

## J. S. Petöfi and Ch. S. Peirce Evolution of the Semiotic Triangle

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The key question in textual semiotic is the one concerned with the definition of what should be called a 'text'. In this respect János Sándor Petöfi specifies five further sub-questions: a text is it

(i) a physical semiotic object or a relational semiotic object (i.e. the manifestation of a signifier-signified relation)? (ii) a unimedial or a multimedial object? (iii) an object that is an element of a semiotic system or an object that belongs to the domain of applying such a system? (iv) only a totally autonomous or also a partially autonomous semiotic object? Finally, depending on the answers given to the questions (i)-(iv) what should be declared as criteria of textuality? [Petöfi, 1990, p. 207]

A text, in Petöfi's theory of language and communication, is always a *relational semiotic object composed by more than one medium*, since in every text we can find verbal and non-verbal elements. To say that a text is « a relational semiotic object » means that a text is not only its physical manifestation, but also the relation that a subject, in a particular *Communicative Situation (CoSi)*, is able to produce between the physical manifestation of a text and its meaning [Garbuglia, 2004, p. 146].

This statement implies a reflection on the so called Peirce's *Semiotic Triangle*.

Peirce says that interpretation of signs could be expressed in a triangular relationship between the sign, the user, and the external reality.

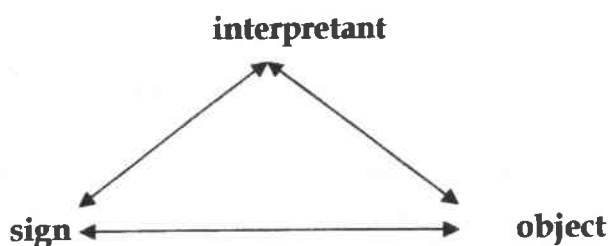


Figure 1: Peirce's elements of meaning

The first thing that should be noticed is that the triangle is constructed with three double-ended arrows which indicate that each term can be understood only in relation to

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others. « A sign refers to something other than itself – the *object*, and is understood by somebody: that is, it has an effect in the mind of the user – the *interpretant* » [Fiske, 1982, p. 42].

At first sight, Peirce's model is almost unrecognisable in Petöfi's one. Petöfi elaborates what he calls an *integrative semiotic model* (figure 2) with which he describes his idea of text, that has been synthesized above.

