
On the object of a functional semiology: towards a typology of indices*

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Abstract: The article touches upon two problems that arose in the development of semiology in the second half of the twentieth century, namely: (1) the debate over the proper object of semiology: signification or communication? and (2) the problem of how a typology of indices (indications), which underlies the conception of the proper object of semiology, can be established. In order to tackle these problems, the article restricts itself to a treatment of the works by the main representatives of a functional semiology, to wit, Georges Mounin, Eric Buysens and Luis Prieto. Especially the works of Prieto are used to unravel a typology of indices that ultimately allows to conceive the object of a specific semiology of signification and to clearly present its aims.

Keywords: Luis J. Prieto; Georges Mounin; Eric Buysens; sign typology; communication; signification.

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1. Functional semiology and communication

It can be claimed that one among many ways of reading the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (*Cours*) resulted in the establishment of a *functionalist* orientation in European linguistics of the twentieth century. Functionalism,¹ in this sense, can be defined as an approach to language that aims to seek, and give a systematic account of, the elements *in speech* that contribute to the establishing and recognition of a message and its meaning, in other words: the elements that have as its *function* to enable communication —communication being, from this point of view, the main function of language, and function being understood, mostly, as ‘purpose’ or ‘utility’. Perhaps one of the most important representatives of this trend was André Martinet. In his *Éléments de Linguistique Générale*, one can read the following lines.

Even if metaphoric, the designation of a language as an instrument or a tool brings our attention, in a very useful way, to that which distinguishes language from many other institutions. The essential function of the instrument that language is consists in communication [highlights on the original —I.C.] [...] (Martinet, 1991, p. 9).²

The view of communication as the main function of language, however, does not come without problems.³ For Saussurean linguistics, this view brings about, among others, the question of *what is the object of semiology?* Such question was posed in the form of asking whether semiology should restrict itself to study *systems of signs*, or (social) institutions, that also have as their main

¹ By functionalism in this text, thus, we refer mostly to the linguistic theories developed by André Martinet and the Prague Linguistic Circle (specially by N. Trubetzkoy). These are not the only theories grouped under the label “functionalism” in linguistics. Indeed, linguists as diverse as Paul Passy, Paul Boersma, and T. Givón can also be called functionalists, however, in this text, we restrict the term to include theories that are explicitly linked to Saussurean linguistics. As we will see the main difficulty of the kind of functionalism treated in this text is actually a problem faced by all functionalist perspectives, to wit, the problem of deciding when a given fact should belong or not to the description of a system, in the successive sections we will see that this is the main problematic entailed by the notion of *indice* itself. It is worth pointing out that the main authors we treat in this text have also been referred to as constituting the *École sémiologique de Genève* by De Angelis (2010 and 2022).

² The translations of all quotations are by the author unless it is otherwise specified. Here is the original: “Bien que métaphorique, la désignation d’une langue comme un instrument ou un outil attire très utilement l’attention sur ce qui distingue le langage de beaucoup des autres institutions. La fonction essentielle de cet instrument qu’est une langue est celle de **communication** [highlights on the original —I.C.] [...]” (Martinet, 1991, p. 9).

³ Martinet’s position can be criticized, for instance, for its portraying a *langue* as an instrument and for characterizing communication as its main function. Such critique, however, is directed primarily to the idea of language as inherently linked to communication, but not so much to its being an instrument. Critiques to the instrumental views of language usually claim that language is *used for* cognitive operations that are more general than just to communicate, but they do not really go against the idea that language is used to do something. It is worth noticing that Mounin gives the opposite argument, in his view the critique is always to the notion of “instrument” and to the inherent polysemy of the word “communication” (see Mounin, 1979, p. 19-43).

function that of communication, and if so, what does it mean that something has as its main function that of communication?

The problem was treated in detail during the first stages of the development of semiology — namely in those works that were explicitly set out to develop a *sémiologie* rooted in the text of the *Cours*. A primordial example, Eric BuysSENS' seminal work, *Les langages et le discours, Essai de linguistique fonctionnelle dans le cadre de la sémiologie*,⁴ reads

The research described in the present work allows to define semiology as the science which studies the processes to which we resort in order to communicate our states of consciousness and those by means of which we interpret the message sent to us (BuysSENS, 1943, p. 5).⁵

BuysSENS's conception of semiology, which he claims as faithful to the one appearing in the *Cours*, rests on a crucial distinction between two types of facts, to wit, *indices* and *semes*⁶ (BuysSENS, 1970). The distinction is based on the observation that, under certain circumstances, an immediately perceptible fact can point, or refer, to a non-perceptible fact, and thus provide some information about something that is not being immediately perceived, yet both *indices* and *semes* are perceptible facts that point to non-perceptible facts. The difference between them thus rests upon two criteria, to wit

- (a) whether the perceptible fact is intentionally produced, and
- (b) whether it is produced to be recognized as a medium for establishing a given social relation.⁷

For BuysSENS, *semes* are characterized by being both intentionally produced, and produced to be recognized as a medium for establishing a given social relation. *Indices* can be intentionally or unintentionally produced, but they are not produced to be recognized as a medium for establishing a given social relation.

⁴ The work was originally published in 1943 and reedited in 1967 under the title *La communication et l'articulation linguistique*. There are important differences between the two editions, we will refer to each of them separately.

⁵ "Les recherches décrites dans le présent travail permettent de définir la sémiologie comme la science qui étudie les procédés auxquels nous recourons en vue de communiquer nos états de conscience et ceux par lesquels nous interprétons la communication qui nous est faite" (BuysSENS, 1943, p. 5).

⁶ The term "indice" appears in the 1967 edition, but not in the 1943 edition. In the 1943 text, "indices" are referred to as a "langage des faits" (BuysSENS, 1943, p. 12; BuysSENS, 1970, p. 19-20). We leave the term without translation in order to avoid confusion with the Peircean notion of *index*.

