

# Expansive and Restrictive Semiosis: Exploring the Process of Cultural Guidance



Alex Gillespie

## 1 Introduction

“Human living is focused on future-oriented temporal extension. This extension comes through setting up specific signs of sufficient abstractness that begin to function as guiders of the range of possible constructions of the future.” (Valsiner, 2007, p. 58)

Humans are motivated by a not-yet-here future. Rooted in the present, possible paths of action branch out in a myriad of directions; some appealing and others feared; some clear and others vague. Despite the objectively compelling and practically consequential nature of these possible futures, they are entirely semiotic constructions.

These possible futures, as semiotic constructions, are simultaneously enabled and constrained by culture. Without signs and ready-made ideas of what is possible, our imagination of possible futures would be impoverished. But, equally, the sign systems employed are never neutral, and they can only ever make salient a subset of the infinite number of possible futures. These sign systems are saturated in values, shaped by their social history, that foreground what is desirable, feared, and socially acceptable.

In this chapter, I will examine the semiotic processes that can either expand or constrain, loosen or contract, human imagination of possible futures. I begin with a brief review of semiosis, identifying key insights from Peirce, Vygotsky, and Valsiner. Then I compare constrained semiosis in intergroup conflict with expansive semiosis in artistic expression. By comparing semiosis in these two different

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A. Gillespie (✉)

Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science, London School of Economics,  
London, UK

Department of Psychology, Bjorknes University, Oslo, Norway

e-mail: [a.t.gillespie@lse.ac.uk](mailto:a.t.gillespie@lse.ac.uk)

domains, I identify the underlying semiotic processes that expand and restrict semiosis.

## 2 Semiosis: Expanding and Restricting the Field of Thought

Semiosis, the dynamic transformation of signs in relation to other signs and experiences, is the bedrock of human phenomenological experience (Valsiner, 1998). The stream of feelings, images, and words, that we sometimes follow (e.g., day dreaming) and sometimes try to lead (e.g., directed thought), is the essence of our psychological being (Valsiner, 2001). Understanding how semiosis expands and restricts meaning is a fundamental task of psychology. In this task, Jaan Valsiner has been a beacon, continually shining a light both backward, finding rich resources in historical texts, and forward, pioneering genuinely novel insights.

The intellectual roots of semiosis, Valsiner (2007) has reminded us, are in the work Peirce who emphasized that all thinking, whether mundane or scientific, is sign based. “A sign,” Peirce (1955, p. 99) writes, “is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.” There are three key elements. First there is the sign itself (Peirce, 1894), which can be either an icon (based on similarity such as a drawing), an index (based on causality such as a weathercock), or a symbol (an arbitrary association such as a word). Second, there is what is symbolized, the object, or more accurately an aspect of an object, that is picked out by the sign. Third, there is what Peirce called the “interpretant” which is the system of signs, within somebody’s mind, that makes sense of the sign. It is the interpretant that gives the meaning of a sign significance. One of Peirce’s key insights is that the interpretation of a sign can become an object, an aspect of which is picked out by a new sign, and which appeals to a new interpretant (e.g., when the “I” at time 1 becomes the “me” at time 2). This semiotic escalation, in which parts of the sign for the basis for subsequent semiosis, makes semiosis a fundamentally dynamic process.

Another key historical landmark in understanding semiosis, that Valsiner (Valsiner, 2015; Valsiner & Van de Veer, 2000) has illuminated, is in the work of Vygotsky (Van Der Veer & Valsiner, 1994) who conceptualized signs as peculiar tools. While we use physical things to act on the world (e.g., hammers, shovels), we use signs (e.g., drawings, weathercocks, and text) to act on minds, to create feelings, change perceptions, or impart ideas (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010). Moreover, signs can be used not only to act on the minds of others but also to act on our own minds. Crucial here is the reverse action of signs, that is, their ability to create impressions in the mind of self as well as other (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). This is very similar to what Mead (1922) meant by the term significant symbol, which has comparable effects on the mind of self and other (Gillespie, 2005). This reversibility is what enables signs initially directed at others to become directed at self and thus forms the basis for self-regulation and goal-directed thought.

Shining a light forward, Valsiner (Valsiner, 2007, 2009) has conceptualized semiosis as dynamic, hybrid, and field-like. Semiosis is a dynamic process of channeling because signs beget signs in a continual process of semiosis; where guidance comes from the signs themselves, with webs of prior meanings (both cultural and individual) shaping what is possible in the next round of semiosis while still leaving enough room for uncertainty and creativity. Signs are hybrid because icons, indexes, and symbols are combined; and meanings are often overlaid, with older signs being repurposed, and tensions set up between contradictory signs. In this hybridity, signs don't determine meanings as much as create fields of possible meanings or semiotic spaces of association and thought. In contrast to many metaphors in psychology that try to specify points (ratings, attitudes, propositional meaning), Valsiner has a volumetric approach, emphasizing fields, or multidimensional volumes, of meaning that constrain thought by circumscribing a boundary but also enable a play of meanings within the boundary. In this sense, Valsiner conceptualizes semiosis as constrained possibility.

