

### **Experience as a Construct**

We can understand experience as the difference between the physical environment and the beings for which the environment exists intentionally. The environment acquires an intentional existence when those beings are queried by the environment and answer to it, transforming it and being transformed by it. This interaction involves more than is present in the physical surroundings: emotions, illusions, and abstractions.

The organism occupies the centre of a web of relations through which it knows both itself and the environment. Cognition happens by relations that arise through the action of signs in nature. The name for this action is semiosis, by which one thing stands for another in a net of representations. Organism and environment cease merely to exist and interact by becoming objects of experience. These objects, together with the relations that constitute and sustain them, is experience itself.

The fabric of the semiotic web is intrinsically open to change, for each new experience implies a new thread, a new relation, a new design. This possibility of continual alterations prevents us from drawing a permanent and rigid division between what depends on the mind and what is independent of it. The point here is that all the elements of cognition are equally objective – that is, they exist only as objects of experience. It doesn't matter whether their origin is a subject existing in nature or the cognizing organism itself as a kind of natural subject.

I adopt a semiotic version of subjective and objective (Jeha 1991: 356). Subjective means that which exists in itself or outside the mind. Objective means that which exists for the mind on the basis of representations. Object, here, is the terminus of the relations that obtain from the cognizing operation. Thing is all that is there for the mind to meet. When a thing is known, it becomes an object.

Experience occurs when the organism can reconstitute the physical environment through objective associations that may not exist separately from the reconstitution. This reconstitution, or interpretation, allows the organism to model the physical world to its biological necessities as a member of a species. The animals of the *Homo sapiens* species take this modeling beyond attending to survival necessities into the creation of sophisticated constructs such as language and culture.

### Worlds of experience

The biological notion of experience as a construct was better developed (for semiotic understanding) by Jacob von Uexküll. He called this construct *Umwelt*, which corresponds to the notion of objective world (in contrast with physical environment).

According to Uexküll (1934), stimuli appear in the *Umwelt* as elementary sensations, to which correspond elementary reactions. To every group of external stimuli that reach the subject in the form of questions corresponds a group of actions that are the subject's answers to the world. Uexküll argues that the subject organizes perceptions by projecting them to constitute things as objects meaningful for the knowing subject.

Every organism lives in an objective world, which determines it and is determined by it. All the perceptions of the organism, considered from within that bubble, constitute the experienced reality. Unless the organism be capable of assuming a point of view exterior to its *Umwelt*, its objective world is equivalent to reality. Thus, only partially does its *Umwelt* coincide with the world independent of its cognition.

For the animals, this creates the possibility of delusion and camouflage, upon which they depend to find food and to survive their predators. For the human animals, the difference between mind-dependent and mind-independent beings provides the possibility to introduce in experience an entirely new dimension for each experienced object: the dimension of "stipulability." From stipulability arises the world of culture – the *Lebenswelt*.

In zöosemiosis the action of signs is grasped by the animals that make use of signification to interact with the environment and to survive there. At that level semiosis is the construction of a structure of experience through relations of signification. These relations are based on *entia realia* or on *entia rationis*, or on both. Here the purpose of the *entia rationis* is to bring into the biologic range of the organism those aspects and elements of the physical environment that it needs to survive.

In anthroposemiosis we speak of a semiosis modified by the awareness and by the manipulation of the role that the relations perform in the structuring of experience. Once human beings are aware of relations as being also an element of objectivity, they add to the sign the characteristic of stipulability. This characteristic makes possible the existence of language and, consequently, the objective world specific of human beings, the *Lebenswelt*.

In the *Lebenswelt* the world of experience opens itself to levels of development that have no precedents nor were prefigured in the *Umwelt*. An opening according to its contrast with the intentional autonomy of the *Umwelt* makes possible the human sciences and literature. An opening according to its contrast with the physical environment makes possible the natural sciences and technology.

Animals can also play with the objects within their *Umwelt* and reorganize them objectively in new ways. When this happens, however, what occupies the consciousness of the animal are the objects related, not the relations between them. In zöosemiosis the organism doesn't know it is manipulating a connection. In anthroposemiosis the knowledge of this possibility of altering fundamentals and termini makes this capacity attractive to human beings.

For animals, it would be more appropriate to speak of correlations between the objects of the senses. For human beings we must speak of ideas – the awareness of relations of signification detachable from their bases. This awareness enables human beings to recreate the structure of experience, which marks their passage from the level of the

*Umwelt* to the level of the *Lebenswelt*. The idea makes it possible for him to introduce relations that do not exist in the animal *Umwelt* or in the physical environment.<sup>1</sup>

This is what happens in the biological (human and non-human) and in the cultural (specifically human) objective worlds. There is yet another level of experience where modeling occurs – the inner world of the individual. Uexküll (1909) called it the *Innenwelt*. This is the interior map that the individual builds and uses to orient itself in the objective world of its species. Such a map comprehends the set of structures and bodily functions (Lorenz 1971: 275) that will orient the behavior of the organism in the *Umwelt*.

