

Understanding the Role of Emotion in Sense-making. A Semiotic Psychoanalytic Oriented Perspective

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Published online: 7 December 2007
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Abstract We propose a model of emotion grounded on Ignacio Matte Blanco's theory of the unconscious. According to this conceptualization, emotion is a generalized representation of the social context actors are involved in. We discuss how this model can help to better understand the sensemaking processes. For this purpose we present a hierarchical model of sensemaking based on the distinction between *significance*—the content of the sign—and sense—the psychological value of the act of producing the sign in the given contingency of the social exchange. According to this model, emotion categorization produces the frame of sense regulating the interpretation of the sense of the signs, therefore creating the psychological value of the sensemaking.

Keywords Emotion · Language · Matte Blanco · Sensemaking

Language and Emotion

In recent years an increasing number of authors have expressed their dissatisfaction with cognitive psychology's computationist approach to mental processes, due to its incapability of taking into account the role played by meaning and contextual factors (inter alia, Bruner 1986). Actually, the computational approach (for a representative example of this approach see for example Fodor 1983) found its first critics within cognitive psychology itself, among those authors highlighting the fundamental role played in information processing by the semantic content of the stimulus. In perceiving as well as in thinking, human beings do not limit themselves to elaborating the information held in the stimuli; instead, they go beyond the information given, making inferences guided by their knowledge of the world (inter alia: Bruner and Goodman 1947; Johnson-Laird 1983; Sanford 1987).

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Criticisms of computationism are even more impelling in the case of language. As matter of fact, language is a clear intrinsically social process of sensemaking unfolding within and according to a socio-symbolic space of human exchange. From this perspective, one cannot but agree with the demand made by Shanahan (2007) for “a new view” on language. According to him, understanding language requires going beyond the computationist approach that sees the speech process as a mere epiphenomenon of cognitive structures and thinking of it as a constitutive dimension of sensemaking.

Recognizing the contextual and semiotic dimension of language leads to underlining the role emotion plays in communication process. As matter of fact, seeing language in terms of sensemaking means thinking of it as an intersubjective phenomenon. And—at least from our combined socio-constructivist and psychoanalytical standpoint (Salvatore et al. 2003; Salvatore 2006)—intersubjectivity can be understood only by referring to its emotional dimension (Salvatore et al. 2006). Therefore, we again agree with Shanahan (2007), when he underlines that “any analysis of meaning ‘construction’ must, if it is to get at the heart of the matter, confront the role of emotion in that construction.”

According to this statement, the author proposes a model of the relationship between emotion and language, in the final analysis aimed at understanding the semiopoietic capacity of language, what Shanahan (2007) refers to as the “vitality” and “magic” of symbolization

what is it about symbols (and language) that lend them their vitality and their ‘magic’: the haunting quality that we associate with symbols in Symbolist poetry, or the explosive element which erupted when Helen Keller moved across the threshold from sign to symbol in her famous encounter with the “living word” at the well? (p.)

Which Definition of Emotion?

Shanahan’s model of the relationship between emotion and language seems to us a representative example of a functionalist-reductionistic line of thinking of psychological processes characterizing contemporary mainstream psychology, grounded on the general idea that reference to the (broadly speaking) neuro-physiological mechanisms enables to get a better understanding of the way of working and the content of psychological processes. Here we do not want to discuss this approach as a whole, but just the issue of understanding language as sensemaking. Below we will try to briefly highlight the limits of Shanahan’s model of the relationship between emotion and language; in doing so our aim is to underline that such limits do not depend on the specific way of depicting *how emotion works* on language, but on the (meta-theoretical) definition of *what emotion is*, taken by the author as a starting point. As matter of fact, this definition still remains within the cognitive paradigm, even though integrated by the reference to the affective mechanism as depicted by the neurosciences. Yet, according to our thesis, we actually need emotion in order to understand language as sensemaking, but we need it as a construct grounded on a semiotic rather than a functionalist-reductionist standpoint (Salvatore and Pagano 2005).

