

Autopoiesis, Semeiosis, and Co-Coupling: A Relational Language for Describing Communication and Adaptation

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Abstract: This article proposes a possible synthesis between the concept of structural coupling with the milieu, derived from the thought of Maturana and Varela, and the concept of semeiosis derived from Peirce. The purpose is to develop a vocabulary and conceptual framework in which to envisage the relationships among autopoietic systems, i.e. organisms, against which communication can take place. By showing how the sign emerges from structural coupling, this article hopes to encourage (or reinforce) a gestalt shift in scholars of communication, away from a conduit metaphor of sending and receiving communications, and towards a grounding of communication in the relationships among organisms and their environment(s), which include other organisms. When these organisms engage habitually in what Maturana calls the “coor-dination of coordination of behavior,” and especially when this involves languaging of the human type, then the environment to which they are coupled also involves a system of signs, which, as Peirce demonstrates, is continually changed by the very interpretive actions which constitute it. Human languaging is “the play of signs” because play is a process of “co-imagining” in which organisms generate a repertoire of potential behaviors by placing themselves outside the immediate (“serious”) context of adaptation/ structural coupling. But within the cooperative domain of human work, i.e. the human collaborative structural coupling with its shared environ-ment or milieu, this “play of signs” can pass or fail the test of effectiveness. Humans engaged in cooperative work co-coordinate their structural couplings by way of conversational, a co-coordination which depends upon their shared encounter with a Secondness or “otherness” with which they grapple together — an “otherness” which can never be known directly, but only approached by the work of fallibilist human cooperation.

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