⁷ The notion of "social relation", in BuysSENS' work, consists in the "modalities" of a communicational act. The two editions of BuysSENS' book differ in this point. The 1943 text reads: "Toute acte de communication a manifestement pour fonction d'établir l'un des quatre rapports fondamentaux suivants : informer, interroger, enjoindre ou interpeller" (BuysSENS, 1943, p. 10). The 1967 text reads "Tout acte de communication constitue un rapport social. Cela se remarque le mieux à un caractère qui sera appelé ici la modalité. Celle-ci est développée au maximum dans les langues : toute phrase est assertive, interrogative, impérative ou optative [...]" (BuysSENS, 1970, p. 17). Cf. Prieto (1975b, p. 126 fn. 144).

An example of an indice given by BuysSENS is that of a given behavior that can point to a given state of consciousness borne by the individual exhibiting such behavior (BuysSENS, 1943, p. 9). To the extent that indices can be intentionally produced, the problem lies in determining whether the behavior in question is only an indice, i.e. intentional but not produced to be recognized as a medium for establishing a given social relation, or a proper seme. The criterion in (a) aims to distinguish what BuysSENS calls *spontaneous manifestations*, i.e. behavior that is unintentional, like shivering when one is cold (BuysSENS, 1943, p. 10), from willful behavior. Yet, the fact that a behavior is willfully produced does not guarantee that it aims to be communicative, thus the need for criterion (b). BuysSENS brings the example of a child that steps on her toes attempting to grab something beyond her reach. In such a case, the behavior, as a perceptible fact, is produced intentionally, but it does not seek to communicate (it does not comply with the criterion in (b)). Even if an observer can infer a state of consciousness borne by the child (i.e. wanting to reach what is out of reach), the child does not aim to establish a social relationship: the behavior is not *addressed* to anyone. BuysSENS compares this behavior to that of a dog asking for a door to be opened by scratching on it. The dog, says BuysSENS, does not try to open the door by itself, but *addresses* the owner, and relies on the owner recognizing the scratching as aiming to establish a *social relation*. In this sense, the dog's behavior is properly communicative (and it is interesting to notice that BuysSENS thus associates communication with *collaboration*, BuysSENS, 1943, p. 10).

It is interesting to notice that the distinction established by BuysSENS between indices and semes seems to be analogous to a distinction drawn by other linguists precisely in view of formulating a functional reading of the *Cours* that developed from the 1930's onwards: to wit, a distinction between "pertinent" and "non-pertinent" facts (or features). This distinction was key to begin the construction of a semiology envisioned as a study of *communicative* systems other than natural language. Georges Mounin pointed out that

As far as what could be called the semiology of linguists is concerned, all the post-saussureans, Trubetzkoy, BuysSENS, Martinet, Prieto, have strongly emphasized the nature of language as a *communication system* [emphasis in the original—I.C.], which was only implicit in the *Cours*. They have construed, especially BuysSENS and Prieto, the solid basis of a semiology which would be, above all, the description of the functioning of all non-linguistic communication systems, from advertisements to road signs, from bus lines numbers or hotel room numbers to the code of the international maritime signal flags (Mounin, 1970, p. 11).⁸

⁸ "Du côté de ce qu'on pourrait appeler la sémiologie des linguistes, tous les post-saussuriens, Troubetzkoy, BuysSENS, Martinet, Prieto, ont accentué fortement le caractère du langage comme *système de*

It is the emphasis on communication what renders the distinction between indices and semes (later reformulated by Prieto as *indices* and *signals*, see below) a relevant distinction. Mounin (1970) seems to suggest that the notions of “indice” and “symptom” can be traced back to Bühler, and more specifically to Trubetzkoy (Mounin, 1970, p. 68), where they, specially “symptom”, designate particularities of speech that do not contribute to proper linguistic communication, i.e. they don’t play a role in the “representative function” of phonological units (Trubetzkoy, 1970, p. 16), e.g. the fact that a particular pronunciation informs us about the provenance of a speaker. An indice, in this way, if we were to take Mounin’s interpretation as valid, is something interpretable, to be sure, but it is not, usually, a decisive factor contributing to communication —and something which, in Mounin’s view, would not communicate at all. Thus, inasmuch as the object of study of semiology is defined by its enabling communication, Mounin writes “*toute sémiologie correcte repose sur l’opposition catégorique entre les concepts cardinaux d’indice et de signal*” (‘all correct semiology rests on the categorical opposition between the cardinal concepts of *indice* and *signal*, Mounin, 1970, p. 13). This position, however, does not suppose (even if it might seem so) that semiology thus conceived is but a mapping of linguistic methodology: the aim of a semiology thus conceived is to describe, in its own terms, the system, if it exists, that enables non-linguistic communication practices. In Mounin’s view, one could argue, aiming to describe such non-linguistic systems supposes, to a given extent, to disregard indices as something beyond the description of a system’s units inasmuch as the proper units of the system are regarded as fulfilling something analogous to a “representative” function (i.e. as proper *signifiers*, or proper parts of them). It would be in this sense that a semiological description focuses on *semes*, which are defined by Buysens, as a “*procédé idéal dont la réalisation concrète permet la communication*” (‘an ideal process whose concrete realization enables communication’, Buysens, 1943, p. 12) — a position Mounin would endorse.

Yet, the problem of what would be exactly the role of indices in semiology is, actually, more nuanced. Even if indices, as perceptible facts not abiding by the criteria (a) and (b), are to be explicitly excluded from a semiological description, functionalists, especially Prieto and Martinet, often endorsed some version of “substantialism”, to distinguish themselves against what was perceived as an excessive formalism on the side of glossematics.⁹ “Substantialism”, in broad

communication [emphasis in the original — I.C.], qui n’était qu’implicite dans le *Cours*. Ils ont constitué, surtout Buysens et Prieto, les bases solides d’une sémiologie qui serait d’abord la description du fonctionnement de tous les systèmes de communication non linguistiques, depuis l’affiche jusqu’au code de la route, depuis les numéros d’autobus ou de chambres d’hôtel jusqu’au code maritime international des signaux par pavillons.” (Mounin, 1970, p. 11).