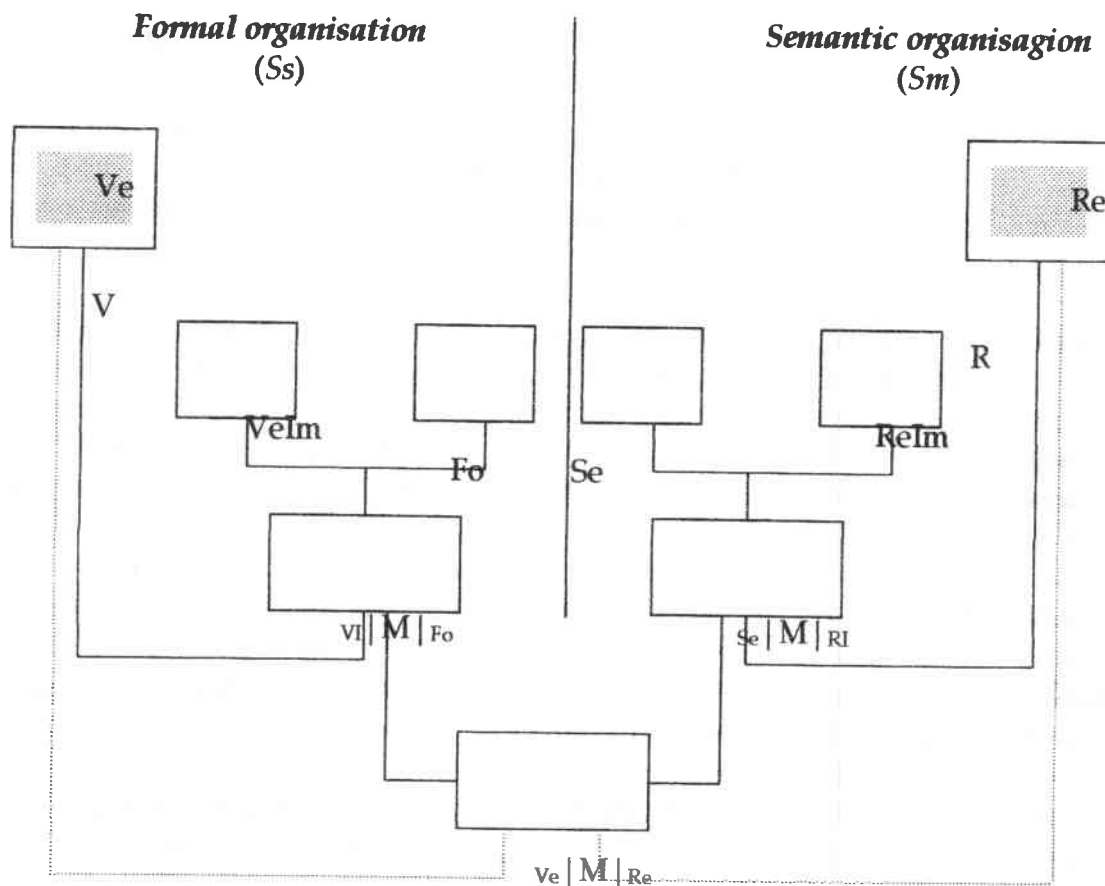


Figure 2: Petöfi's integrative semiotic model

In this scheme the physical manifestation of a text is called *vehiculum* (Ve). « In dealing with written media (and written or printed texts) the physical manifestation is the visual manifestation » [Petöfi, 1990, p. 211]. When a subject interacts with the physical manifestation of a text he produces, through a *mental model* ( $VI|M_{Fo}$ ), a particular *mental-image* of the text-object itself: the *vehiculum imago* (Velm). The Velm of a text is the image that we keep in our memory even when the text that has produced it is not physically present anymore. In a certain way, we could say that the mental-image of a text is a sort of *inner translation* of phenomenological reality, a translation that, in presence of the "original

text", tends to be assimilated to it. The mental model  $_{VI}M_{Fo}$  in producing the  $VeIm$  recognises at the same time the *formal organization* of the vehiculum called *formatio* ( $Fo$ ).

Doubling this basic structure, that could be described as a *model for the non-ingenuous perception*, it is possible to obtain the second part of the scheme, that contains the semantic side of Petöfi's integrative semiotic model. The meaning of a text is called *sensus* ( $Se$ ), that is strictly connected, through the mental model  $_{Se}M_{RI}$ , to the *mental-image* of the thing, or of the situation, expressed by the text (*relatum imago* –  $ReIm$ ). The  $ReIm$  of a text is the mental image of a thing, or of a situation, that we can construct interacting with the text itself. This kind of construction is always based on reality but it can combine differently the same aspects. In this way the word 'unicorn' or 'Pegasus' have their  $ReIm$ , as well as the word 'table' or 'chair'. The *relatum* ( $Re$ ) is the phenomenal (cognizable by the senses) reality expressed by the text. So, if in our mind we can construct the mental image ( $ReIm$ ) of Pegasus, because, we have seen horses and wings, it is not possible to find the relatum of Pegasus. The formal organisation and the semantic organisation are connected by the mental model  $_{Ve}M_{Re}$ .

Applying Petöfi's categories to Peirce's semiotic triangle, it is possible to say that the  $Ve$  and the  $VeIm$  are the equivalent of the sign, the  $Fo$  and the  $Se$  are the equivalent of the interpretant and the  $Re$  and the  $ReIm$  are the equivalent of the object. The relation between this two partly different theories can be synthesized in the following scheme (figure 3 - Petöfi, 2004, p. 98).