The existence of this interior world and its relation with the exterior world was known to Peirce. “Every person,” according to him (*CP* 5.487), “lives in a double world, the inner and the outer world, the world of percepts and the world of fancies.” Percepts here mean the objects directly apprehended. These objects are part of the *Umwelt* and have their correlative in the *Innenwelt* of the experiencing organism.

Percepts and fancies can affect human beings to produce “a tendency – the *habit* – actually to behave in a similar way under similar circumstances in the future” (*CP* 5.487). Repetitions in the *Innenwelt*, as well as in the *Umwelt*, produce habits that can influence actual behavior in the *Umwelt*. Thus, the inner world can use signs of fancy to create an outer world composed of mind-dependent beings: an objective reality without a counterpart in the physical environment. Similarly, through logical signs, the *Innenwelt* can create an *Umwelt* capable of replacing an objective reality, up to a certain point, freely chosen.

### Modeling Systems as Interpretants

Sebeok believes that Uexküll’s theory led to the development and application of the phrase “modeling system” in semiotics. In a first attempt to clarify the meaning of that concept, Sebeok (1987: 22) found a very good word for *Umwelt* – model. The interpreta-

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<sup>1</sup> The animal *Umwelt* is the objective world of purely perceptual elements where relations remain objectively latent or merely virtual as objects of experience.

tion an organism makes of the environment to create its species-specific objective world is already an act of modeling.

Uexküll's expression makes it possible to find three main modeling systems. The first is the species-specific biological apparatus, which creates the *Umwelt*. The second is the individual organism's interests, which determine its cognitive map – the *Innenwelt*. Specifically human, the third modeling system is the world of culture, or *Lebenswelt*, which arises with the introduction of language.<sup>2</sup>

Sebeok (1987 n.2) maintains that language as a

modeling system, in the broad sense, refers to an ideological relationship with some other system, such as an individual organism, a collectivity, a computer, or the like, and where its reflection functions as a control of this system's total mode of communication. A model of the world thus constitutes a program for the behavior of the individual, the collectivity, the machine, etc., since it defines its choice of operations, as well as the rules and motivations underlying them.

The introduction of language in the human *Umwelt* produced a model of the world that queries the human beings and to which they answer, transforming it and being transformed by it.

Language operates also between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt* of the individual. When he communicates, the individual correlates his *Innenwelt* and his *Umwelt*. He makes his internal modeling system (purely objective) commensurate with the modeling system (objective and physical) in which he exists. To do so, he must resort to a correlation that is also a modeling system, as we shall see.

Suppose two individuals from different cultures that want to communicate about a certain object. Because the interpretants they develop about that object are not wholly commensurate, communication will be deficient. Some communication always occurs, though, since their objective worlds superimpose in certain common points that make possible the exchange of messages. The common points we call *code*; the private, *ideas*.

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<sup>2</sup> Sebeok (1981: 120) has been calling language a “behavioral organ.” Chomsky (1980: 60, 241) calls it a “mental organ.” Both see language as endowed with a function: that of modeling the universe.

The code exists originally in the *Umwelt*. It marks the physical environment according to the objectivity of the organism interacting with it. Biologically the code corresponds to an anomaly in the *Innenwelt* that Uexküll called “familiar path.” The organism recognizes within the *Umwelt* a path that depends solely on its experience. There is nothing in the physical environment that determines the sequence of steps that the organism must take to go from one place to another.

The familiar path is a modeling subsystem, both in zoösemiosis and in anthrosemiosis. As a code, the familiar path is an interpretant not only for human beings but for the whole nature: where there is correlation, thirdness, or laws, there is an interpretant.

The familiar path, strictly biological and functioning only at the level of perception (and even before it), prefigures the code properly speaking, that is, linguistic. Idea (discovery of the relation) and code (correlation) are interpretants, linked to *Innenwelt* and *Lebenswelt*. The two individuals from different cultures have their own interpretants about the object they want to talk about. Although the interpretants originate in their interior objective worlds, they can be made public through stipulated signs that are part of their external objective worlds.

Emitter and receiver must share the code for communication to occur. Peirce (qtd. in Hardwick 1977: 196-197) calls this common ground the “communicational interpretant”:

a determination of that mind into which the minds of utterer and interpreter have to be fused in order that any communication should take place. This mind may be called the *commens*. It consists of all that is, and must be, well understood between utterer and interpreter at the outset, in order that the sign in question should fulfill its function.

The communicational interpretant is more than the linguistic code: it is that entire objective universe to which reference is made.

It is thus that real and reality are the interpretants developed by a culture and by the individual in a certain period. Similarly, the interpretant of good or bad is constructed by a culture or by an individual. Interpretants of real and unreal, good and bad are historically dated. The interpretant substitutes for the pre-semiotic notion of natural given: reality,

truth, and most of the concepts underlying our civilization are collective interpretants constructed by human beings in the *Lebenswelt*.

When we interact with the world, we impose our biological, individual, and cultural interpretation on it. Experience is not a relation that obtains between an organism and the environment. It is a semiotic process in which the environment becomes a sign to an organism according to its species-specific, individual, and, for human beings, cultural interpretants.

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