

METATHEORETICAL COMMITMENTS

(IN HUMANITIES-BASED INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH PROGRAMS)

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INTRODUCTION

- ▶ What is this presentation about? (hint: it's in the title)
- ▶ Is there metatheory in the humanities?
- ▶ How do we deal with metatheory in interdisciplinary research programs?

METATHEORY IN THE HUMANITIES?

- ▶ *Humanities* as a blanket term
- ▶ Some areas of the humanities may be theoretically cohesive
- ▶ Semiotics as an example:
 - Part of the humanities
 - Theoretically cohesive

SEMIOTICS IS COHESIVE?!

- ▶ Defending the assumption:
The history of the discipline leads to an encounter of traditions and an institutional acknowledgment of this process.
- ▶ But semiotics is wildly variegated!

SEMIOTICS AND TYPE-SEMIOTICS

- ▶ General theory coupled with a target discipline leads to different forms of the source discipline.
- ▶ Subdivisions in semiotics (type-semiotics):
Type-semiotics don't make claims about the generality of signs, but rather, use general claims in specific contexts.
- ▶ Examples of type-semiotics: sociosemiotics, biosemiotics, cognitive semiotics, etc.

METATHEORETICAL COMMITMENTS

- ▶ Distinction between *theoretical commitments*.
In semiotics, theory is engaged in *signs, meaning-making* and so on.
- ▶ But metatheoretical commitments remain hidden!



METATHEORY

- ▶ “The philosophy behind the theory” (Bates 2005)
- ▶ A “coherent set of interlocking principles that both describes and prescribes what is meaningful and meaningless” (Overton 2007)
- ▶ “The empirical scientific theory of scientific theorizing” (Meehl, 2004)
- ▶ So metatheoretical commitments are those related to how a theory is supposed to do its theorizing wrt its area.

META- AND THEORETICAL COMMITMENTS IN SEMIOTICS

- ▶ Theoretical commitment:
Signs, *via* Peirce, are three part relations (representamen-object-interpretant)
- ▶ Metatheoretical commitment:
Talking about signs necessitates meaning in the signs we describe

ONE BIG HURDLE FOR SEMIOTICS

- ▶ So, is semiotics a *method* or a *point of view*?



SO, HOW DO WE IDENTIFY METATHEORETICAL COMMITMENTS?

- ▶ This is the meat of the issue, and its answer depends on what we think of theory in general.
- ▶ One way to look at it is by considering what a theory sanctions as valid or proper within the theory itself (like what is the subject matter of a specific theory).
- ▶ But let's keep in mind that these are not the same as the philosophical commitments of a theory!

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONCEPTS

- ▶ Now, metatheoretical and philosophical commitments are not fully distinct from one another. Instead, they are intertwined.
- ▶ Example: If we argue that the mind is not a computer, then we have a metaphysical perspective on the mind and a specific approach to psychology itself.

BOUNDARIES OF METATHEORETICAL COMMITMENTS

- ▶ Metatheoretical commitments lie at the intersection between the discipline and what lies beyond it.
- ▶ (Very modest) proposal for what we talk about when we talk about metatheoretical commitments:
 - Metaphysical claims about the core object of the discipline
 - Methodological assumptions *lato sensu* about it
 - Stand on current theory in a *syntagmatic* view of it

THREE POINT AGENDA

- ▶ *Ontological* commitment
- ▶ *Methodological* commitment
- ▶ *Historical* commitment



QUICK DIGRESSION: THE METASEMIOTIC

- ▶ Semioticians recognize, to some degree, the possibility of a *metasemiotic* as a way to deal with semiotic theory, but (pessimistic realism) it hasn't been properly fleshed out.
- ▶ Most statements about the *metasemiotic* are relegated to the scrutiny of semiotic statements. This is not enough!

TYPE-SEMIOTICS

- ▶ Biosemiotics as a prime example: When we do biosemiotic, we partake in commitments about semiotics *and* biology.
- ▶ The Peircean paradigm* and the code paradigm make essentially opposed assumptions about object, method and position in history:
Sign vs. code, leading into different methodologies and acceptance of their place in history of semiotics.

WHAT CAN WE EXTRAPOLATE FROM THIS?

- ▶ Humanities: Still a blanket term!
- ▶ Interdisciplinarity makes matters complex: Where do we make the cut in what commitments are transferred from one side to the other?

EXTRAPOLATIONS PART 2

- ▶ If we study language as a computational or embodied phenomenon, we are committed to two essentially different views of language.
- ▶ If that is the case, we also limit methodology to what makes sense considering the object of our research.
- ▶ When we take a stand on whether language is embodied (for instance), we also place our theory in the continuum of theories of language.

AND WHAT DO WE GET FROM THIS?

- ▶ Hopefully being able to interact with these commitments more clearly (instead of going hush-hush) can help us articulate our positions more clearly.
- ▶ Striving for different perspectives within a discipline (even if the discipline itself is messy, philosophically speaking) can help us develop our own ideas further.