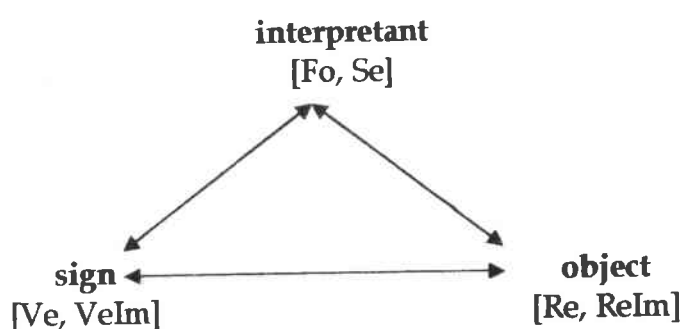


Figure 3  
Relation between Petöfi's and Peirce's theories

Petöfi's integrative semiotic model has the advantage of permitting the description of two different processes related to the existence of a sign: the *reception* and the *production*. The receiver perceives the physical manifestation of text and elaborates his/her interpretation, while the producer perceives a thing, or a situation, and constructs a text (figure 4 - Petöfi, 2004, p. 99).

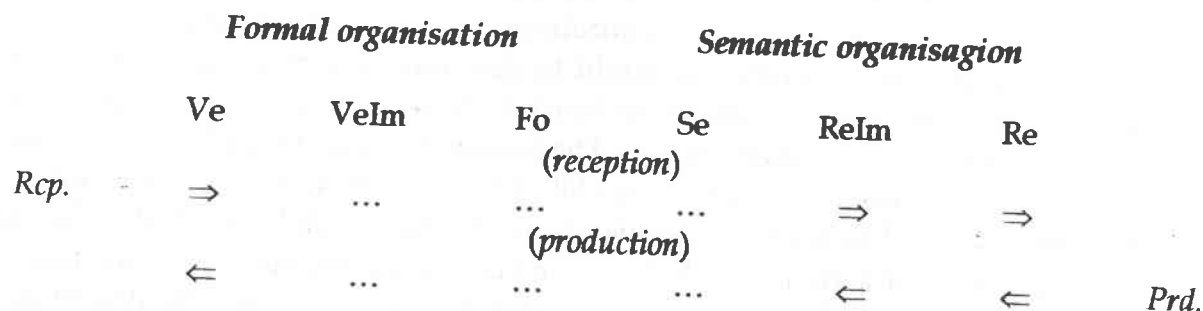


Figure 4

*Petöfi's integrative semiotic model and the processes of production and reception*

In this way, the integrative semiotic model constitutes itself as the basis for a typological scheme (figure 5 – Petöfi & Pascucci, 2001) with which it can be described the process of translation and of production of a text based on another text. In this particular case, the production doesn't start from a thing or from a situation but from the interpretation of a text (i.e. Joyce's *Ulysses* is based on Homer's *Odyssey*). In the figure 5 the Ve is the physical manifestation of the original text perceived by the recipient (Rcp) and the Ve' is the translation or the successive text produced by the same person who acts in the role of producer (Prd) and, in particular cases, of translator.

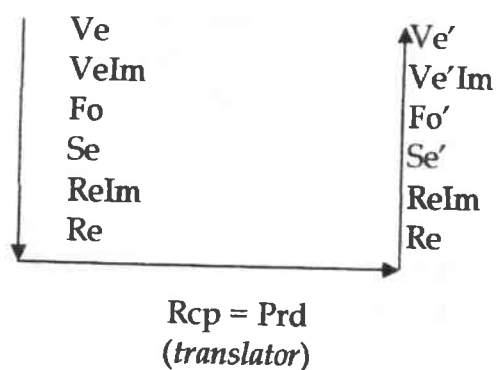


Figure 5

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