

Hybridity and Heterogeneity: The Balance of Interpretation

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Abstract

The hybrid aspect of cultures has been on the agenda of cultural and social studies as well as the arts for several years. From the perspective of the semiotician, cultures will necessarily be in continuous contact with a minimum of neighbours in order to enhance cultural semiosis, i.e., to make innovation and change possible. Otherwise, isolation would be in effect and limit a culture to its own resources. The utter failure of all isolationist historical examples illustrates this. – Peircean semiotic theory provides a basis for analysis of cultural exchange. The semiotic interface making sign exchange possible is generated actively in any peaceful or hostile contact situation. This paper, arguing that cultural interfacing is the key to the understanding of cultural evolution, utilises the concepts of pragmatism and aims at communicating the importance of semiotic theory for understanding any transcultural dynamics.

1. PRELIMINARIES

Before going into the details of this paper, please let me bring forth some aspects of semiotics which may be so prominent that they may be regarded trivial, but are nonetheless of utmost importance to the endeavour of mapping cultural contacts semiotically.

Semiotics is the science of signs. This is the most common definition of our field; however, I shall give it here as one of the fundamentals again. We must especially keep in mind that semiotics cannot be an exclusive science choosing which signs to analyse and which to ignore: Semioticians must face the obligation to recognize phenomena as signs.

Signs are organised in systems. As soon as we recognize something as a sign (and, indeed, the quality of “sign”, or at least “proto-sign” can be found in everything), we will find that these signs do not appear isolated. For our own convenience, or due to reasons of natural organization, we will identify sign systems, which are assembled according to certain rules.

Signs are not static, but dynamic units woven into processes of cognition and evolution. Therefore, systems of signs are also not static, but dynamic; they are not isolated, but in permanent contact. This very fact is rooted in the process of sign creation and sign growth, or change, commonly called semiosis. Signs which are not dynamic but static must be considered “dead”. Signs evolve out of *contact* of previously existing signs, and their making contact will result in future signs. This is also included in the process of semiosis.

Cultures are sign systems by definition following these statements. They are constructed in systems containing manifold phenomena. They change, and they are in contact. The conviviality of cultures hence means, in semiotic terms, the peaceful exchange of signs in order of fruitful sign growth, which may also colloquially be called mutual learning and understanding.

2. "PURE" CULTURES VERSUS HYBRID CULTURES

Whereas immigration has always been an issue of history since the days of colonialism, the countries of Western Europe have faced significant figures of immigrants from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe for only some three or four decades. Legislation being the base for regular immigration, the issue of integration, is on the agenda. A notable controversy has commenced all across Europe. Conservative forces have raised the question of how migrants might be integrated in the existing societal structures in the first place, asking newcomers to yield to the existing cultural continuum of the majority. Especially in the fields of language, habits, and religion, new immigrants should take on prevailing customs. Unfortunately, these politicians have not specified what exactly the *nature* of the prevailing culture was; neither have they explained how in particular it could be degenerated by immigrants. Thus they have produced the vague fear in the population of migrants being dangerous merely by maintaining their individual traditions.

While it is obvious that migrants should adhere to the local laws and hence follow a given set of existing cultural standards, the question remains if foreign cultural influence can be eliminated in all remaining fields. Moreover, if there is something like a prevailing culture to begin with, can it be supposed to be “pure”? And is it worth while to condemn foreign influences?

In this paper, I will argue that any contemporary culture of any industrialized country is the result of extensive exchange with other cultural continua, hence representing a hybrid culture. Notwithstanding this fact, there is something like heterogeneity in cultures, and surely minorities will find themselves at odds with others more often than not. On a broad scale, however, all these phenomena may be understood as the inevitable consequences of cultural semiosis, which fosters hybridization at the very root of cultural evolution. The construction of myths of homogeneous cultural continua is therefore the result of a misconception of how cultures evolve and how they interact, ignoring the fact that cultures are in utter need of contact-making in cultural interfaces so they will have a prospect of continuous development.