Shanahan (2007) explicitly states that he is referring to emotion as defined by neuroscience and cognitive psychology. According to such a definition, emotion is a kind of *appraisal of a stimulus* performed by the organism (one can see the

biologist's terminology: not the "person," the "actor"... but the "organism") in order to select the type of behavioural answer to it.

This definition depicts emotion as an intra-psychological function, something that happens inside the organism—according to Pribram's model recalled by Shanahan—and we can add: with a self-regulative function. Moreover, it implies a model of emotion as a process concerning the relationship between the individual and discrete object of the world (the stimulus). Emotion is thus depicted somehow as the "petrol" of language, assigning a "hot" meaning—that is the meaning retrieved from the individual's repertoire of his/her inner reaction—to the object. In the final analysis, this perspective models the emotion as a secondary meaning that the individual attributes to the stimulus according to—and insofar as—it has been represented in terms of its primary meaning. In terms of semiotic theory, emotion is here conceptualized as the connotative predicate attributed to the denotative predicate associated to the argument (Eco 1975).

So defined, emotion is clearly close to the naïve experience everyone has of affective arousal that 'commonsense' considers emotion. Nevertheless, it does not take into account the socio-constructive nature of the relationship between subject and the world, and is therefore insufficient to enable the semiopoietic capability of language to be understood.

Here we will just recall three aspects of this topic. First of all, the subject does not come in touch with a single, discrete object. Obviously, each one of us has experience of discrete segmentations of the world, perceived as specific contents; but this is the output of the constructive sensemaking, rather than the input. Objects are products of a recursive and systematic work of differentiation, discretization and making the intrinsically continuous field of experiences relevant (Abbey and Valsiner 2005; Bucci 1997). From this point of view, the subject does not meet the object, but he/she is immersed in a dense network of an infinite number of potential linkages among the environmental flow of energy-matter unfolding along the temporal line. This means that an object to be represented firstly has to be extracted from the flow; in other words, constructed as a specific pattern of redundant connections selected from the contextual configurations the subject has experience of. In sum, we do not meet the object as the taken-for-granted content of the world, but we first of all engage with the global undifferentiated field and construct objects that are ultimately specific making relevant a very limited class of contextual relationships—among the infinitely possible. If we perceive objects this happens because we have shaped the field of experience according to a specific positioning (Harré and Gillet 1994), selecting/activating a specific set of connections: two people engaged with the same field of experiences, but having different positions, will be able to construct different objects.

Secondly, the considerations just made mean that perceiving a stimulus does not happen before attributing a significance to it, but through the mediation of the meaning (Cole 1996); meaning mediation is immanent to the selection and valuation of the pattern of connections we referred to above. Consequently, one has to conclude that not only can one construct many objects from the field of experience, but there are also many possible ways of representing each of them. Coming back to the above example, the two people dealing with the same field of experience will be able to perceive different objects insofar as and as a result of referring to their

different system of significance.¹ Sensemaking concerns precisely the constructive unfolding of such a system of significance: it comes logically and functionally before the attribution of meaning to the object, the latter being a product of the former.

Last but not least, one has to take into account that even if meaning-making is obviously subject to constraints deriving from the configuration of the field of experience, yet within such constraints it is not driven by the requirement of fitting some kind of universal and meta-historical criterion of truth (Rorthy 1989). Rather, it is embodied in a social activity and it is shaped and oriented for and according to the requirements of regulation of such social activities. In other words, representing an object and attributing a meaning to it, is an operation driven by and reflecting the point of view of the maker, his/her/their system of interests, aims, desires, requirements of self and intersubjective regulation; in short: a consequence of a specific positioning (Harré and Gillet 1994; Nightingale and Cromby 1999). From this standpoint, sensemaking is always a social and discursive process (Billig 1996).

