {a, b, c,...}. This set is the process name for the selected sign.

Every flag is a sign in this way; for example, the French tricolour can be rendered as {blue, white, red, equal vertical stripes}. The flag is an ongoing process of selection distinguishing the elements of its set from a changing background. That's why flags grow old and controversial. Their selections change with circumstances. *Can we lose the crown, please? Isn't the lion of empire a little out of place on this small island?*

You might object that flags do not change and nor do banknotes. The tricolour is what it is. Sound as a pound. This is a mistake. In the same way as the value of banknotes is changing in relation to inflation and currency exchanges, their images are changing in relation to changing relations between symbols, things and ideas. *How dare you fly the confederate flag today of all days? Where are all the banknotes with images celebrating women?*

Process semiology is highly permissive in the selection of elements for sets. You can have as many or few in the set as you like. Anything can be an element. Like your crafty hosts, process semiologists can let their imagination roam anywhere. The set can include contradictions and nonsense, objects and ideas, other sets, meanings and technical terms from opposite theories.

It does not matter who or what puts the things into the set. It could be human hand, when an artist selects a particular shade or frame for the sign. It could be a natural process, when a cloud covers the sun and creates a portentous sign of Athens dimmed under burdensome skies. It could be chance, when cards are dealt (*my set contains all the aces*). Or it could be by machine (*the Sat Nav said turn back*).

What does matter, though, is that this selection is always against the background the elements have been drawn from. The set, the process name for a sign, appears to be isolated and alone but as process it interacts with boundless things: everything that has been discarded in different ways with the selection of the set. You could have selected anything and, in principle, everything is impacted by that selection. When you choose 'the One' for a job or as a lover, other candidates and suitors are discarded and transformed. *I am loser, baby...*

When clouds cover a city and offer a grey vista to a newcomer, the city as sun-drenched and welcoming fades into the background. The idea of swimming off its shores dims as well. The lost suntan lotion dropped in the airport is now unimportant, but the missing umbrella is much more urgent. These are the ongoing effects of the sign. They are inseparable from it, because it works thanks to them.

The changing background is always part of a sign's process. It is impossible to create an abstract sign, immune to deformation by context. *Try it, I dare you (and if you succeed tell me)*. In the get-the-

guest example, the clues given to you continue to work after you have opened the bedroom door for the first time. They chose mirrors for you and that insight into your vanity gnaws at you. *Am I really that shallow?*

The surrounding effects of the sign as selection call for a second part to the method of process semiology. First, there is the art of the selection of the constituent set for the sign: {a, b, c, ...}. What's in? What's out? Second, there is the drawing up of the diagram of the effects of that selection. How is this moved away from the centre of things? How is that drawn close to this? What directions are privileged? What patterns and shapes does this selection imply?

Take an apparently simple sign such as the selection of a colour {cycling shirt, yellow}. As you cycle off through France in July to sarcastic shouts, you realise it has much wider effects, when onlookers give you sarcastic plaudits as "leader" of the tour. Or take the slightly less simple sign of a tattoo {Marie-Claude, heart, dagger, face}. The mark on the face has wide effects on those you meet. *Your mother will never forgive you, nor will Marie-France...*

The second art of process semiology is to draw up diagrams of those wide effects. When we select and position a tattoo or a form of words, we have these diagrams in mind, even if we do not directly think of them. We reflect on possible reactions, on future events and past experiences. The selection of a sign, such as a name or a definition, always has these effects. Process semiology seeks to map them as ongoing and multiple processes.

Each diagram for a sign is a proposal. It is a speculative suggestion of how things unfold around a sign. As a suggestion it is never unique. Every sign allows for many different diagrams. So each sign is not only a selected set. It is also a suite of diagrams, a chain of them offering competing suggestions about the effects of the selection of the sign as ongoing processes.

Like the selection of sets, the form of diagrams for signs is highly permissive. Process semiology is transgressive and critical. You can choose a poem as your diagram, or a picture, or a graph, or an essay. These choices are connected by a single function. A diagram shows how a selected sign transforms relations in terms of directions and intensities in and around elements.

When you stand outside a room, waiting to enter it to give news, you play the future scene in your mind and you select signs. *Sad face or resolute? Joke or just the facts?* The scene you play is a diagram for the sign. The scene takes elements from the room and changes their relations. A picture might show a crowd drawing closer in rising anger. These are the directions and the intensities. They can be drawn, told or enacted. You might play a film for the sign, or attach it to a favourite song.

A sign is always incomplete without its diagrams. The saddest stupidity is when signs are used as if they are fixed and free of process. When we say someone used a sign insensitively, we mean they were not aware of its diagrams. We grow apart from others and hurt them, if we forget that signs are alive and in motion. *How could you forget their loss? How could you say it is only a piece of land?*

The simple definition of the process sign is that it is a selection of a set {a, b, c, ... } and at least one diagram of the changes in and around all potential elements. The diagram shows shifting relations,

movements and directions around the sign. Other diagrams will suggest different changes, competing with the first. External stipulations over the sign, such as a science of the sign or of its elements, will deny the validity or possibility of a selection or diagram.

We used to think of the sign as a fixed pairing: X signifies Y. We should have been thinking that the sign was a selection {a, b, c, ...} and diagrams of the effects of that selection. The sign is a whirlpool rather than a link. It is about the chosen and the damned, and diagrams are about how they are torn apart and brought together again.