



Discussion on Noema and Semiotic Phenomenon

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Abstract. People often ignore such a fact that signs connect human being and world. Furthermore, system of sign which people always use is continually forming the cognition and knowledge about the world. Even the world people live in, the all about it they have known are formed by system of sign. Therefore, it is worth to study on this issue that how signs work in people's daily practice and mental activities. The "Noema" put up by Edmund Husserl is the core concept such like a key to open the door of man's mind palace. In this article, the author would argue the point that two triangular models from C. S. Peirce and D. Davidson are important and useful to explain how the world of meaning is constructed. Moreover, these triangular models would make people more clear about the process of meaning produce and deliver between subjectivities.

Keywords: Meaning · Sign · Triangular model · Noema

1 Introduction: Noesis and Noema

The correspondence between language symbols and objects has plagued human beings from generation to generation. In each culture, in each history, in each community and society, there are thus barriers to understanding and communication, and researchers have sought to solve this problem in their own way. The key to dissecting this complicated picture is to find the mechanism and rules for establishing a relatively fixed relationship between symbols and objects in a retrospective method, so as to reconstruct the process and understand the mystery. The ancient Greek philosophers used "Nous" to refer to the concept of the faculties of man's mind, and every person who is a rational being has "nous" to distinguish it from other beings and serve as its prominent symbol. More than two thousand years later, when Husserl constructed his phenomenological theory, especially the theory of intentionality, he borrowed the concepts of "noesis" and "noema" contained in the concept of nous, in order to clarify human intentional activities and in what way and what mechanism consciousness will construct an object in intentional activities. Noesis points to the intentional activities of human beings, and noema exists both as the result of noesis' operation and as the "object" of the whole intentional activities. In addition to the extensive explanation of Husserl's "Logical Investigations",

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the discussion on noema can also be found in the thoughts of many philosophers based on the concept itself. Therefore, the discussion and debate about noema outweighs noesis. After joining the field of semiotics, how to combine noema's own characteristics and the theory behind it in the theoretical field of semiotics to advance the analysis of the theory of meaning is the main issue to be expounded in this paper.

2 The Foundation of Semiotic Phenomenon

The participation of semiotics in the discussion of the theory of meaning that belongs to analytic philosophy or linguistics does not constitute a breakthrough in its own disciplinary field, let alone an “overstep” of the exclusive field of analytic philosophy or linguistics. Relying on the double sense of the history of philosophy and theory, analytic philosophy once shut out or even “sniffed” theories and methods outside the field, even the discussion of meaning in the continental phenomenology-hermeneutics tradition is no exception, especially for the young discipline of semiotics. However, the development of semiotics in the past half a century has shown a broader theoretical horizon than that of analytical philosophy or even linguistics, thus providing a stage for researchers who focus on thinking about meaning. It is because of the efforts of these people that it becomes more legitimate and beneficial for semiotics to participate in discussions of the theory of meaning. This can be demonstrated by the following two points: First, in terms of how to view the relationship between human intellectual thinking and objects, the “turn of language” at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries regarded language as an explicit form of intersubjectivity and acting on the two-way process of input and output in which human beings regulate the world with their own thinking patterns. It is true that animals only use signal systems, and only human beings use language. However, in the theoretical field of semiotics, both signal systems and human language can be included in the semiotic system for consideration. Language is only the most complex and subtlest of the sign systems that exist on earth. Second, in terms of the generation and transmission mechanism of meaning, language occupies only one part in human society, and it is indeed a larger and most important part, but there are considerable non-linguistic elements such as symbols, graphics, and objects that coexist and are used together with language. In today's increasingly diverse ways of human information acquisition and dissemination, non-linguistic elements and language also carry meanings. These parts that do not overlap with traditional horizons are also increasingly showing their importance. Worldwide, emoji even has a wider use group and audience than English.