One point is worth highlighting. Meaning-making is not only a product of a positioning: at the same time it is the way such positioning tries to reproduce itself in the dialectical space of the social exchange. As Austin (1962) pointed out, producing a sign is not a mere operation of making a text, but a speech act: an action of communication that is an integral part of and is carried out through a given system of activity. Therefore, one can not look at the language without taking into account its perlocutionary valence, its conative function aimed at doing something, influencing the listener(s), obtaining a certain reaction in him/them... We use language to be in relationship with others and to do something through such relationships: to express agreement, to impose one's own point of view, to define rules and roles, etc. According to this point of view, language is an argumentative and rhetorical activity aimed at empowering one's own vision of the world.²

In short, language is far from being the result of a blind and encapsulated algorithm: it is worth considering it as a process of constructive sense-making unfolding according to and by means of social exchange (Salvatore et al. 2005). Therefore, the functionalist-reductionistic definition of emotion does not take into account some crucial aspect of sensemaking. It seems a way of understanding the cognitive work on the products of the social construction of reality in which sensemaking consists, rather than a model of such sensemaking. Insofar as language and sensemaking are intersubjective, social, perlocutionary and semiotic processes, we need a model of emotion able to depict its semiotic intersubjective and perlocutionary properties.

¹ Impressive examples of this topic come from the situation in which is possible to compare the account of an event given by people with contrasting or however different perspectives on the happening being recounted. For example, the accounts of a soccer match made by the supporters of the two teams have so little in common that one may often be led to think that one is hearing accounts of two different matches.

² The lesson of the later Wittgenstein (1953/1998) returns here: language forms can be considered as tools and expressions of forms of life.

Emotions as Generalizing Categorizations of the Field of Experience

Thinking of emotion as a kind of appraisal of discrete objects clashes with our daily experience and with some empiric evidence highlighting the generalizing logic of emotional categorization. Being caught by an emotion means representing the world in an absolutizing, homogenising and generalizing way: a person in love tends to represent her/his beloved as having all the possible good qualities *to the maximum extent*; when someone is angry, this feeling tends to spread over the whole field of experience. Obviously people can constrain the generalizing tendency of emotional categorization, striving to focus and associate their feeling onto specific objects and events. And we know that people to a greater or lesser degree usually somehow succeed in doing so—however much a person may be in love, sooner or later he/she will accept that his/her beloved is not perfect... Yet placing constraints on generalizing categorization has to be understood as the consequence of the moderation function exerted on emotion by another mental process (the paradigmatic way of functioning of the mind, to use Bruner's terminology; or the secondary process, to use psychoanalytical terms), rather than the way emotion works.

The studies of Osgood et al. (1957) and more in general the vast literature on Semantic Differential highlight that when people are asked to evaluate a set of different objects through a set of connotative parameters,³ they tend to produce generalized evaluations, using a subset of parameters in a homogeneous way throughout the set of objects. In short, the connotative (emotional) way of evaluating tends to perform a double kind of generalization, homogenising both the evaluative parameters (i.e. if an object is felt to be attractive, it will be felt to be good and reliable too), both the object of the field of experience (if the co-occurrence of attractiveness, goodness and reliability works as the connotation of an object, it will tend to work for other objects under evaluation too).

The evidence concerned with the generalizing way of working of emotional thought is consistent with the results of different surveys on the representations of Italian schools shared by the different population sectors participating to this system of activity (Mossi and Salvatore submitted; Salvatore et al. 2004). An interesting finding of these studies is the homogeneity of the different affective connotations of the different levels of context experienced: the way of evaluating the micro-social environmental (i.e. the class; the relationship with colleagues), the institutional frame (the school organization) and the macro-social context (society, the institutional and political environmental of the school) are not independent of each other, but are strongly associated; if a student connotes positively one of this objects/levels of experience, he/she will connote the other in the same way too. And such a pattern is present in the whole population analysed: in students as well as teachers, parents as well as school managers.

Matte Blanco's bi-logic theory of the unconscious (Matte Blanco 1975) offers an useful model to understand the generalizing way of working of emotion as well as the role it plays in sensemaking. Matte Blanco's theory is aimed at overcoming the

³ The parameters are presented by means of dichotomic scales structured in terms of opposing pairs of adjectives (e.g. good/bad; strong/weak; big/small...). This structure is aimed at eliciting an affective answer rather than an analytic representation of the stimulus (cfr. Mossi and Salvatore submitted).

traditional reified spatial idea of the unconscious as the container of the contents of the repressed thoughts, in the perspective of a model depicting the unconscious as an autonomous, systematic way of functioning of the mind, having its own logic, even if different from the paradigmatic one. This theory is interesting for our discussion because according to it, emotion can be seen as the product of a thought predominantly working according to the syntax of the unconscious.