⁹ This criticism to glossematics is ubiquitous in the works of functionalists, from Martinet’s review of Hjelmslev’s *Prolegomena* to the works of Prieto, Buysens and Mounin. It can be argued that the criticism

terms, supposes precisely that indices, at least in the sense that a regional pronunciation is an indice, are to be taken into account, if only to better delimit the “field of dispersion” (Martinet, 1970, p. 47) of a given phoneme, what would be tantamount, in semiology, to determine the range of variation allowed by a given seme.¹⁰

2. The notion of “indice”

The previous remarks point to a seeming extrapolation of the notion of indice, and it shows that, despite Mounin’s claim of “indice” being traceable to Trubetzkoy, the term has a different conceptual content for semiology than for Trubetzkoy’s phonology. Let us look at the matter in some detail.

In Trubetzkoy, we do find mentions of “indices” and “symptoms” (Trubetzkoy, 1970, p. 16). Yet, Mounin claims that both “indices” and “symptoms” are “*renseignements que le locuteur donne sur lui-même, sans aucune intention de les communiquer*” (‘information the speaker gives about herself, without the intention to communicate it’, Mounin, 1970, p. 68). In the *Principes de phonologie*, however, it seems that only symptoms are given without intention to communicate, to the extent that, Trubetzkoy writes, in speech we would recognize “*des indices servant à faire reconnaître des mots déterminés et les phrases composées avec ces mots*” (Trubetzkoy, 1970, p. 16), thus indices can be interpreted as linked to the representative function of sounds, while *symptoms*, in Trubetzkoy, might be part of *phonostylistics* (Trubetzkoy, 1970, p. 29). Importantly, in the previous passage, the term “*indices*” is a translation of the German *Merkmale* (see Trubetzkoy, 1939, p. 18), in fact, the English translation completely omits this term, and uses “marks” instead: “[...] and still others as *marks* [my emphasis — I.C.] by which words and their specific meanings as well as the sentences composed of these words are recognized” (Trubetzkoy, 1971, p. 14). A different situation happens with the word “symptom”, which is indeed used by Trubetzkoy in the original German (as “Symptome”). Emanuelle Fadda has already shed light on the matter while discussing the theoretical lineage of the term “indice”, specifically in Prieto’s works (2004, p. 129-147). Fadda, in addition to pointing out the difficulties

is addressed departing from “a received view of Hjelmslev” inaugurated precisely by Martinet’s review. The place of “substance” in glossematics is a complicated issue that we will not treat here, but it seems important enough for us to point out the fact that the “functionalist interpretation” of glossematics is not the only interpretation possible, and thus the functionalist critique does not necessarily hold under every interpretation of glossematics.

¹⁰ The substantialist stance of functionalism was envisioned, by Martinet, as necessary for explaining diachrony (e.g. Martinet, 1970), in (functional) semiology, Prieto considers that the way of knowing a substance is not separable from the substance itself (Prieto, 1975a, p. 127). A diachronic semiology from this point of view, to my knowledge, was not fully attempted by the aforementioned functionalists (but see, for instance Mejía Quijano, 1998; Gambarara, 1991; Krampen, 1983, all of them close associates of Prieto, but not necessarily functionalists in the sense we understand the word in this text).

translation poses to a philological-theoretical reconstruction of the history of the term “indice” in semiology (e.g. Fadda, 2004, p. 132, fn. 64), rightly indicates the non-saussurean filiation of the term, bringing it back, instead to what he terms an “anglo-viennese” tradition. For us, it is interesting to notice that Fadda gives evidence of the misinterpretation of the term by Mounin and, at the same time clearly shows the link existing between Trubetzkoy and Bühler (Fadda, 2004, p. 137, fn. 77). A comparison between the Italian and French translations of Trubetzkoy show that the term “indice” is a (miss) translation of the German “Symptome” (with the Italian text conserving the word “*sintomi*”). Here is the passage in the original German, Cantineau’s French translation and Baltaxe’s English translation.

Alles das hat aber mit Phonologie nichts zu schaffen. Denn obgleich es sich hier um akustisch wahrnehmbare Symptome handelt, gehören diese Symptome nicht zum konventionell festgesetzten Zeichensystem einer bestimmten Sprache und behalten ihre symptomatische Kraft selbst bei auszersprachlichen Stimmbetätigungen (Trubetzkoy, 1939, p.20).

Mais tout cela n’a rien à faire avec la phonologie. Car bien qu’il s’agisse là d’indices perçus acoustiquement, ces indices n’appartiennent pas au système de signes, établi conventionnellement, d’une langue déterminée et gardent leur valeur de symptômes, même dans des actes vocaux extérieurs à la langue (Trubetzkoy, 1970, p. 18).

But all this has nothing to do with phonology. For, although perceptible to the ear, these features are not part of the formal system of signs of a particular language. They retain their distinctive force in extralinguistic vocal activities as well. (Trubetzkoy, 1971, p. 16).

We will not discuss the many challenges posed by Baltaxe’s English translation where “Symptome” and “symptomatische Kraft” are translated as “feature” and “distinctive force” respectively, but the problem it might pose to the English-speaking reception of Trubetzkoy is obvious. In any case, an important thing to show is that the connection to Bühler might be more important than what it seems at first hand. In this paper, however, we do not have enough time, or space, to pursue it in detail.¹¹

¹¹ But we refer the reader to the work of Fadda, and to the places we have already signaled. The problem runs very deep for, in fact, via Bühler the notion of “indication” in early semiology, even as a mistranslation, could be traced back to the works of Husserl, as one reviewer pointed out. The Logical Investigations of Husserl that deal with language, and which were apparently known to Bühler, include a section on “Anzeige” (Husserl, 1968, p. 24-25), translated into French, although later than Trubetzkoy’s *Grundzüge*, precisely as “indication”. The connection between Jakobson and Husserl has been pointed out already by some scholars (specially Hohenstein, 1973 and 1976), and this begs both the question of whether Trubetzkoy himself might have been directly or indirectly influenced by phenomenology, and of what is the exact extent of the influence phenomenology might have had in early semiology through Jakobson’s works. These questions,