3. OPPOSITION, HETEROGENEITY, AND HYBRIDITY IN SEMIOTICS

In a fundamental and rigid approach, Nöth postulated that opposition can be found at the root of semiosis. Rephrasing this notion by replacing “opposition” with “hybridity” does not intend to oppose Nöth’s thesis. On the contrary, by examining the evolutionary force of semiosis, we may see that both concepts are intertwined.

The concept of opposition can both be found both in Peircean semiotics, or the pragmatist approach, and Saussurean semiology, i.e. structuralism. I will ignore here the Saussurean approach (see, however, Ipsen 2002 for more details). Pragmatist semiotics teaches that it is not monadic systems that the world is made of. Neither does the world consist of dyads, or mere differences. Rather, the cosmos and hence cognition is based on the plurality of signs and events, i.e., the action of signs in a dynamic cosmos.

However, it is not difference in itself that is predominant in cognition. Rather, plurality resulting from opposition is a concept of logic for the pragmatists. It is at the base of any experience. According to Peirce, the minimalist form of plurality, namely *binarity*, is contained in any thought. *Meaning* to him is *reaction*. This is true, e.g., in examples as simple as word pairs:

We can make no effort where we experience no resistance, no reaction. The sense of effort is a two-sided sense, revealing at once a something within and another something without. There is binarity in the idea of brute force; it is its principal ingredient. For the idea of brute force is little more than that of reaction; and this is pure binarity. Imagine two objects which are not merely thought as two, but of which something is true such that neither could be removed without destroying the fact supposed true of the other. Take, for example, a husband and wife. Here there is

nothing but a real twoness; but it constitutes a reaction, in the sense that the husband makes the wife a wife in fact (not merely in some comparing thought); while the wife makes the husband a husband. (CP 2.84)

The result of binarity, namely the relation of elements, naturally belongs to the category of secondness in the Peircean classification. Binarity must at once come into existence among the phenomena of mere firstness, or the raw emotions or feelings, which otherwise remain meaningless. Without secondness, nothing can be experienced:

The world would be reduced to a quality of unanalyzed feeling. Here would be an utter absence of binarity. I cannot call it unity; for even unity supposes plurality. I may call its form Firstness, Orience, or Originality. (CP 2.85)

As Nöth (1994a: 44) remarks, the minimal possible occurrence of opposition therefore is that between oppositional dyads. He states that Peirce, “in the framework of his semiotic philosophy of evolution, defined the process of mediating between a first and a second as the very principle of evolution (ibid.)”.

This plurality is an inherent quality of signs, as they are necessarily involved in the process of semiosis. In principle, semiosis is an endless chain of experiences producing new signs in the process, which are themselves set into relation to experiences of the past, and therefore contributing to cognition in the future. The evolutionary principle is obvious, as *all* signs in the process will eventually be altered, their meaning reconfigured, respectively:

The origin of things, considered not as leading to anything, but in itself, contains the idea of First, the end of things that of Second, the process mediating between them that of Third. A philosophy which emphasizes the idea of the One is generally a dualistic philosophy in which the conception of Second receives exaggerated attention; for this One (though of course involving the idea of First) is always the other of a manifold which is not one. The idea of the Many, because variety is arbitrariness and arbitrariness is repudiation of any Secondness, has for its principal component the conception of First. In psychology Feeling is First, Sense of reaction Second, General conception Third, or mediation. In biology, the idea of arbitrary sporting is First, heredity is Second, the process whereby the accidental characters become fixed is Third. Chance is First, Law is Second, the tendency to take habits is Third. Mind is First, Matter is Second, Evolution is Third. (CP 6.32)

This rejection of a “dualistic philosophy” necessarily restricts structuralism to the realm of heterogeneous concepts. The fact that “variety is arbitrariness”, at the same time hints at the perception of the “One” really being a perception of a “Many”.¹