On the basis of a phenomenological and logical analysis of feelings, as well as of psychotics' thinking and accounts of dreams (that is the spheres where the action of the unconscious is more evident) Matte Blanco manages to depict the syntax of the unconscious in terms of a logical formal model. As he highlights, one peculiarity of the unconscious is that it is not endowed with the notion of negation. Consequently, it doesn't identify differences (a difference necessarily entails a negation) but only similarities. Matte Blanco applies this basic assertion in a systematic and extensive way, and in so doing succeeds in identifying two general logical principles as being sufficient to model the logic of the unconscious. The first is the *symmetry principle*. According to this principle, the unconscious way of thinking works by treating as identical the two elements of every relationship. Then, from the perspective of unconscious thinking, if "Marco is the father of Bruno" is asserted, then "Bruno is the father of Marco" is true too. The second is the *generalization principle*, asserting that the unconscious treats the elements of a class as equivalent to the class, then recursively the class as equivalent to the super-classes it belong to. Therefore, from the perspective of the unconscious there is no difference between an exemplar and the species: the former will have all the qualities of the latter, and vice versa. Stereotypes are clear forms of thinking that retain elements of such a way of thinking.

According to these two principles, the way of thinking of the unconscious can be understood as the working of the mind to mentalize the field of experience in terms of an indistinct totality and to lead every perception of a discrete object back to this totality. What psychoanalytic theory calls "secondary process"—that is rational/paradigmatic thought—constitutes the opposite and complementary way of the mind's working, striving to constrain the homogenising/generalizing tendency of the unconscious.

The mind never works according to just one of the two logics. It always operates as a combination—in variable proportions—of unconscious and paradigmatic logic, working as a dividing function. From this point of view, emotional categorization has to be thought as the way of thinking characterized by a predominance of the unconscious functioning, with the paradigmatic thought having a marginal—yet essential—function of introducing some basic distinctions articulating the homogeneous totality of the unconscious representation of the field of experience (Bucci 1997). According to this model of the mind, one can conceptualize emotion as hypergeneralized classes emerging from the first rapture of the indistinct totality and maintaining inside the homogenising and generalizing modality of the unconscious.

Before concluding the presentation of this model of emotion, it is worth underlining that the recognition of the generalizing logic of emotion does not entail rejecting the definition of emotion as a kind of appraisal of an object in itself. The point is what kind of appraisal of what kind of object one means. In the final analysis, from our standpoint, emotion can be thought of as a kind of evaluation, on

condition that: (a) one means evaluation not as an analytic assessment—i.e. the representation of the evaluated stimulus in term of its having a specific quality to a given extent—but as a global form of categorization that projects the stimulus in a generalized affective class (i.e. the class of good things as opposed to the class of bad things)⁴; (b) one considers the generalized field of experience—rather than the specific object—as the target/content of the emotional evaluation.

The Role of Emotion in Sensemaking

We want to dedicate this last section to highlighting how the model of emotion just proposed can help to conceptualize language as a process of sensemaking. More specifically, we focus on two issues that this theoretical task has to cope with. Firstly, the problem that Shanahan (2007) also raises: the understanding of what we have mentioned above as the semiopoietic property of language; secondly, the question of how people can understand and use signs notwithstanding—yet one could also say, thanks to—their intrinsic ambiguity.⁵

The Semiopoietic Capability of Language

From our standpoint, the “vitality” and “magic” of language (more in general, of symbolic activity) concerns the transformation of *representation* into reality having value-of-life for the person who thinks of it (Grasso and Salvatore 1997). The human being does not come directly into contact with the world, but with representations of discrete states of it; representations made of hierarchized signs (Valsiner 2001). However, people treat such signs as if they were things, states of the world. How does this happen? One could argue that the mind is immersed in and made of signs; having nothing but signs to encounter, the mind cannot but attribute value-of-life to those signs. But this solution is not satisfactory simply because people do not attribute value-of-life to every sign they have as content of their mental processes. Some representations are treated as *intensional*, that is as not having a reference (i.e. a correspondence in the world); or as part of a hypothetical state of the world. Just in some cases people treat the significant they think of as not *standing for* something else (the meaning, that is something said of a given reference) but as being immediately (in the sense of: “without mediation”) the state of the world the sign refers to.⁶ Therefore, the fact that people treat some mental content as having value-

⁴ The three affective dimensions identified by the literature on Semantic Differential (Evaluation; Power; Activity) are a way of depicting how affective dimension of evaluation works in terms of global categorization.