To conceptualize semiosis as dynamic constrained possibility, Valsiner has introduced a series of key concepts: meta-signs that regulate, guiding and constraining, lower level signs (Valsiner, 2007); promoter signs that guide the variability in future meaning construction (Valsiner, 2002, 2005); redundant control, in which multiple overlapping constraints are used to guide semiosis (Valsiner, 2007); and circumvention strategies, used in overcoming/bypassing blocking signs (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998). Together these concepts conceptualize the dynamic creation and constraint of fields of meaning. They do not determine future meanings as a precisely defined point; rather, they circumscribe, or foreground, a broad or narrow field of possible meanings. This conceptualization of semiosis as constrained indeterminacy simultaneously raises questions about constraint while also leaving space for creativity. Thus, it shines a light on the semiotic processes, or cultural guidance system, that expand or constrain the fields of possible meanings.

### 3 Expansive Semiosis in Literature

Expansive semiosis is particularly evident in art. Literature, film, and visual art can absorb the audience, creating a structured, but open, space for imagination (Benson, 1993). Although semiosis is never neutral or unconstrained, art often pushes in the direction of openness, affording or even promoting proliferating interpretations. Such an opening of meaning is evident in Samuel Beckett's (1996) short story "Company."

The text begins: "A voice comes to one in the dark." This sentence affords multiple interpretations. The use of "one" invites reversibility between "I," "you," "she," and "he." The abstractness of "a voice," without being attributed to a source, invites the reader to envision multiple possible sources. The phenomenological experience of reading the opening sentence is of coexisting, and possibly incompatible, meanings. This expansive and ambiguous style continues throughout the text. The

positions of the voice, the subsequent thoughts about the voice, and the narrator are never clearly defined; they are held in a state of superposition, with possible meanings shimmering in and out of focus.

The text not only leaves key terms ambiguous, but, it defines them in contradictory ways. Who is in the dark hearing the voice? Sometimes it is “he” but at other times it is “you.” Is the voice talking to the reader, the “he” or a third? The reader is both in the story, invited to be in the dark, and being told about someone else who is in the dark hearing a voice. And, who does the voice belong to? Sometimes it is suggested that there is someone else in the dark who is speaking, yet, at other times, it seems that the voice and the thoughts about the voice are one in the same. So maybe the voice is not external to the stream of thought; maybe the whole text is a single multivoiced stream of thought? – which of course, at a textual level, it is. Unanchored, without a body or clear perceptions, the stream of thought is afloat in the dark, wandering the entire web of possible meanings.

As the text continues, there are few closures and many openings. The only certainty is the stream of text itself, the words about the voice, commenting on the voice. Everything else is fluid. Even the stream of thought itself seems simultaneously to belong to everyone and no one, and the voice seems to be simultaneously outside the stream of thought and a constitutive part of it. Sometimes certainty is offered, such as the oft repeated phrase “you are on your back in the dark.” But, no sooner is it offered, then the certainty is withdrawn, with a phrase such as “or of course vice versa.”

Using the terminology of Eco (1989), we can conceptualize “Company” as an open work. According to Eco, a text is not a mere string of words that sequentially determines meaning. Instead writing, and especially aesthetic writing, creates fields, or rather multidimensional volumes, of meaning. There is an aesthetic in expanding, rather than closing, these spaces of meaning, exploring and expanding the gap between the sign and what it signifies (Glăveanu & Gillespie, 2015). There is an aesthetic in the overdetermination of meaning, something which can’t be done in the material world. Meanings can be held in superposition, with contradictions not only tolerated, but multiplied and provoked. Such texts yield different meanings on each reading; like a projective Rorschach test, the meanings answer to the reader. Eco (1989, p. 3) writes: “the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood.”

In the terminology of Valsiner (2007, p. 80), Beckett’s (1996) short story exemplifies a “unity of opposites.” It vividly illustrates that the logic of meaning is separate from the logic of the material world (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). At a material level, “I” cannot be “you,” and “they” are different to “us.” But, within the logic of meaning, as Beckett illustrates, “I” and “you” can coexist, and “we” can simultaneously be “they.” This is possible because of the reversibility of the sign (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). Within the phenomenology of meaning “I” is “you” because when you say “you,” I hear “I” – this reversal of the meaning of pronouns happens in conversation so rapidly we rarely notice (Gillespie, 2010). It is this reversibility that makes possible the shimmering of meaning between seemingly irreconcilable

opposites, creating a space of play that opens the text and the reader to novel and sometimes surprising meanings.