Experience requires continuity. The latter is constructed as a principle of coherence in the past. Experience is “esse in praeterito (CP 2.84)”. Since experience comes in the shape of signs with new interpretants, the “effect of the sign (CP 5.475)”, plurality is an essential criteria of thirdness: “The general idea of plurality is involved in the fundamental concept of Thirdness, a concept without which there can be no suggestion of such a thing as logic, or such a character as truth (CP 4.332)”.ⁱⁱ Plurality therefore is multitude of signs and hence in the world of experience, i.e., “variety of nature (CP 1.160; 8.307)”. The universe in itself is pluralistic; its singular appearances are merely manifestations within ourselves, not the universe itself:

In the little bit that you or I can make out of this huge demonstration [of the universe], our perceptual judgments are the premisses for us and these perceptual judgments have icons as their predicates, in which icons Qualities are immediately presented. But what is first for us is not first in nature. The premisses of Nature's own process are all the independent uncaused elements of facts that go to make up the variety of nature. (CP 5.119)

Plurality of experience and variety of nature imply hybridity. Present and past are being amalgamated in the signs. Acoustic, pictorial, tactile, olfactory, and other representamina are interacting in forming new interpretants.

This idea of pluralistic experience is exemplified by William James, who argues that thus a continuity of experience is given:

Not only the absolute is its own other, but the simplest bits of immediate experience are their own others [...]. The concrete pulses of experience appear pent in by no such definite limits as our conceptual substitutes for them are confined by. They run into another continuously and seem to interpenetrate. What in them is relation and what is matter is hard to discern. You feel no one of them as inwardly simple, and no two as wholly without confluence where they touch. [...] The tiniest feeling that we can possibly have comes with an earlier and a later part and with a sense of their continuous procession (James 1909: 127-128)

This fact in the process of experiencing enables us to formulate the identity of oneness and plurality. The abstract concepts of oneness and manyness may be logically contradictory (James 1909: 127), but this problem is resolved in the recognition of the “one thing” as the “all-form of experience”, whereas the “many things” resemble the “each-forms of experience” in individual members of the community (ibid.). The identity of both can only result from a universe providing a natural plurality from which an unlimited individuality of “each-forms” can be harvested. Naturally, the forming of relations is arbitrary: “Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism or the doctrine that it is many means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related* (James 1909: 145)”. The realization of these potential relationships happens in the tiniest experience:

For pluralism, all that we are required to admit as the constitution of reality is what we ourselves find empirically realized in every minimum of finite life. Briefly it is this, that nothing real is absolutely simple, that every smallest bit of experience is a *multum in parvo* plurally related, that each relation is one aspect, character, or function, way of its being taken, or way of its taking something else; and that a bit of reality when actively engaged in one of these relations is not *by that very fact* engaged in all other relations simultaneously. (ibid.: 145)

In this manner, the plurality of the universe becomes the prerequisite of its being experienced. The relations of experience, since they are not all “solidaires (ibid.)”, can vary. From the principles of sign evolution discovered by pragmatism, we may formulate the first thesis on hybridity in semiosis:

Interpretants are entities of thirdness, i.e., signs generated in the process of semiosis. They represent the relations between other signs, which were themselves produced in semiosis before. Therefore, any interpretant may as well be called a hybrid idea. The possibility of reinterpretation of concepts is based on the natural plurality of the universe, which defines our sphere of experience. At the root of semiosis, therefore, hybridity plays out in concord with opposition. Both are necessary conditions for semiosis.

4. HETEROGENEITY AND HYBRIDITY IN CULTURES

After submitting these fundamental characteristics of signs and semiosis, let us now look at their application to cultural phenomena in modern societies. García Canclini (1998) uses the term hybridity to illustrate the contemporary state of civilization:

At the end of the twentieth century, nations and nearly all ethnic groups are economically, politically and culturally integrated in the modern world, or are experimenting with intensely hybrid processes which produce a complex heterogeneity.