⁵ To avoid getting bogged down in our discussion we will not examine the connection between these two issues here. In other works (Salvatore et al. 2005, 2006), one of us and others have highlighted how language’s semiopoietic capacity rests on the polysemic quality of signs.

⁶ For example, if I see a big stone falling on my head, I do not represent either it or the very possible, though hypothetical, consequence as a sign, but as something immediately having a real life value for me. Interestingly, people with cerebral damages associable to the emotional elaboration of the stimuli, are able to represent, but unable to attribute a real life value to them. Such a person might think: “I can see a heavy stone falling on my head. This will surely kill me”, but without moving (Damasio 1999).

of-life should be considered as a product of a psychological function, rather than a mere given natural condition of subjectivity.

We suggest that this psychological function is performed by emotion, insofar as we conceptualize this construct according to Matte Blanco's bi-logic theory (Matte Blanco 1975). As we have highlighted above, such a theory offers a conceptual frame in which to understand the empirical and experiential evidence of the homogenizing/generalizing way of working of the emotions, interpreting such characteristics as the result of the predominance in emotional semiosis of the logic of the unconscious, making equal (both between the logical component of the categorization—principle of symmetry—and the different levels of such a process—principle of generalization).

The unconscious property of making equal seems a good candidate in order to model the psychological function we are discussing. As a matter of fact, this psychological function is making equal the fundamental components of the semiosis activity: the sign (meant as combination of significant and significance) and its reference—that is: the thing in the world the sign refers to (Eco 1975). Rational/paradigmatic thought treats the sign as something representing the reference, but standing for it. Hence, paradigmatic thought sees a difference between a picture of a steaming hot pizza upon an advertising leaflet and the tasty thing the picture refers to—an important distinction leading people not to eat advertising leaflets. Yet for unconscious thought—therefore for emotion—things work differently: the sign represents and, at the same time, *is* the reference. In other terms: emotional semiosis makes sign and reference identical. So, for instance, the act of trampling the flag (a symbol) of the Country does not mean, but *is* the act of trampling the Country (the reference). Think also of the aptitude to talking to the picture of a loved one who is absent or dead, as a way of feeling that s/he is present. In this sense, the emotional semiosis *reifies*: it turns representations (discourses, behaviours, thoughts, images) into realities for the mind.⁷ It follows that—from the emotional point view—representing something is equivalent to experiencing it as true and real (as happens in dreaming). Therefore, one can read a Shakespearean sonnet and participate actively in the situation described, sharing emotions and supporting one or the other of the characters.

The Ambiguous Nature of the Signs

The Hierarchical Organization of the Mind

Cognitive theory (inter alia, Johnson-Laird 1983; Neisser 1987; Reed 1988) had already highlighted that the syntactic and semantic information held in a given utterance (more generally: in a given system of signs with a—broadly speaking—representational function) is not usually sufficient to decode it.

Subjects often have to make inferences in order to complement the information given. In so doing, they are prompted by their knowledge of the world, both that representing the context the utterance refers to, and that representing the social

⁷ To show that property in action, we can recall the process of hallucinatory satisfaction of desire described by Freud (1900). The child acts out the omnipotent fantasy of nourishing through the significant reifying food.