Let us then go back to the nuances entailed by the notion of indice in early semiology. If, for Trubetzkoy indices are elements contributing to the representative function of language, it would turn out that, in semiology, indices do not form neither are part of a system, even if they are involved in the instantiations of systemic elements (as facts of substance). Yet, functionalists do propose that the way in which indices work, that is the way in which they provide actual indications, is general enough to include, in general lines, the way in which *semiological* systems ought to work, with one crucial difference highlighted by both BuysSENS and Prieto. Mere indices do not imply the alternating roles of emitter and receiver, while semiological systems often do (yet not in every case). This situation would become clearer in the works of Luis Prieto, especially in his article *La sémiologie* and in his book *Messages et Signaux*. There, Prieto gives a rigorous definition of both indices and signals that rests upon the two criteria we identified in BuysSENS. In *La sémiologie*, one can read the following

The signal [...] belongs to the category of indices, which means that it is an immediately perceptible fact that makes us know something about another fact that it is not immediately perceptible. But not every indice is a signal [...] The distinction between a signal and an indice that is not a signal can be done without difficulties in practice; but in the current state of our knowledge, it is difficult to give a rigorous definition of signal by determining what is the specific difference which characterizes it within the class of indices. The more satisfying solution, at the moment, it seems to me, is the one we find in the first two chapters of BuysSENS' book [...] for a perceptible fact to constitute a signal, it is necessary, first of all, that it has been produced to function as an indice [...] but a perceptible fact is not a signal just by its being produced to function as an indice [...] to have a signal, it is necessary also that the person to whom the indice is addressed can recognize, without compromising the aim of such operation, the aim for which the perceptible fact has been produced (Prieto, 1968, p. 95-96).¹²

as we have stated before, cannot be answered in this paper. The reader might, in any case, look at Sonesson (2015) for a semiotic view on Husserl's notion of "Anzeige" as a "general notion of sign", an understanding that falls close to the one we present here of the notion of indice. I thank Morten Tønnessen for having pointed out Sonesson's text to me.

¹² "Le signal [...] appartient à la catégorie des indices, c'est-à-dire qu'il est un fait immédiatement perceptible qui nous fait connaître quelque chose à propos d'une autre qui ne l'est pas. Mais tout indice n'est pas un signal [...] La distinction entre un signal et un indice qui n'est pas un signal semble pouvoir être faite sans difficulté dans la pratique ; mais en l'état actuel des connaissances, il est malaisé de donner une définition rigoureuse du signal en déterminant quelle est la différence spécifique qui le caractérise à l'intérieur de la classe des indices. La solution la plus satisfaisante de ce problème me semble être pour l'instant celle qu'on trouve dans les deux premiers chapitres du livre de BuysSENS [...] pour qu'un fait perceptible constitue un signal il faut, d'abord, qu'il ait été produit pour servir d'indice [...] Mais un fait perceptible n'est pas un signal du seul fait d'avoir été produit pour servir d'indice [...] pour avoir fait à un signal, il faut encore que celui à qui l'indication est destinée puisse reconnaître, sans que le succès de l'opération en soit compromis, le but pour lequel le fait perceptible en question a été produit" (Prieto, 1968, p. 95-96).

The works Prieto published in the 1960's concerning semiology seem to offer an implicit typology¹³ in which “indice” is the more encompassing term, later divided into *intentional indice* (i.e. *signals* for Prieto, *semes* for BuysSENS) and non-intentional indices (indices). Further divisions, specially at the end of the decade, and in his works from the 1970s, include the notions of “falsely spontaneous indices”, and “conventional indices”, although they were not always used by Prieto. These categories, especially the latter, will be treated in the following subsection.¹⁴

3. The problem of ‘signification’

A debate over the communicative function of the objects that semiology was supposed to study was prompted, to some extent, at least in the francophone milieu of the 1960's and 1970's, by the existence of another approach to semiology: the one espoused by Roland Barthes.¹⁵ Mounin's words

¹³ Such typology would be a typology of indices, or of indications, but not a typology of signs. “Sign”, in functionalism, is a technical term, and it does not coincide with the common usage of the term, even within contemporary semiotics. Prieto's works often seem to imply that for him, the Saussurean notion of sign, as signifier and signified is, in fact, equivalent to BuysSENS' seme (Prieto, 1966, p. 39 fn.2, in natural language a seme is a sentence, not a word). Since Prieto departs from BuysSENS' definition of seme as “an ideal procedure”, he sees the need of making a further distinction between such ideal procedure and its instantiation as an immediately perceptible fact, to wit, a signal. The signal is thus a realization of a signifier, but a signifier is only so in virtue of its being linked to a signified. The union between signifier and signified, for Prieto constitutes a seme, and within the seme, as its constitutive parts, there might be signs, which are then defined as bifacial entities of a codes' first articulation, in the case a code would bear such an articulation. Thus “sign” would rather be equivalent with “moneme”. But notice that regardless of their degree of articulations, all codes have semes (even if they only possess the second articulation). Thus, semiology is to be defined, from a functionalist perspective, as the study of *systems of semes* (cf. Prieto (1966, p. 39, fn. 2), and BuysSENS (1943), this last author calls a system of semes a *sémie* (BuysSENS, 1943, p. 34)).

¹⁴ Prieto went back to the problems of indices and its interpretation in an article included in his *Saggi di Semiotica II* (published in French as Prieto 1997), where he distinguishes between different kinds of indication (of existence, and of attribution) which are similar, but not exactly the same to some notions he had treated already in *Messages et Signaux* (notificative and significative indication). These types of indication are included in the mechanism of indication itself, but they do not constitute, in principle, different types of indices. The mechanism of indication in Prieto works in such way that the only way the indication fails is if the indicated (the non-immediately perceptible fact) takes place without the indicator (the immediately perceptible fact) having taken place too (Prieto, 1966).