This cultural plurality, simultaneously mixing, is not desirable to everyone. Governments and political parties are engaged in disputes on the role of concepts such as culture, nation, or identity in this epoch of change. Naturally, such discussions lack the historical dimension. Cultures have practiced exchange of values, customs, or material goods for years uncounted. At the same time, said contacts changed those cultures. This process is deeply rooted in semiosis, as I have shown before. It is a necessary outcome of cultural evolution. Isolation, i.e., the deletion of cultural signs from the process of transcultural semiosis, leads to stagnation. Semiotically, stagnation

equals death. Despite this fact, multiculturalism bears negative connotation to some interest groups. According to García Canclini, cultural isolationism can even be a program:

Multiculturalism, viewed from the separatist point of view, leads to each group entrenching itself in its own language, customs and exclusive heritage, and calls for risk-free cultural policies which discourage creativity. [...] Multiculturalism and cultural diversity, as understood by some government agencies and a growing number of private foundations, are indulging in harmless hobbies. These produce a small number of works which, aesthetically speaking, might set a challenge to, refine, criticize or in some way call in question the status quo. The aim is to appease the populist mentality, which is content with the easy job of defending differences of race and gender in the arts rather than tackling the arduous quest for excellence. Most of the art resulting from these programmes is a medley of kitsch produced on politically correct lines. People like it for the same reasons as they like postcards with rhymes and sentimental drawings of birds. It makes them feel good. (ibid.)

In the field of culture, our first thesis on hybridity needs to be expanded. As for now, all signs are hybrids to our understanding. In cultural semiosis, this plays out on a higher level which can be subject to analysis. Cultural hybridity thus means that signs are generated from varying regional sources, codes, or times.

In the process of hybridization, the various codes available from various resources are picked up, recombined and processed. The result is a cultural continuum where heterogeneity is only the precursor of hybridity.

Integration, the diffusion of codes in favor of the new whole is what is at the core of cultural hybridity.

Hence we have arrived at the hybridity of separate signs as opposed to hybridity in entire sign systems, the messages produced by using these systems, respectively.

From this the second thesis on hybridity is derived: Elements of various, originally different, separated sign systems may appear together and hence form new concepts of mediality, or cultural customs. All these phenomena of hybridity of higher order are only possible due to the inherent hybrid nature of signs. If merely difference persisted among signs and sign systems, various codes could not be mixed without creating an unproductive chaos.

5. HYBRIDITY VS. HETEROGENEITY RECONSIDERED

I have now determined how hybridization is at work in cultures, and I have provided the theoretical basis for semiotic description of such processes. Nevertheless, at a given time, not all

signs of a culture are in close contact. There is as well heterogeneity as the idea of homogeneity of a culture.

Obviously, in the process of cultural semiosis, the difference between hybrids and heterogeneous concepts is an important issue. I suggest there is a temporality to both concepts that at the same time connects them over the course of time, and explains how the myth of homogeneity, or “purity”, is born.

Naturally, two concepts, or customs of different cultural origin will not spontaneously meld. Still, habits like smoking, drinking coffee, eating chocolate, or having potatoes as a typical regional crop (e.g., in Germany) is not considered “foreign” nowadays. If, from a conservative point of view, e.g., German culture is not to be influenced by foreign strands, how can we explain that today said habits and fruit are not rejected?