context in which the utterance is produced. Let us take the following utterance as an example (Sanford 1987): “Mary is going to Sofia’s wedding reception. She hopes that she will like the bonbonniere.” We evidently understand this utterance as the description of Mary’s expectation to receive a valuable bonbonniere from Sofia, on the occasion of Sofia’s wedding reception. This interpretation seems to be obvious. Nevertheless *the text* does not *contain all the* information needed to make it. By itself the sentence could also be understood in the following way: “Mary is bringing a bonbonniere to Sofia hoping that Sofia will welcome it”. The utterance does not provide the reader with all the information needed to understand the utterance itself—in this case to understand who the two occurrences of the word ‘she’ refer to. Nevertheless, we understand that the first ‘she’ is for Mary and the second too. The point is that we understand the utterance in such a way only because we have specific knowledge of the system of activity working as the frame of the utterance—in this case of the way wedding reception works (bonbonniere is received by the guests of the person whose wedding is being celebrated). An utterance with the same syntactic structure, but a different content—recalling a different context of activity—would be understood in a different way (think of “Mary is going to Sofia’s *birthday* party. She hopes that she will like the *present*”).

In sum, the incompleteness of the signs leads to depicting processes of information elaboration as a hierarchical structure, where super-ordered mental models—conceptualized as forms of knowledge-representation of the context in which cognition takes place—drive inferential process enabling the subject to go beyond the information given.

The hierarchical model of mind helps to understand how we can represent and understand signs, even if their incompleteness/ambiguousness is the rule rather than the exception. Nevertheless, the cognitive psychology formulation of this model is not sufficient, because it leaves out the pragmatic dimension of the meaning. Recalling the previous example, Cognitivism helps us to conceptualize how one is able to understand who Mary hopes will like the bonbonniere, but it tells us nothing of the pragmatic dimension of sensemaking, i.e. of how and what one can understand from the fact that Mary is expressing such a hope—instead of expressing a worry or a certainty...—or of the fact that someone is producing the utterance, speaking of Mary’s hope. The fact is that sensemaking concerns not only the content of the signs, but the whole act of using such signs in a social exchange, that is in the terms we have used above: the pragmatic dimension. This last statement entails a distinction between significance and sense (Salvatore et al. 2006).

Significance and Sense

If one defines *significance* as the semantic content of the sign (what the sign says about a given reference), one can distinguish it from *sense*, defining the latter as the psychological/communicational value that a certain significance acquires within and according to the situated intersubjective (discursive) circumstances (Edwards and Potter 1992; Gergen 1999). In other words, the psychological value of a sign is not what is said, but what is communicated by the act of saying it. The same significance (i.e. semantic content) may have a huge number of different senses according to *who* makes it, to *whom*, *when*, *where*, and *why* (Salvatore et al. 2005). Let’s imagine a

person meeting other colleagues for a work matter. He arrives at the briefing and says: “What a foul day!” At first analysis we can note that the significance of this sentence is not obvious: it expresses a negative evaluation (foul) of an ambiguous reference. Nevertheless, the briefing participants will be able to reduce this indeterminacy, by the help of contextual markers. For example, the direction of the speaker’s gaze outside the window, the state of the weather and the quality of the outside landscape might lead them to understand that the speaker was referring to the whether. Thus, once they have specified the reference, they would have no difficulty in decoding the significance of the sentence. The point is different as regards the sense. If the *significance* of the sentence has a certain degree of indeterminacy (though reducible by the reference to the context in which it is uttered), the act of making such an utterance in the presence of those given listeners, at that given moment, can have infinite *communication values*. To recall some of them, it can be a way to communicate: |I am going through a bad patch| or |I don’t like my job| or |I don’t like what we have to discuss|, or |I am happy to be here with you, while outside it is bad| and so on.

The Frame of Sense

The above example should have highlighted that sensemaking does not finish in the understanding and negotiating the content of the communication (what we have called “significance”), but it concerns the pragmatic output of the communicational activity (what we have called “sense”). Moreover, it leads to the question of how people understand and get a certain extent of agreement about the sense, selecting one of the infinite possible communication values could be given to the act of producing the sign.

To answer to this question we have to enlarge the hierarchical model of the mind, in order to include the pragmatic level of sensemaking. For this purpose, let us return to our last example. Imagine the colleagues exposed to the act of saying “What a foul day!”. They will interpret such an act according to the more general representation they have of the briefing, of the organizational context of such activity, and of the relationship among them and between them and the colleague speaking. For instance, if they shared a representation of the organization as being in dire straits, and the briefing as the *redde rationem* moment, very probably they would understand the sense of the act as something like “today for (some of) you will be a bad day.” On the other hand, if the dominant representation of the context was of a participative and supportive group of friends aimed at pursuing shared aims, maybe the act would be meant as a way of communicating the pleasure of being inside in comfort, in contrast to the unpleasant and unwelcoming situation outside.