¹⁵ The debate between the two orientations is widely recorded. It can be seen not only in the works of Prieto, Mounin and BuysSENS. Jeanne Martinet addressed the problem in her *Clefs pour la sémiologie*, linking each tradition to a specific intellectual heritage: “Mounin et Barthes restreignent [...] le champ des recherches en précisant « systèmes de signes ». Mais ils les envisagent de façon très différente. Pour Mounin ces systèmes se définissent par leur fonction : ils servent à la communication humaine. Pour Barthes, ils sont caractérisés par le fait qu'ils ont une signification [...] mais on peut se demander si ceci ne conduit pas à poser des systèmes là où n'auront été vraiment identifiés que des ensembles de faits significatifs. Il est intéressant, en tout cas, de voir comment se partage un héritage intellectuel, comment le même Cours de Saussure peut, en toute honnêteté, être invoqué aussi bien pour fonder une sémiologie de la communication, héritière aussi de l'École phonologique de Prague et du fonctionnalisme linguistique de Martinet, qu'une sémiologie de la signification, qui interprète Saussure à travers Merleau-Ponty et Hjelmslev.” (“Mounin and Barthes delimit [...] the field of their research by saying “systems of signs”. But they conceive them in very different ways. For Mounin, these systems are defined by their function: they serve the purpose of human *communication*. For Barthes, they are characterized by the fact that they have

“the semiology of linguists” are partly addressed to Barthes, and to the fact that, on Mounin’s opinion, Barthes lacked a proper understanding of basic linguistic notions (Mounin, 1970, p. 191). Yet, it is instructive to remember that Barthes, even if he was not a linguist himself, and he would often recognize it, he was indeed close to some linguists, most notably to Martinet (*cf.* Arrivé, 2000, of whom both Mounin and Prieto were direct students). In fact, Arrivé tells us that both Greimas and Barthes often discussed the elaboration of semiology with Martinet (Arrivé, 2000). Yet, Barthes approach to semiology was far from being a *functional* approach in the sense of the ones proposed by Buysens, Prieto, and Mounin, which is all the more interesting considering that Barthes’ *Le système de la mode* was being supervised by Martinet during the second half of the fifties, that is, around the same time Prieto was studying under him in Paris (Chávez Barreto, 2022, p. 34; Arrivé, 2000, p. 20). Both Prieto and Mounin, devoted some articles to the ideas developed by Barthes (Prieto also dictated a course on Barthes’s semiology, see Chávez Barreto, 2022, p. 56). They both acknowledged the merits of Barthes’ writings, and neither of them claimed that the conclusions at which he arrived were necessarily wrong, yet, they both regarded his proposal as in need of further, more systematic development.

Perhaps because of this, both Mounin and Prieto wrote articles called “Sémiologie de la communication et sémiologie(s) de la signification”. Both articles were, to some extent, a critique to the Barthesian approach. Prieto’s article, which appeared later than Mounin’s, concerns itself with defining in clear terms what should be understood by “communication” and by “signification”, a difference that Barthes himself introduces, but does not explain, in the *Présentation* to the issue 4 of *Communications*. The core of the article is to propose an ordering of the two semiologies in relation to linguistics; linguistics would be included in semiology of communication, and this latter would be included in semiology of signification, thus the definitions of “communication” and “signification” are central to the argumentation.

Thus, Prieto first presents a definition of communication based on Buysens’ proposal. He begins by conceiving communication within the framework of indications. He distinguishes between indices and signals, and then considers indices in their being (i) falsely spontaneous, (ii) natural, and (iii)

a *signification* [...] but one can wonder whether such position would not lead to state the existence of a system when only a collection of meaningful facts has been identified. It is interesting, in any case, to see how one intellectual heritage is shared, and how the same *Cours* of Saussure can be invoked, in all honesty, to found both a semiology of *communication*, heir also to the Prague school of phonology and to Martinet’s linguistic functionalism, as well as a semiology of *signification* that interprets Saussure through Merleau-Ponty and Hjelmslev’, Jeanne Martinet, 1973, p. 9, emphasis in the original — I.C.). J.M. Klinkenberg presented a paper in the first meeting of the International Association for Semiotic Studies that directly addressed the problem (Klinkenberg, 1974). In the same occasion, D. Gambarara referred to the two disciplines as “semiology of communication and semiology of connotation” referring to Prieto (Gambarara, 1979, p. 279, although Prieto would sometimes speak of a “semiology of connotation” as different from that of Barthes, *cf.* Prieto, 1975a, p. 69-70).

conventional. Falsely spontaneous indices are indices that are produced with the intention of deceiving the interpreter of the indice: thus they are really signals, in that they are intentional, but they are produced to be interpreted *as if* they were indices (e.g. as not fulfilling the criterion (b)). Natural indices are what is otherwise known as ‘natural signs’, like the sound of rain as indicating rain. Conventional indices are certain facts that acquire their character of being indices by a *social convention*. This last kind of indices, Prieto claims are the object of Barthes’ semiology, thus he writes

It seems to be possible to define “signification” — which, as we have seen, characterizes the object of semiology, according to one of the two main tendencies of this discipline that assume as their own the Saussurean project— as the relation between an indice and what it indicates when this relation is not natural but has been instituted by a given social group. We will call this semiology, as conceived by those who represent this tendency, a “semiology of signification” (Prieto, 1975b, p. 129).¹⁶