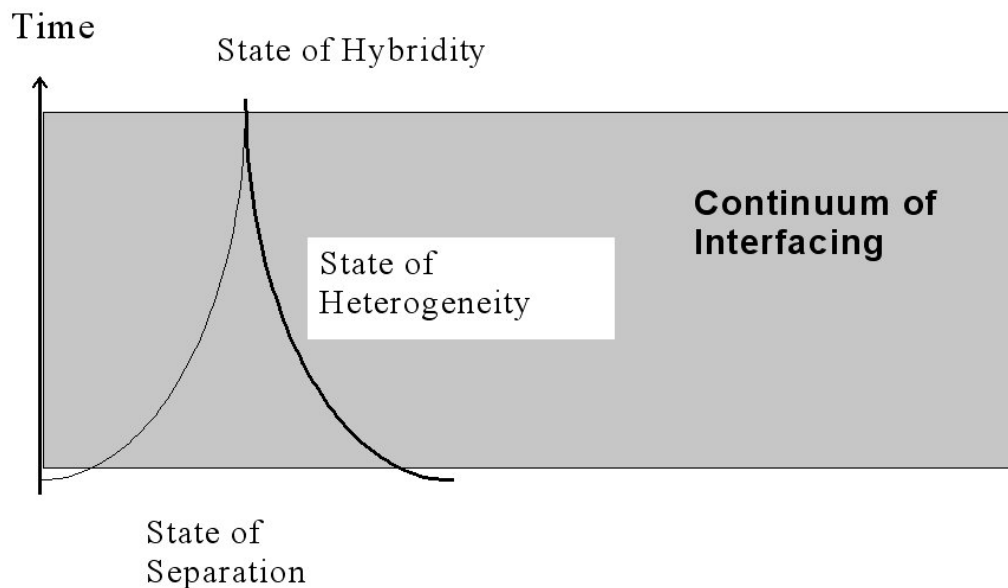


Figure 1

In Figure 1, I have tried to represent the process. Originally, two cultural continua are separated. On some point in time, they contact each other. You will notice that from the design of the illustration, this point of contact is very difficult to set. I intended it to appear so, as I think, and you will remember this point, isolated cultures are a theoretical construct. After engaging in quantifiable, empirically measurable contact, however, cultures have become what I like to call interfacing cultures. The interfaces between cultures by which signs can be exchanged are manifold. There are, among other concepts:

- personal exchange via migration
- trade
- mediated communication

- exchange of artifacts
- intellectual interchange of ideas
- taking part in international political associations, or pacts
- armed conflict
- colonialism
- imperialism
- developmental aid
- globalization
- *conviviality* in mutual learning and understanding

In any process of interfacing, both of the cultural communities will perceive new concepts as foreign first. As soon as old and new concepts are established simultaneously in the cultures, *heterogeneity* is in effect. The own and the foreign are still discernible. If they are approved of, they are adopted easily. If not, they will remain in contrast for a longer period of time. In the course of time, however, the cultural community will become accustomed to the new concepts. It may adopt these and hence undergo a change towards a hybrid culture.

The crucial point is that as soon as the stage of hybridity is achieved, the surface structure of the culture will not easily show which elements were originally foreign. Hence, the members of the community will perceive their hybrid culture as being homogeneous, or “pure”. As soon as more foreign concepts appear on the cultural horizon, this myth of pureness will help the community to define itself in difference to these latest concepts (cf. Nöth 1994b: 26). Again, heterogeneity is at work.

Hence, in the process of cultural semiosis, the hybrid as a mode of thirdness can only emerge from the heterogeneous as a mode of secondness. From the cultural mixture of codes the cultural whole is born, the new is generated from the cognition of the own and the alien. This process is endless, analogous to the general theory of semiosis.

6. "PURE" CULTURES AND ICONICITY

From what we have seen so far, we can argue that “pure” cultures are not only very unlikely, as they require a total isolation from other cultural strands, even neglecting to reflect on their own historicity, but that cultural change and interfacing is a necessity of cultural evolution.

From what I have shown, it is obvious that true hybridity in cultures, while it is achieved over the course of time, can only be revealed by recovering historical events. This is not always possible. As in crops, it is hardly imaginable that almost the entire Western European cuisine is based on plants introduced to regions north of the Alps in the Middle Ages or earlier. There was

no French wine but for the Romans (and, effectively, the Americans). There was no Swiss chocolate but for the South American cacao nut. There was no English language as we know it but for the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, the Danish, the Normans, and some other minor strands of influence such as Celtic and Latin. No Vienna cafe houses without the Turks who waged war on Austria. These are only a few superficial examples. It is obvious that it is impossible to maintain a cultural memory of foreign influences present at all times.

Still, semiotics can show that “pure” cultures cannot exist without the aid of historical analysis. Let us assume a culture free of foreign influence, and not suffering from what García Canclini (1995: 2-3) calls “multitemporal heterogeneity”. Only under these circumstances, a culture should be considered a “pure” culture.