The example just made highlights how interpreting the sense of the act of producing a sign—that is, selecting one of the infinite possible communicational values to attribute to such an act—is an inferential activity driven by a superordered representation of the context of activity—and therefore of the social relationship entailed in such an activity—within which the act is performed. In other words, sensemaking is possible insofar as the actors involved share a *frame of sense* enabling them to interpret the pragmatic level of the communication in a way that is convergent enough to allow the coordination of their shared activity (Salvatore et al. 2006).

The Frame of Sense As Output of Shared Emotional Categorization

The idea of a frame of sense working as a shared superordered representation of the system of activity and for this reason working as the regulative device of sensemaking seems to us a believable extension of the more general hierarchical vision of the mind widely accepted in contemporary psychology and coherent with the area of psychoanalytic theory that underlines that intersubjective sensemaking is driven by superordered affective schemas of relationship (Bornstein and Masling 1998; Gill 1994; Storolow et al. 1994; Weiss and Sampson 1986).

On the basis of the consideration above, let us now turn to our central issue: the role of emotion in sensemaking. Our model of emotion—as a way of generalized categorization of the field of experience—leads us to conclude that emotion is the semiotic function specifically devoted to categorizing the context of relationship and in so doing to generating a frame of sense. In sum, according to our proposal, first of all actors participating in a relationship—mediating a given activity—construct a shared emotional categorization of their common context—that is of the relationship/activity they are involved in. This categorization is emotional because of its generalized and homogeneous nature. Once activated, this shared emotional categorization works as a frame of sense, regulating the interpretative operations that constitute sensemaking.

If one takes into account how what we call emotion works in everyday life, one can recognize that when an emotional connotation of a given stimulus is made, it inevitably tends to generalize itself, until it works as an appraisal of the whole context in which the stimulus is encountered. For instance, if we are treated rudely by a person we do not know, we will tend to feel the whole person is impolite, and even aggressive. Especially in the social circumstances in which we have to mix with other people we have not met before, the first moments of communicative exchange do produce impressions that we tend to feel as referring not to the specific exchange, but to the whole context. For instance, if at the beginning of a business meeting one experiences the first communications as warm and efficient, one will be led to connote the meeting as a whole as warm and efficient, rather than if the single individuals behaved in such a way. A recent study (Mossi and Salvatore [submitted](#)) on the representation of school in a high school student population found five generalized images, each of them shared by a subgroup of the population. Each of these images is generalized in twin complementary aspects: on the one hand this brings together all the different objects of the field of student role experience (the school, its mission and its environment, the image of the teachers as well as of their role) capturing them in terms of and by means of one homogenising representation; on the other hand, this representation is a global connotation made of a generalized class of meaning. For instance, a group of students shares the idealized image of the school world as something absolutely good and reliable. Every aspect of the experience is traced back to this connotative class of meaning, and therefore works as a specific frame of sense according to which these students regulate their sensemaking operations.

Before concluding it is worth highlighting that conceptualizing the frame of sense as the output of emotional categorization allows us to give an answer to two central questions.

The first question concerns how the frame of sense is generated and how it reproduces itself over time. As we have underlined, the frame of sense is shared by definition. It is not in the head of the actors; it is a social product of the communicational exchange. We have to think of the frame of sense as shared; otherwise we could not understand how actors are—to a greater or lesser degree—able to converge on a specific interpretation of sense among the infinite possibilities, then to coordinate their reciprocal participation in activity. Yet thinking of the frame of sense as a shared representation entails a potential paradox. As a matter of fact, if we conceptualized the frame of sense as a functional representation of the context, the output of paradigmatic thought, we would fall into a circular reasoning, because this would mean that creating a frame of sense requires a social exchange—which carries out the negotiation—therefore in the final analysis a frame of sense that is already active. Conceptualizing the frame of sense as the output of an emotional—generalized—categorization allows us to avoid such a paradox. This is because by definition such a way of conceptualizing means that the frame of sense is not a stipulated representation, that is the output of a negotiation by means of which actors reach agreement. As we know from everyday life experience, emotional categorization of the reality is not shared in terms of stipulation, but is as it were “contagious.”