In this way, the proper object of a semiology of signification would be constituted by *conventional indices*, that is, *indices that acquire their character of being indices within a given society*. However, a terminological conundrum might arise with the notion of “conventional indice”. On the one hand, Mounin, in his article on the two semiologies, writes “*La signal est une espèce d’indice très particulier. C’est, dit Buysens, un indice « conventionnel », c’est-à-dire « un moyen reconnu [par le récepteur] comme un moyen »[...]*” (‘The signal is a very particular type of indice. It is, according to Buysens, a “conventional” indice, that is to say, “a medium recognized [by the receptor] as a medium” [...]’, Mounin 1970, p. 14). Buysens’ text, however, in the pages referred to by Mounin (pages 12, 18 and 20), does not speak of conventional indices, it only speaks of “convention”: “*Le sémiologue [...] se limite aux moyens conventionnels*” (‘The semiologist [...] limits herself to conventional means’, Buysens, 1970, p. 12) ; “*L’acte de communication n’est toutefois pas défini complètement par ce qui précède: il faut dire que le fait perceptible utilisé est conventionnel, c’est-à-dire reconnu comme moyen par les deux individus qui y sont intéressés*” (‘The act of communication, however, is not defined in its entirety by what has been said, it must be added that perceptible fact is conventional, which is to say, recognized as a medium by the two individuals involved in the act of communication’, Buysens, 1970, p. 18) ; “*Ce qui distingue l’acte de communication de l’indice,*

¹⁶ “Nous croyons pouvoir définir la « signification » —qui, comme nous l’avons vu, caractérise, selon l’une des deux grandes tendances de la sémiologie qui se re réclament du projet saussurien [i.e. Barthes’ semiology— I.C.], l’objet de cette discipline— comme la relation qu’il y a entre un indice et son indiqué lorsque cette relation n’est pas naturelle mais a été instituée par un groupe social. Nous appellerons la sémiologie, telle que la conçoivent les tenants de cette tendance, la « sémiologie de la signification » ” (Prieto, 1975b, p. 129).

c'est son caractère conventionnel: le fait perceptible associé à un état de conscience est réalisé volontairement et pour que le témoin en reconnaisse la destination." ("What distinguishes the act of communication from the indice is its conventional character: the perceptible fact associated to a state of consciousness is realized purposefully and for the observer to be able to recognize to whom it is addressed", BuysSENS, 1970, p. 20). Mounin is, nevertheless, justified to call a signal a conventional indice based on his reading of BuysSENS' and Prieto's works. In fact, Prieto (1975b, p. 129) explicitly says that all signals are conventional indices, but not all conventional indices are signals. Yet, the only distinction between signals and conventional indices in general seems to be a resort to the criteria (a) and (b) we introduced before. In the same text, Prieto defines a signal first of all as "intentional", but to be intentionally produced is a necessary but not sufficient condition for something to be a signal. Thus Prieto adds, quoting BuysSENS, that "*Il ne suffit donc pas qu'un indice soit produit intentionnellement pour qu'il constitue un signal, il faut encore pour cela qu'il puisse être reconnu «par le témoin comme un moyen, non comme une manifestation involontaire»*" ("It is not sufficient that an indice is intentionally produced for it to be a signal, for that it is also needed that it can be recognized 'by the observer as a medium, not just as an involuntary manifestation'", Prieto, 1975b, p. 128). Which is a restatement of the passage we found in *La sémiologie*.

4. Indices: natural, conventional and other classifications

Thus, the problem seems to lie in determining how exactly a classification of indices would have to look like. Let us look at Prieto's typology as presented in his article on the two semiologies. It is stated that indices can be natural (also called spontaneous), in this case, they are neither intentional, nor are they produced to be recognized as a medium for establishing a social relation. To complicate the matter, Prieto adds in a footnote that "[e]n appelant « naturel » un tel indice nous ne nions pas, bien entendu, que même s'il est naturellement lié à son indiqué et possède donc naturellement la capacité d'être indice, il ne le devient effectivement que par un processus qui ne saurait être que social" ("by calling "natural" such an indice we certainly do not deny that even if the indice is naturally linked to what it indicates and thus naturally possesses the capacity of being an indice, it does not become an indice but through a process that can only be social", Prieto, 1975b, p. 128 fn. 147). It is more likely that here Prieto is referring to the fact that even in the case of a natural indice such as, to use one of his examples, a black cloud as indicating rain, even if the link follows from what

a black cloud is in itself,¹⁷ the relation between the black cloud and rain must be *learned*, and such *learning* is social, as in e.g. recognizing types of clouds or other meteorological conditions that might indicate rain. In this case, it is the learning of ways of interpreting the indice what is social, and thus conventional, but not the indication in itself, and this would be a crucial distinction from “conventional indices”.

If an indice is intentionally produced, then it might be a signal. Signals proper are both intentionally produced and produced in order to be recognized as a medium for establishing a social relation, they thus enable communication. However, as we saw with Buysens, a given perceptible fact might be intentionally produced but not produced to be recognized as a medium, thus, even if Prieto does not consider them in his text, there could be intentional indices that are not signals (we could call them *natural intentional indices*) and intentional indices that are signals.

Related to this last problem, we find falsely spontaneous indices, which are given careful attention by Prieto in his text. Falsely spontaneous indices are indices that are intentionally produced but, if they are to fulfill its function, they need not to be recognized by their interpreter as a medium for establishing a given social relation (Prieto, 1975b, p. 126-127). A falsely spontaneous indice that is not recognized as a signal *does not communicate*, because it is regarded just as an indice. If a falsely spontaneous indice is recognized as a signal, then it fails to fulfil its function, and because it is recognized as a signal, it would indeed communicate, except the emitter would intend the contrary. A falsely spontaneous indice that fails to fulfill its function communicates “false” information (Prieto, 1975b, p. 127).

When it comes to conventional indices, the criteria in (a) and (b) are no longer applied, however. This is so because a conventional indice is an analogous of a natural indice, but for which its functioning as an indice is socially established, and thus conventional. Yet, Prieto does not clearly state this. A conventional indice would not fulfill the criterion (a), of being intentionally produced, nor (b), of being recognized as a medium because in their being equated to natural indices, a conventional indice would not suppose the interplay between emitter and receiver. Conventional indices, thus aim precisely to *naturalize* the way in which a perceptible fact gives an indication, as if the indication would follow from what the perceptible fact is in itself (as in the case of the black cloud and the rain), except that for a conventional indice the relationship between the perceptible fact and the fact it indicates is not natural at all, but socially instituted. Here is Prieto’s text

¹⁷ By the expression “what a black cloud is in itself” we do not want to point to a seeming “essentialism”. Rather, we mean that there is a relation between the cloud and the rain independent of its being known by someone, and thus different from the relation between a stop sign and the message it conveys.