The “most fundamental division of signs (CP 2.275)” in Peirce’s theory of the sign is his distinction of icon, index, and symbol. Whereas index and symbol refer to sign relations of secondness, thirdness respectively, the icon is a sign of firstness, representing its object on the basis of similarity (cf. Nöth 1990a: 121; cf. Nöth 1999, 2000). Therefore, an iconic representamen represents an object similar to itself (CP 2.276). Genuine firstness, however, is without reference (CP 2.85), which is obvious, as by establishing reference firstness would presently give way to secondness. Therefore, *real* iconicity is an entirely abstract construct:

A Sign [...] denotes its object only by virtue of a contrast, or Secondness, between two qualities. A sign by Firstness is an image of its object and, more strictly speaking, can only be an idea. For it must produce an Interpretant idea; and an external object excites an idea by a reaction upon the brain. But most strictly speaking, even an idea, except in the sense of a possibility, or Firstness, cannot be an Icon. A possibility alone is an Icon purely by virtue of its quality; and its object can only be a Firstness. (CP 2.276)

Therefore, Peirce makes a difference between the pure icon, that is the *potential* of absolute firstness, and the *hypoikon*, which is an iconic sign that is really existent, representing its object by similarity, “no matter what its mode of being (CP 2.276)”.

Obviously, a culture referring only to itself in its relative temporal manifestation, denying any reference to other cultural continua, evinces a strong tendency towards iconicity, which again is highly improbable. Even the distinction between *exophoric* and *endophoric* icons (cf. Nöth 1990b: 195) will not help our iconic culture out. Any exophoric icon refers to objects outside its own code, whereas endophoric icons evince self-reference towards their own code. However, any reference to other cultural continua must result in secondness and ultimately in thirdness. Therefore, a “pure” culture remains hypothetical.

7. CONCLUSION, OR: A PRAGMATIST VIEW ON CULTURAL EVOLUTION

In decades of international cooperation, European unification, implementation of immigration policy etc., we have seen that the discourse on immigration and cultural contact is suffering from ideology and cultural beliefs that are mainly based on myths. Cultural evolution is a natural cause, and European cultures have had more influence from other cultures than not. Though pragmatist semiotics may not be able to convince politicians to install a liberal legislation, the processes of cultural evolution and interfacing can be isolated and analyzed in high detail. The mediation of cultural signs against the odds of heterogeneity will be a task of the immediate future. A deconstruction of cultural myths is therefore necessary to foster peaceful contact and prosperous growth of all cultures. To return to the beginning of this paper, I may state that semiotics is the science that has developed the necessary techniques for analysis and description of these processes of cultural interfacing.

ⁱ Naturally, the concepts of unity and individuality must not be confused. Whereas unity without implication of the many would be condemned to meaninglessness, i.e., pure iconicity, individuality gains meaning only by being contrasted by generality. The latter hence resembles a dialectic process where individuality is assigned to an idea, without implying that individuality resembles pure oneness: "There is no individuality in a quality of immediate consciousness such as magenta or solferino, because there is no setting of object over against subject, which is requisite before oneness can be positively assigned to an idea (positive oneness thus involving duality); but neither is there any generality in the immediate consciousness, as long as it remains nothing more than what it first was. The purest oneness does not involve the least reference to plurality, and is therefore not positively opposed to generalization, and is not destroyed when generalization takes place. But positive and insistent oneness necessarily involves, or rather springs out of, the idea of duality, and distinctly denies it; so that generalization destroys it; it is the otherness of otherness, the negation of negation" (CP 6.375).

ⁱⁱ Even in the case of degenerate thirdness, namely in self-referential secondness, as in subdivision, plurality persists in its minimal form of duality: "In pure Secondness, the reacting correlates are Singulars, and as such are Individuals, not capable of further division. Consequently, the conception of Subdivision, say by repeated dichotomy, certainly involves a sort of Thirdness, but it is a thirdness that is conceived to consist in a second secondness" (CP 5.70).

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