

Chapter 2

Constructive Semiosis Is the Core of the Human *Psyche*



Jaan Valsiner

Let us begin at the entrance (Fig. 2.1). This church entrance is remarkable because it is in the state of being “half-cleaned.” Yet that status is ambiguous—what does CLEAN mean in this case? Two meaning systems are in opposition and top each other in this case:

“BEING CLEAN” (THE ONTOLOGICAL STATE): the church façade over the centuries has gathered dirt that obscures its original shape, which is now being restored—“made clean”.

“BEING HISTORICAL” (THE DEVELOPMENTAL STATE): the church façade has developed over the centuries and has incorporated the “dirt” as a constitutive part of its identity. Its removal means vandalism against that identity. The authentic historical “clean” involves NOT removing the “dirt,” as the latter has become an integral part of the identity of the church.

The fight of these two perspectives has been often the target of controversies in the restoration of objects of art.

The ambiguity of the meaning of CLEAN is a good example of the principle of dynamic stability of signs. Signs do not exist as objects—they are constantly constructed to present some other objects; an object *A becomes a sign* that presents object *B* once the sign-maker, the semiotic agent, sets it up to present *B* to somebody *in some capacity*. What that “capacity” is constitutes one of the crucial objects of investigation of the Cultural Psychology of Semiotic Dynamics (CPSD). Sign construction is teleogenetic—constructing goal orientations in the process of making of a sign.

J. Valsiner (✉)

Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg Universitet, Aalborg, Denmark



Fig. 2.1 Cleaning of a church facade

The opposition clean \leftrightarrow non-clean (Fig. 2.2) would be a closed circle where the goal of CLEAN is reachable, but it cannot be maintained. Furthermore, it is reachable only under the conditions that the duality of the sign (the non-A part of the $\{A \leftrightarrow \text{non-A}\}$ structure) is overlooked. For example, the chemicals we use in the act of cleaning may be themselves non-clean—dangerous to our bodies—and we keep our body involved in the act of cleaning from being contaminated by the chemicals that “clean” (Fig. 2.3).

Keeping us “safe” from the “cleaning” devices is an example of asymmetric mutuality in our relations with environments (Fig. 2.4). Most of our relations with the world are of such kind—symmetry is a rare case of temporary overcoming of asymmetries.

The CPSD operates under the axiomatic acceptance of the open-systemic nature of human psychological functioning. This involves (a) constant relating with environment (b) in irreversible time and (c) with the centrality of feed-FORWARD processes (Fig. 2.5).

Fig. 2.2 The eternal cycle of CLEANING

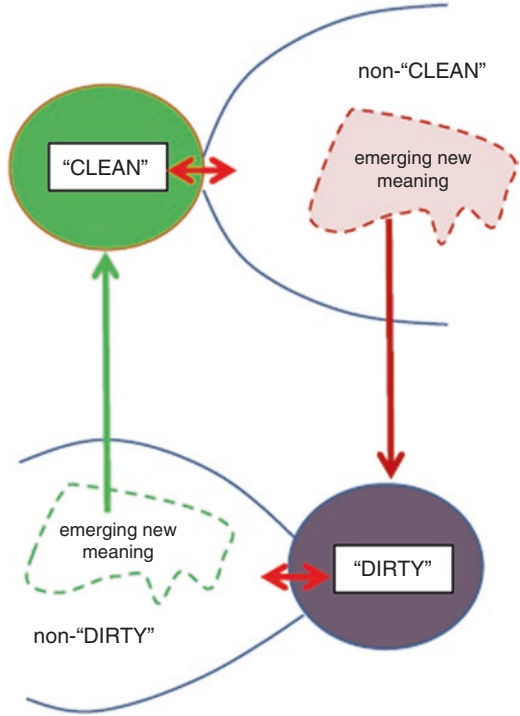


Fig. 2.3 A simple act of cleaning—protecting skin by gloves



A. Symmetry of mutuality



A feeds forward into B and B feeds forward into A
 ("I control you to control me"—Valsiner, 1999)

B. Asymmetry of mutuality



A feeds forward into B while blocking B's efforts to feed forward into A
 ("I control you, but your efforts to control me are blocked" i.e. the cleaning situation: "I need to clean B without B endangering me")