An indice as the one constituted by the sound of rain [...] is what can be called a “natural” indice: a natural indice is that for which the relation with what it indicates and thus its capacity to be an indice are naturally given. In other cases, on the contrary, the indice *acquires* [emphasis in the original — I.C.], in a given society, its capacity to be an indice, because it is the society itself which institutes the link that unites the indice to what it indicates: it can be said in such cases that the indice is “conventional” (Prieto, 1975b, p. 128).¹⁸

Prieto thus explains that, in his view, the semiology proposed by Barthes, to wit, a semiology of signification, would aim to explain how is it that such link comes to be instituted in the first place. He thus refers to Barthes’ passage in the *Éléments de sémiologie* which reads “*dés qu’il y a société, tout usage [c’est-à-dire tout comportement] est converti en signe de cet usage [de ce comportement]*” (“from the moment there is society, every use [that is to say every behavior] becomes a sign of such use [of such behavior]”, Prieto, 1975, p. 129), and adds that for this to happen, each usage, or each behavior, must be assumed to have a function, i.e. an aim, and such aim must be able to be achieved in different ways, thus, each behavior must have different possible realizations. These realizations, in their diversity, constitute different *styles*, and on the basis of a study of style a semiology of signification could be constructed (cf. Prieto, 1975a, p. 70-71). In this way, a semiology of signification is given a functional basis, by assuming that conventional indices can form a system, yet a system in which variation itself, via the notion of style, has a leading role.

Conclusions

Prieto’s definition of a semiology of signification makes it clear that such a semiology has as its object facts that do not communicate, but simply *indicate*. The proper aim of such semiology, according to Prieto is to give an account of the *semantization* processes undergo by such facts. If the mechanism of indication is a more general mechanism than the mechanism operating in communicational acts, Prieto can be interpreted as disproving Barthes’ claim that semiology is a part of linguistics (instead of the other way around). In Prieto’s view, one could argue, when semiology turns its attention to “ensembles provided with true sociological depth” (Barthes, 1964, p. 1)¹⁹ it would reencounter the mechanism of indication in its bare form, not, by any means, language. It can be

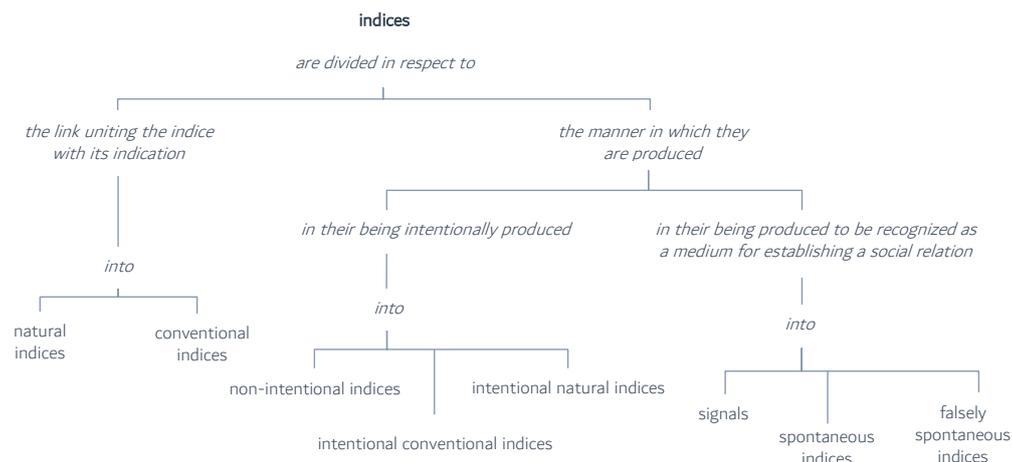
¹⁸ “Un indice comme celui que constitue le bruit de la pluie [...] est ce qu’on peut appeler un indice « naturel » : un indice naturel est celui dont la relation avec l’indiqué et par conséquent sa capacité d’être un indice sont données naturellement. Dans d’autres cas, par contre, l’indice **acquiert** [emphasis in the original —I.C.], dans une société déterminée, sa capacité d’être un indice, parce que c’est la société elle-même qui institue le lien qui l’unit à son indiqué : on dira dans ces cas que l’indice est « conventionnel »” (Prieto, 1975b, p. 128).

¹⁹ Original: “ensembles doués d’une véritable profondeur sociologique” (Barthes, 1964, p. 1).

thus claimed that this bare form of the mechanism of indication would be precisely what makes possible the *naturalization*, in the sense of *ideologization*, of a given way of knowing a given portion of material reality. And thus, it reveals that the main task of semiology is precisely to uncover the ways in which knowledge becomes ideological in a given society —usually with the view of preserving a given order serving the interests of dominant classes²⁰ (cf. Prieto, 1979, p. 264; 1975a, p. 164-165, in English in Chávez Barreto, 2022, p. 109-110). The uncovering of such ways consists in showing the historicity behind every cognitive construction, to the extent that every cognitive construction can be regarded as a gradual sedimentation of practices across time (cf. Prieto, 1975a, p. 158).

Finally, our analysis of the facts that are to be included in the object of a semiology of signification conceived from a functional basis, allows us to propose a typology of indices. Such typology might be established in the following way.

Figure 1: A typology of indices constructed on the basis of the type of link established between the indice and its indication and the manner in which the indice is produced.



Source: Made by the author.