## 4 Restrictive Semiosis in Intergroup Conflict

Constrained semiosis is perhaps most evident in contexts of intergroup conflict. In such conflicts each side cannot completely ignore the other side; indeed, for the conflict to be experienced as such, each side must have some phenomenological awareness of the other side as having a different point of view. But, this awareness of the other point of view is dangerous because it might become convincing. Accordingly, in contexts of intergroup conflict, each side must cultivate ways of talking and thinking about the other, and their point of view, without being influenced by it. While much attention has been given to intergroup contact, much less attention has been given to semantic contact – that is how the ideas of the two groups connect (Gillespie, 2020). Semantic contact, in the context of intergroup conflict, reveals the powerful canalizing forces of culture, constraining what can be thought.

Consider the following two excerpts from an interview study of the intergroup conflict between Israelis and Palestinians (Nicholson, 2016). The first excerpt is from a Palestinian and the second is from an Israeli. These excerpts illustrate semantic contact because each speaker is talking about the views of the other group and provide insight into how semiosis can constrain fields of meaning. The first excerpt is from a young Palestinian man.

So most people, all Arab people, they understand the Holocaust. They understand the consequences of that, right? The thing is, no-one will understand the Nakba: They say it's just because you want to revolt against the Israelis. But they do not understand [...] They have Independence Day. (Male Palestinian, Gaza)

The semantic contact occurring in this excerpt is between the phrase “they say it’s just because you want to revolt against the Israelis” (which is the perspective being attributed to the outgroup) and the surrounding content (which is the perspective of the speaker). The outgroup perspective is embedded, as a meta-perspective (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010), within the speaker’s own perspective. Talking about the outgroup perspective is dangerous because it risks the outgroups’ motives appearing reasonable. Accordingly, this animated, or ventriloquized, perspective of the outgroup needs to be constrained. The semiotics constraining the voice reveal what Valsiner (2007) has termed redundant control, where multiple strategies are used, to overdetermine the constrained meaning.

First, the positions of “Arab people” and non-Arabs (the word “they” is used five times) are fixed and animated in oppositional terms; there is no ambiguity about who thinks what, and there is no possibility for the pronouns to reverse. The fixedness of these positions is aided by invoking concrete atrocities that are particular to each group. Second, the meta-perspective of the outgroup has questionable

legitimacy; it is framed in subjective terms (“they say”). Third, the single argument from the outgroup (“you want to revolt”) is resisted with multiple counter arguments, or meta-signs: (1) the ingroup understands the Holocaust, but there is no reciprocal understanding of the Nakba; (2) the outgroup has an Independence day, but the ingroup does not. The implied third counter argument is that the ingroup only want what the outgroup already have.

The second excerpt, again from Nicholson (2016), comes from a middle-aged Jewish Israeli man. This excerpt again contains an instance of semantic contact, where the perspectives of the outgroup and the ingroup collide, providing us with an opportunity to see how meanings are stabilized:

They (Palestinians) claim the land because they were the generation who was born on the land. You know, nobody actually promised them on their Bible. The Koran doesn't say anything about Israel [...] We were there 2000 years before them. (Jewish Israeli, male)

The semantic contact occurs between the first sentence (“claim the land because they were the generation who was born on the land”) and the rest of the excerpt that resists that perspective. Again, there are meta-signs with redundant channeling that constrains the semiotic potentials.

First, there is again a fixation of the views of the ingroup and outgroup (“they,” “they,” “them,” “we,” “them”), supported with reference to specific and sacred objects that are particular to each group. Second, there is the delegitimization of the perspective attributed to the outgroup (“claim”). Third, the single argument from the outgroup (“born on the land”) is resisted with multiple counter arguments, or meta-signs: (1) the land was promised to the ingroup but not the outgroup; (2) although the outgroup was born on the land, the ingroup were born on the land 2000 years before them. Again, there is a third counter-argument that aims to reverse the argument of the outgroup: if the argument about being on the land first is valid, then, one needs to recognize who was on the land two thousand years ago.

Across both excerpts one can see, not only that the ingroup talks about the outgroup, but, also that they also use semantic barriers to prevent the perspective of the outgroup spurring untoward semiotic associations that might create empathy for their cause (Gillespie, 2008). As is expected, on the basis of identity research (Avraamidou & Psaltis, 2019; Psaltis, 2016), central to this restrictive semiosis is the rigid positioning of self and other that is repeatedly asserted. The opposites of self and other mutually require each other, but are rigidly separated (Valsiner, 2007). But, this separation is not as ironclad as it might seem at first sight. In both excerpts we observed that each speaker selectively reverses meanings, creating an equivalence between self and other when it aids their cause.