Fig. 2.4 Two forms of mutualities

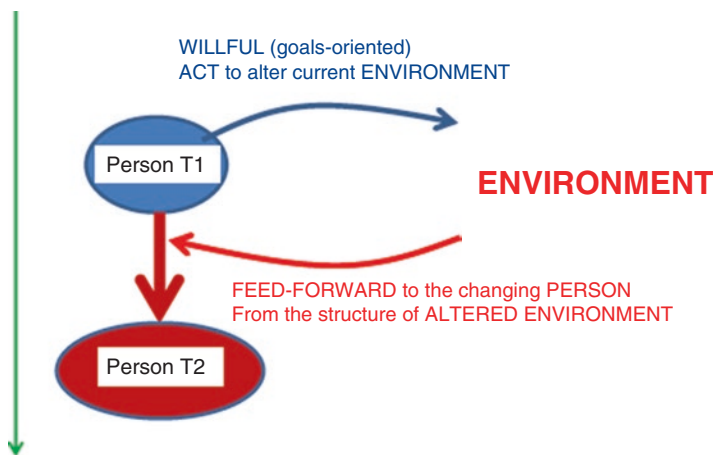


Fig. 2.5 The open-systemic nature of the human *psyche*

The open-systemic frame sets a very clear scenario up for human semiosis—it is necessarily always forward-oriented—even when it utilizes materials borrowed from the past (memory). The uses of memory are *pre-constructive*¹ for the future—

¹What is usually called “reconstructive memory” in the Bartlett-Wagoner perspective is actually pre-constructive within the CPSD framework. In classical psychology it is parallel to the act of *apperception*.

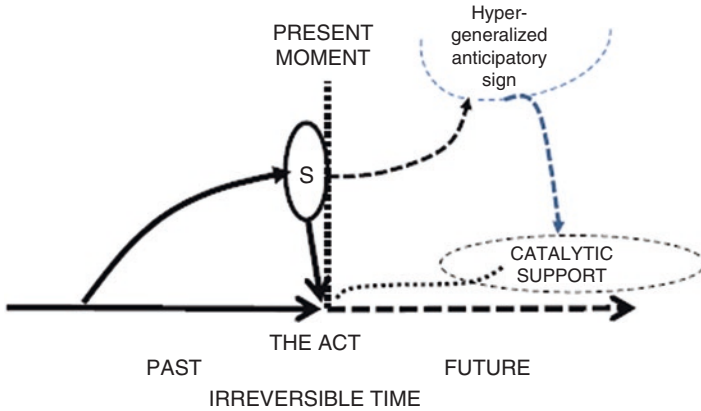


Fig. 2.6 Dual function of sign

memory feeds into the making of signs. Thus, each emerging sign (*S*) is dual in its function (Fig. 2.6).

Figure 2.6 schematizes the central notion of the CPSD—the **double function** of any sign that emerges—made by semiotic agent anew or borrowed from available repertoire, in the forward movement of semiosis in irreversible time. The sign first of all provides meaning to the act in the here-and-now setting (THE ACT in Fig. 2.6). Thus, the act of “I am rinsing my hands in the water, holding a piece of soap” becomes to be presented “I am CLEANING my hands” (without any evidence about the water being uncontaminated or the piece of soap not made of cancer-causing chemicals).

The second function of a sign is its forward-oriented hyper-generalized function as a field-like catalytic device—meant for meaning construction in some unknown future moment. That specific moment is unknown before the future has turned into a present. Yet all sign mediation in the present is oriented toward that future anticipated moment. We make our lives meaningful for our living forward—into the unknown future. The social practice of cleaning our bodies as regulated by signs here and now is in the service of generalizing the value of “being clean” and extrapolating it beyond the immediate bodily functions (Fig. 2.7).

Figure 2.7 demonstrates how the meaning construction process can transcend itself and lead to hyper-generalized sign fields that can operate in the future. A dedication to keeping one’s body cleaned can lead to viewing oneself as a clean, pure person or—on the other end—a dirty, disgusting one.

The hyper-generalization process is likely to lead to qualitative synthesis of meaning—through the process of double negation (Fig. 2.8). This form of thinking—originating in dialectical philosophies of the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries—involves a meta-negation superimposed on the regular (classical logical) negation (if $A = A$, then it is not true that $A = \text{non-}A$).

