On the Conceptual Underpinnings of Organizational Semiotics

Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen
Professor of Semiotics
Department of Philosophy, History, Culture, and Art Studies, University of Helsinki
ahti-veikko.pietarinen@helsinki.fi
www.helsinki.fi/~pietarin

Abstract

The research on organizational semiotics deals predominantly with the question of how to bring the notion of information to bear on semiotically conceived accounts of human organizations. In this talk, I take up what I perceive as some of the key theoretical and conceptual elements involved in this endeavour. I will assess their status from the points of view of philosophy of science and Peirce’s theory of signs (semiotic). The following questions are seen to be at the heart of the methodology of organizational semiotics, which I will discuss from the philosophical and semeiotic perspectives: (1) How to build a science of information systems from the theory of signs? (2) How to study what signs do and how they are used to get things done in human organizations? (3) What is the true and what is the false in the kind of social constructivism that is taken to depend on the use of signs? (4) What sorts of successful theories are there to be allied with the notion that signs are necessarily contextual representations?

The answers I seek are along the following lines: (1) The foremost need is to have a pragmatic theory of information. Peirce’s methodetic and semeiotic make a step towards that direction. (2) Peirce’s pragmatism is a theory of the meaning of intellectual signs in use. The meaning of signs that can represent information structures in organizations is thus found in the habits of action (or action routines) of those organisations. (3) Pragmatism is incompatible with the central tenets of social constructivism and actualism. (4) Pragmatism takes all informative signs to be contextual. In institutional as well as organizational contexts, which typically encompass a variety of subcontexts, a promising theory is one that can successfully combine pragmatic semeiotic and some exact theory about rational behaviour, most notable, the theory of games. Such a merger comes close to what Geoffrey Hodgson has written on concerning the evolutionary economics of institutions, in terms of which organizations may be seen as being specific types of institutions.