Participating in the analysis and discussion of the theory of meaning, semiotics needs to answer a primary question, that is, in what way and which method will semiotics use to make breakthroughs in existing theories of meaning and produce new results. Professor Zhao Yiheng believes that “semiotics is the study of meaning”, that is, “the theory of the study of meaning activities” [1] is based on the positioning of semiotics, and semiotics should take the problem of meaning as the core of its discourse to study. Once this is the case, the traditional research on meaning issues will undergo great changes, which are mainly reflected in three aspects: first, the carrier and transmission medium of meaning will go beyond the scope of language, including all symbolic systems used by human beings such as marks, patterns, paintings, music, etc., which greatly expands

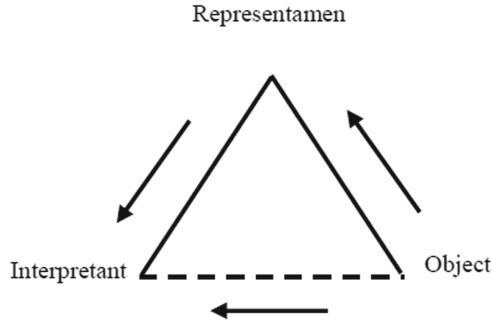


Fig. 1. Peirce's Model.

the theoretical horizon; second, the peculiar methods of semiotics provide operability for the study of meaning, such as Thomas Sebeok's semiotic modeling theory, so that it can get rid of the old way of psychologicalism in modern philosophy; third, semiotics can be combined with other disciplines or disciplinary branches to form new research approaches and interdisciplinary horizons, such as semiotic phenomenology formed by the combination of semiotics and phenomenology, and semiotic aesthetics formed by the combination of semiotics and aesthetics, etc. The properties and openness of semiotics make it more conducive to participating in the issue of meaning research than other disciplines.

3 Formal Intuition and Symbolization

The combination of semiotics and phenomenology has produced semiotic phenomenology, and the integrated part is mainly reflected in the reduction and intuitive method of semiotics, which is used to explain how to symbolize in the process of human semiotic activities, that is, how to put "that" becomes an object and then acquires meaning. The rationality and necessity of this process have been made in great detail by Peirce's "symbolic triangle" theory and the "language turn" itself at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and many analytic philosophers in this wave have made extremely detailed arguments. Peirce's "symbolic triangle" will be revisited here, a theory that will help to explain symbolization and its specific manifestations — the specific manifestations of formal intuition. As the "Fig. 1" shows:

In the primary reflection, it is easy for the subject to view the interpretant from the experience directly obtained by the object, that is, to obtain the meaning from the intuition of an object. This kind of thinking tendency has been the norm for hundreds of years in the philosophy of subjectivity since Descartes in modern times. A series of major discoveries in the field of natural sciences in the 19th century forced philosophy to begin "thinking changes". Frege and Husserl jointly launched a critique of psychologism. Psychologism was at odds with the demands of the natural sciences for certainty, precision, and objectivity, and philosophy began to change in different directions. The change indicated by the "turn of language" has profoundly changed the way of "doing philosophy". The Peirce "symbol triangle" shown in the figure above is an example.

The path of primary reflection and modern philosophical research on the question of meaning is shown to be the most direct path, but what is obtained from this is only an “experience” based on the subjectivity of a single subject, not experience, and cannot contribute to the formation of knowledge, the mutual understanding and two-way transmission of information between subjects. Therefore, Peirce added a “representamen” as a mediator between the interpretant or the meaning and the object. In his writings, the representamen is often called a “sign”. From this, the complete picture of “language turn” is depicted by this seemingly simple figure. The bottom edge of the symbolic triangle is formed by a dotted line, which means “this road is blocked”, and the realization of the triangle vertices expanding to both sides indicates that the sign system must be involved in the process of obtaining meaning, and the symbolic activity has become indispensable in the process of obtaining meaning. The process of obtaining meaning is “object-representamen-interpretant”. Compared with the short and direct line of “symbol-interpretant”, the addition of the medium of “representamen” seems to make this line more devious and complicated, but the representamen part includes language and human use. This makes the process of starting from the object and finally acquiring the meaning with the characteristics of being operable and analysable.

On the right side of the symbol triangle, the representamen is connected to the object, and the key point is how people deal with the object in the process of using the symbol, that is, how to symbolize the object and make the object become a symbol. The first step of righteousness is divided into two simultaneous processes: at the physiological level, the subject focuses his gaze on one face of the object. Because the human visual organ determines that it is impossible for a person to form a complete observation image of a certain object at a certain moment, only one face can be seen, and it takes many times to observe the whole picture of the object. The aspect of an object obtained at a particular moment is called “physiognomy”. The generation of physiognomy, together with their simultaneous conscious action, initiates a specific act of attaining righteousness. At the level of consciousness, the subject’s noesis puts the object under the “halo” formed by it, so that the intentionality points to a certain object. Due to noesis’ action, the object gets rid of the properties of things and becomes noema.