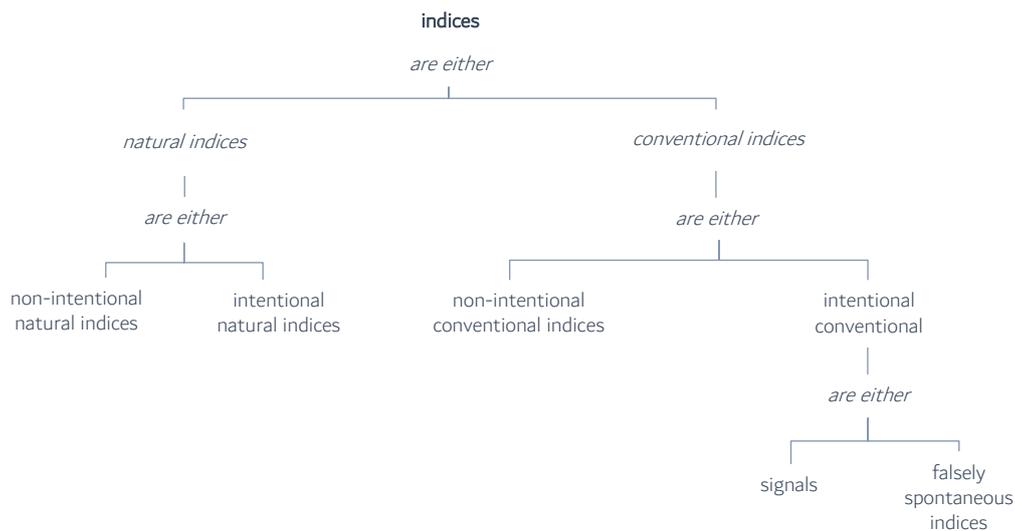
Notice that the typology in Figure 1 draws a distinction between natural and conventional indices in three respects. The branch “*in their being intentionally produced*” has as one of its endpoints “intentional indices” irrespectively of their being conventional or natural. An example of a intentional natural indice would be the child aiming to reach for something out of her reach as in Buysens’ example. A non-intentional conventional indice would be part of

²⁰ Certainly, however, not all ideological, or naturalized, knowledge is oppressive. The knowledge speakers have of their own language appears as “natural” to them, in the sense that ‘phonemes’ are not known, for a speaker as different from their acoustics realizations. Linguistic competence, i.e. to know how to operate with a given language, can be an ideological knowledge, a fact pointed out repeatedly by Prieto (cf. Prieto, 1975a).

the object of Prieto’s semiology of signification. Notice also that we have used the term “spontaneous indices” as an endpoint of the branch “*in their being produced to be recognized as a medium for establishing a social relation*”, this is meant to highlight that such spontaneous indices can be either natural or conventional, but in both cases, they are not signals, neither falsely spontaneous indices. From this point of view, a given regional pronunciation would be a spontaneous indice, and it could be regarded as natural in its not (always) being under the conscious control of a speaker, but it could also be conventional in its indicating not only the provenance of the speaker, but also the social values attached to such provenance (e.g. not only indicating “the person is from region *x*”, but also “the person is from social class *x*”).

The typology in Figure 1, however, fails to capture the fact that signals and falsely spontaneous indices are conventional indices, thus an alternative way of drawing the typology could be the following one.

Figure 2: An alternative way of presenting the typology of indices (made by the author).



Source: Made by the author.

This alternative way of presenting the typology of indices reflects that all falsely spontaneous indices are intentional and conventional indices, but not all conventional indices are intentional, and not all intentional and conventional indices are falsely spontaneous indices. It also shows that indices are either natural or conventional, and thus all the natural indices and all the conventional indices make up the totality of indices. On the other hand, all the natural intentional and non-intentional indices make up the totality of natural indices. Prieto’s proposal for a semiology of signification would then mostly restrict itself to study the facts that can be classified into the right-side branch of figure 2.

Facts such as a given pronunciation that indicates the provenance of a given speaker would, in this case, fall within the right-side branch of figure 2. This is because, in this way of presenting the typology, the term “spontaneous indice” is absent, with only the notion of “falsely spontaneous indice” being present (and implicitly, the notion of “non-falsely spontaneous indice”). The facts belonging to the left-side circle would be the object of a general semiology, thus not only a semiology of signification as defined in the terms laid down by Prieto in the article we analyzed in the previous section, but of a semiology that would take as its object the *raison d’être* of knowledge *tout court*.²¹ ●

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²¹ I would like to thank Prof. Samuel Bidaud for his help in revising all the translations in this text, and to Dr. Claudio Rodríguez Higuera for helpful discussions. The two anonymous reviewers of this text also helped me in pointing out some aspects that the original version was missing. This publication was made possible thanks to targeted funding provided by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports for specific research, granted in 2023 to Palacký University Olomouc (IGA_FF_“A historical and theoretical view of the intersections between linguistics and semiotics” (Project SPP: 432105021)).

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 **Sur l'objet d'une sémiologie fonctionnelle :
vers une typologie des indices**

 CHÁVEZ BARRETO, Eugenio Israel

Résumé : Cet article se penche sur deux problèmes survenus lors du développement de la sémiologie pendant la seconde moitié du vingtième siècle, à savoir : (1) le débat autour de l'objet de la sémiologie : cette dernière traite-t-elle de la signification ou de la communication ? et (2) la question de savoir comment établir une typologie des indices, laquelle se trouve à la base de la conception de l'objet propre à la sémiologie. Afin d'examiner ces problèmes, nous nous focalisons sur quelques travaux des représentants principaux de la sémiologie dite fonctionnelle, notamment Georges Mounin, Eric Buysens et Luis Prieto. Ce sont essentiellement les travaux de Prieto qui sont utilisés pour en dégager une typologie des indices qui permette de concevoir un objet spécifique à la sémiologie de la signification, et, en même temps, de présenter clairement le but d'une telle sémiologie.

Mots-clés : Luis J. Prieto ; Georges Mounin ; Eric Buysens ; typologie des signes ; communication ; signification.n

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