## 5 The Semiotic Processes of Overdetermined Guidance

Comparing the semiotic processes in the two very different contexts, of expansive and restrictive semiosis, reveals similarities and differences. In both contexts, we can see the role of pronouns and specific events to anchor, or unanchor, the coordinates of meaning. In both contexts we can see the reversibility inherent in semiosis, but this can either work strategically or without direction. And, in both cases, we can see how multiple semiotic processes combine to overdetermine very different outcomes.

In terms of pronouns, there is a contrast between destabilization and reification. In Beckett pronouns are deliberately destabilized, with the alternation between “one,” “you,” and “he,” while in the conflict, there is the repetition and reification of “they.” In the intergroup context, the fixedness of the pronouns is reinforced by mentioning specific atrocities and sacred objects that cannot be thought of except with reference to unique groups. Instead of the darkness, that throws all ostensible facts into doubt, there are precise references that have strong emotional power to sharpen the distinction between self and other. In contrast, in Beckett there are no fixed events or objects, it is not even clear if there is perception, and the subjective nature of the text means that any events or objects are nebulous; without these anchors the pronouns become free-floating and mobile. Beckett’s protagonist is a stream of thought suspended in the dark, unencumbered by specifics, without events or objects that differentiate self and other, does not lead the difference between self and other to collapse, but rather become multiply determined; there is a differentiation between “me,” “you,” and “he,” but, psychologically, we are invited to occupy all positions simultaneously.

In terms of reversibility, this varies significantly between the contexts. Reversibility entails an equivalence between self and other such that the signs applied to other can be applied to self (Mead, 1922; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). Reversibility is central to Beckett (1996), as evident in his repetition of the phrase “or vice versa.” Reversibility in the intergroup context is massively constrained, but not altogether absent and is evident in both excerpts. The logic in the first excerpt is to make an equivalence between what “they” have and “we” want. The reversibility in the second excerpt is to take “their” argument about being born on the land and argue that “we” were on the land two thousand years ago. What is remarkable is that the reversibility of the sign does not create an equivalence between “I” and “they”; instead it is used to appropriate their argument and to reinforce the distinction between “I” and “they.” Each excerpt selectively takes from the perspective of the other, foregrounding a premise or assumption that can be reversed to bolster the argument of the ingroup. Thus, there is a highly strategic reversibility in the intergroup context, which is in sharp contrast to the free-floating reversibility in Beckett’s short story.

In terms of redundant control, both contexts employ multiple strategies to either expand or restrict the proliferation of meaning. Valsiner describes redundant control as a key aspect of cultural guidance, where, instead of relying upon one mechanism,

multiple mechanisms are employed to guide semiosis so that, if one mechanism fails, the cultural guidance remains intact. In the case of Beckett, the multiple strategies are deliberate, and crafted, so as to create an expansive space of association. In the case of the intergroup conflict, the redundant control is more intricate. On the one hand, self and other are kept separate; but, on the other hand, brief moments of reversibility are allowed. The risk is that the reversibility escalates (e.g., leading to thoughts about self and other being similar because both have suffered due to the conflict, concerns for loved ones, loyalties to their communities, and a shared humanity). Accordingly, multiple strategies are deployed to prevent this escalation of reversibility, and this explains why we simultaneously see the repetition of pronouns, subjectivizing the outgroup point of view, anchoring differences in specific events, and detailed argumentation.

## 6 Conclusion

Expansive thinking that creates possibilities is one of the defining features of humanity; but it should not be taken for granted (Glăveanu, 2020). The societies we inhabit, our educational systems, and the discourses we promote both create possibilities but also impossibilities (Valsiner, 2007). While many impossibilities are created by limitations in the material world, other impossibilities are semiotic creations, barriers created by our ways of thinking. Arguably, many of the big events of history are the reconfiguring of the semiotic boundary between what is possible and impossible. Indeed, this is often what is required for intergroup reconciliation (Psaltis, 2016). Accordingly, understanding how culture expands and restricts semiosis is a crucial task.

In this task, of understanding how culture guides us into an unknown and unpredictable future, Valsiner has been a pathbreaker. He has expanded, not constrained, our conceptualization of semiosis. In a world where researchers are both too quick to forget the past and too constrained to imagine innovative approaches to psychology, Valsiner has somehow managed to reconcile both a profound understanding of where ideas have come from with an expansive vision for the future of psychology.

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