4 Functions of Noema in Understanding

According to Husserl in “Idea I”, for example, at Sect. 101: “This becomes clearer when we direct the attentional gaze of an ego to the object of consciousness. The ego’s gaze thus penetrates the intentional objects of the hierarchical sequence — up to the object of the final level, to which it does not penetrate, but is fixed on.” [2] According to this discourse, noema is not equivalent to the physiognomy in semiotic intuition, which contains both perceptual objects and attributes of meaning or connection to meaning. Thus, in the symbolic triangle, the representamen of the vertex position can mediate and connect the interpretant-meaning and object. Referring to Professor Zhao Yiheng’s discussion of semiotic intuition, we can find that this kind of intuition belongs to formal intuition, that is, “the initial acquisition of consciousness”, and has the following characteristics: “Formal intuition, as the act of initial acquisition, is self-clarifying.... Subject consciousness produces intentionality to acquire meaning. This need, as well as

this ability, is the foothold of the inner proof of the self and the starting point of symbolic phenomenology. The intentional activity of acquiring meaning requires no other as its basis.” [3] In formal intuition, what intentional activities point to is actually not only a thing-object, but also a psychological entity formed after the object is symbolized by human symbolic activities. And this “psychological entity” suspends the “materiality” of things. If the understanding of formal intuition is correct, then the formal intuition of semiotics points to Husserl’s noema. Therefore, the analysis of noema’s role and role in semiotic formal intuition will further reveal a complete process of obtaining meaning of the subject. Based on the above analysis, and taking Peirce’s symbolic triangle thought as the analytical model, the status and role of noema in the process of obtaining justice have the following four possibilities.

The first possibility: noema has included both representamen and interpretant. In this possibility, the model of the symbolic triangle actually changes from a ternary structure to a binary structure, that is, a combination of representamen and interpretant, and objects at the other end. Continuing to deduce along this route, it can be seen that the process of symbolization is the process of transforming objects into symbols through formal intuition, and it is also the process of obtaining interpretant, and meaning is also generated in this process. This interpretive approach may lead to both positive and negative opinions. From a positive perspective, for example, in the natural symbol system, bamboo and plum symbolize nobleness. Humans have given this meaning to two kinds of plants. Bamboo and plum have become symbols of “nobleness” after the process of giving meaning. Judging from the typical meaning-giving process of this example, the representational relationship between bamboo, plum and nobleness is a two-way selection and fixed process. To a certain extent, people’s understanding of the characteristics, growth process and appearance of bamboo and plum is in line with the need to express nobleness. Therefore, what symbol is chosen to represent the object or in what way the object will be reproduced, at least shows that the process from the object to the representamen includes the process of the object being interpreted through the representamen. The role of noema, as a psychological entity constructed by noesis, bears its assigned meaning. The opposite view is that this effectively ignores the efforts of Peirce and philosophers after the turn, including language, to rescue language or symbolic systems from the rut of psychologism. Because if in the process of a subject’s acquisition of meaning, the representamen used by it, that is, the symbol system, does not have the basis of public semantics, then the process and result of the acquisition of meaning will only be limited to the spiritual world of a subject. What such “meaning acquisition” actually gets is not meaning, but just the “experience” of this single subject. In other words, if noema is a combination of representamen and interpretant, it ignores both the symbolic triangle thought proposed by Peirce and Husserl’s phenomenological reduction thought.

The second possibility: noema is only an interpretant, and does not include a representamen, that is, there is no merger in the symbolic triangle model, and the object, as an object and a transcendent thing, is free from the activities of meaning, and does not enter the level of consciousness. However, this possibility itself is contradictory. Noema, as the intentional correlative item of the righteousness activity, is related to the object directly pointed to by a specific form of consciousness, and the process of turning objects into

symbols is also marked with the form of human thinking, that is, the interpretive thinking of the philosophy of subjectivity. Interpreted in such a way, noema seems unnecessary.