MULTIFINALITY OF THE MEANING-MAKING PROCESS

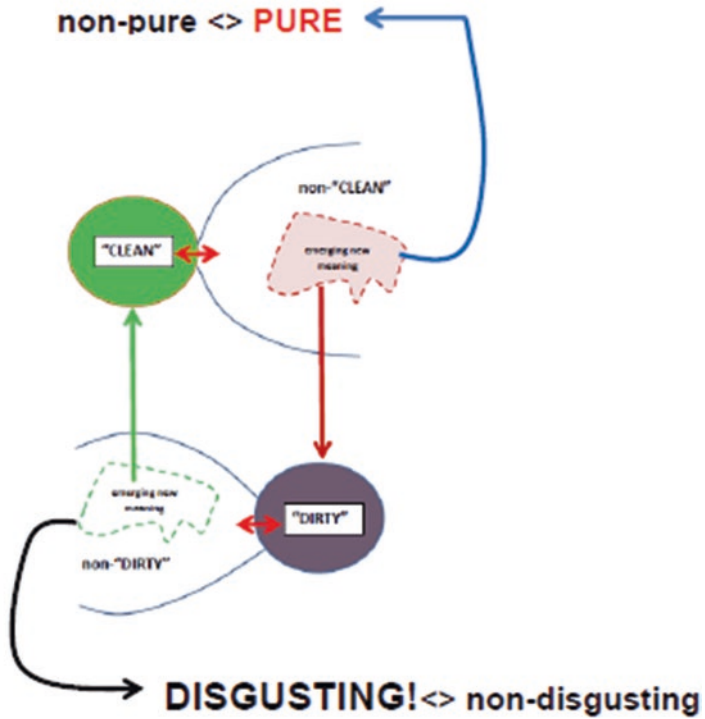


Fig. 2.7 Going beyond the “clean” as a given—here and now

THE KEY TO SOLUTION OF NOVEL WAYS OF USING DIALECTICS—inserting **DOUBLE NEGATION** INTO ANALYTIC SCHEMES

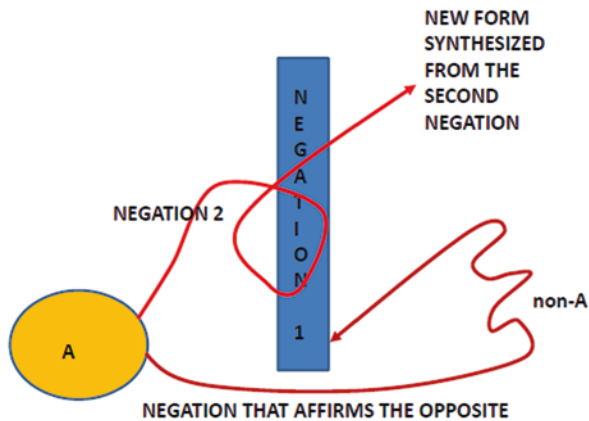


Fig. 2.8 The structure of double negation

The second negation eliminates the first one, leading to a new, synthetic form. For example, start from the first negation:

A is the case, therefore not B. “This is a man; this is not a woman.”

B is the case, therefore not A. “This is a woman; this is not a man.”

A PERSON is EITHER a man or a woman, but not both.

This is the result of the first (classical logical) negation. It is perfectly logical (in the classical sense), yet it misses the point of the function of making the distinction of A and B (men and women). It is the second negation that negates the first:

If A is the case and therefore B is not, both A and B exist, and A relates with B.

If B is the case and therefore A is not, both B and A exist, and B relates with A.

The existence of a man implies that a woman exists and vice versa

And a synthetic “jump”:

Each of us is (simultaneously) a man and a woman, and in other terms

we are all androgynous (uniting male and female aspects) even if we belong to different classes of men and women.

The second negation is not reversal (denial) of the truthfulness of the first but an operation that provides unity of the previous mutually excluded opposites, with some possibility to “jump” to greater generalization. It is the second negation that opens the door for any generalization (beyond categorization—that is the end result of first negation).

Conclusion: Constructive Semiosis as Culture

Culture is a meta-level concept that unites all different disciplines and subdisciplines that investigate specifically human phenomena of persons, communities, societies, and the human species as a whole. In that meta-concept role, culture has no existence. It has also no agency—statements like “culture CAUSES X” or “X is due to CULTURE” are void of explanatory power. Human beings have agency and construct new artifacts—loosely also classified under the label “culture.”

I treat “culture” as a classifying term that links my perspective of CPSD with other directions within cultural psychology. Yet CPSD differs from all others by (a) locating the semiosis within irreversible time (semiosis is forward-oriented; human beings live into the future); (b) semiosis is dynamic and hierarchical (signs regulate other signs, forming temporary hierarchies, and organize the ongoing experience), and (c) memory and imagination are similar presentational processes, one oriented toward the past, the other toward the future. Cultural psychology is a basic science about higher human psychological functions that are mediated by signs.