The third possibility: noema is both the object and the representamen, which is equivalent to merging the right part of the symbol triangle, that is, as the combination of the object and the representamen. What must be considered in this possibility is the manner of the representation of the object, i.e. what symbol is chosen for the representation of the object. According to the principle of arbitrariness, the representational relationship between the symbol and the object has an element of convention, but even the correspondence formed by convention should show that there are reasons for interpretation in the process of convention. In the history of human beings and in the long-term language practice, the generation of the language sign system itself contains the provisions of this representational relationship, so the problem has changed from the representational relationship between the representamen and the object to the understanding relationship between the interpretant and the object. In thinking about this problem, both the interpretant and the object must actually operate through the representamen, that is, the symbolic system. If this is acknowledged, then noema makes the “objective reality” as “thing” the “psychological reality” inherent in human thinking, which is the reconstruction of the object in thinking by consciousness. Only objects reconstructed in this way can correspond to interpretant, and the generation of interpretant must also be based on objects reconstructed in consciousness. Therefore, the basic function of noema is not merely the representamen but also to represent it using symbols, and to include the product after formal intuition acts on the object. Noema is not simply equated with the union of the representamen and the object, nor with Frege’s *Bedeutung*.

The fourth possibility: noema is neither an interpretant nor a representamen, but merely a mental construct of the object and a possibility to merge the two bases in the semiotic triangle. The author thinks that this possibility is a necessary theoretical assumption for the construction of symbolic phenomenology. The reason is that the object must be observed by consciousness, and then it can become an object from a simple “that”. This is the only way for all subjective philosophy and transcendental philosophy, and phenomenology is not exempt. And the intuitive method of phenomenology on which symbolic phenomenology relies is also based on this approach. The process of “that” becoming an object is the process by which noesis reconstructed it in consciousness. In this process, consciousness constructs for itself an intentional referent, which is noema, and thus noema is associated with the object, and “that” also takes the form of noema in this process be given. In “Little Idea”, Husserl once said: “Only in knowledge can the essence of the object be studied completely in terms of all its basic forms, and only in knowledge can it be given, and can it be clearly intuited. This discerning intuition is itself knowledge in the most precise sense; and the object is not something that is hidden in knowledge like it is hidden in a pocket, as if knowledge is a form that is equally empty everywhere, an empty pocket in which this time this time, and that next time. Instead, we think of givenness as: the object constructs itself in knowing...” [4] The result of the construction is that the object becomes a noema, which in turn connects the interpretant. So far, from the triangle of symbols, representamen connects objects and interpretant in a figurative form, while noema connects objects and interpretant in an abstract way.

5 Conclusion

Based on the explanation of the fourth possibility above, the status and role of noema in the process of obtaining meaning can be further explored in new directions and paths. “Meaning must be the meaning of symbols, symbols are not only tools or carriers for expressing meaning, but symbols are also the conditions for the production of meaning: only with symbols can there be meaningful activities. The things that the meaning form intuitively faces, at this time, it also makes the relevant physiognomy appear as symbols, and makes itself the meaning that the symbols refer to. In the sense-acquisition activities of consciousness, there is no difference between things and symbols... The object that falls in the sense-acquisition activities is no longer the thing itself, but the provider of the meaning required by the sense-acquisition activities.” [5] Professor Zhao Yiheng’s explanation can be used to annotate the first and the conclusion of this article at the same time. In the first interpretation, objects and representamen are indistinguishable in the process of acquiring meaning. Through the formal intuition of symbolic phenomenology, objects have been eliminated from their “materiality” and become symbols. This process is also a process of transforming and restoring to noema by suspending physical properties under the action of noesis. Along the reasoning of the fourth interpretation, the intentional act of the object being sensed in formal intuition suspends certain aspects, intentionally or unintentionally, at a certain moment. The physiognomy obtained by the subject at a certain moment must be incomplete and one-sided, and may produce almost infinitely different or partially overlapping physiognomy at multiple specific moments. This also explains why the same object can have “infinite meanings” and why it can have different meanings a person’s acquisition of meaning for an object becomes a structure formed by the overlapping and overlapping of several physiognomies. Perhaps this is the actual result of the activity of acquiring meaning.

The remaining puzzle is how noema, as a single construct of consciousness, is communicated and understood among subjects, and where does the legitimacy of objectivity of phenomena and the world come from? How is the other person constituted by the transcendental self as a subject different from a given subject? Questions such as these will be questions that semiotic phenomenology must confront and give rational explanations for.

Authors’ Contributions. This paper is independently completed by Yang Gao.

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