This is understandable insofar as we assume that the emotions follow the unconscious logic of making equal. First of all this assumption implies that sharing an emotional categorization means that actors have to converge among a few global and generalized classes of meaning.⁸ Moreover, this assumption means that we must not think that actors put their relationship as the preliminary object to be appraised, in order to define the shared frame of sense allowing them to regulate their subsequent interpretative operations on the signs. Rather, they generate the frame of sense precisely as an induced outcome of their interpretative operations. In other words, subjects A, B and C encountering each other for the first time need not stipulate an explicit agreement about the sense of their system of activity in order to use it afterwards to interpret the sign they exchange then coordinate. They just have to produce a sign and interpretations of this sign and these interpretations (explicit or implicit as they may be) will make a frame of sense emerge.⁹ This conclusion is possible if one takes into account that from the point of view of the unconscious logic every interpretation of a sign in terms of a given sense is made identical to—then carries within itself—the frame of sense according to which it was made (Mossi and Salvatore [submitted](#)). Recall the previous example and the image of the participants at the briefing seeing the statement “What a foul day!” as a signal of how stormy and hard the meeting will be for them, because they are interpreting it according to a frame of sense depicting their organizational system as a persecutory and violent context. In this case, the emotional appraisal of the sign “What a foul day!” will be at the same time a way of evoking the frame of sense depicting the organizational system in such a way.

⁸ The Italian psychoanalyst Fornari (1979) states that the unconscious speaks of very few things, conceivable as the basic content of affective experience of the world: parental figures, parts of the body and life/death.

⁹ A model aimed at modelling such a process of emergence has recently been proposed (Salvatore et al. 2006).

The second issue concerns the capability of the frame of sense to guide the interpretative activity of the actors. In other terms, we have to understand how the shared frame of sense is able to regulate in a shared way the sensemaking process, so as to make this process social. Also in this case a possible answer lies in the unconscious logic of making equal. As a matter of fact, insofar as we assume that this logic is organizing the level of categorization we are referring to, we can guess that when a shared representation (in our case: the one constituting the frame of sense) is active in the mind of a single participant, as a content of its thought activity, *at the same time* such a representation is felt by the actors to be their own. In other words, according to the unconscious way of thinking, the assertion “I think that the other people present feel that our shared context is X” is the same thing as “I think that our shared context is X.” Such equivalence may seem strange; yet we all experience it more often than we realize. For instance, think of how grateful and loving we feel towards A who is telling us that person B has a high opinion of us. A feeling like that clearly entails making equal A and B, so that we transfer the characteristics of B to A.¹⁰

Conclusion

The discussion put forward above was triggered by our agreement with those who, like Shanahan (2007), underline that language—and more generally: symbolic activity—can be understood as a process of sensemaking—rather than a mere product of mental schema—insofar as one takes into account its emotional dimension. We have tried to highlight that this point of view and this theoretical task requires a deeper study of the theoretical model of emotion for the conceptualization of the semiopoietic capability of language.

With this aim in view, we have proposed a semiotic and psychoanalytical model of emotion. According to such a model, grounded on Matte Blanco’s (1975) theory, emotions have to a certain extent the property of unconscious logic of making equal, working as generalized, homogenizing and global representation of the social context actors are involved in. We have used this model of emotion to conceptualize sensemaking, underlining that the emotional categorization of the social context can be thought of as working as the frame of sense of the actors’ interpretative activities, according to a hierarchical model of sensemaking.

In sum, from our point of view, recognizing language as a sensemaking process means recognizing its nature as an intrinsically social process. And if we consider language as intrinsically social, we have to do the same for emotion, if we want to use such a construct to get a better understanding of how language works.

¹⁰ Here one could actually refer to the psychoanalytic theory of transference (inter alia: Gill 1994), which in the final analysis deals with the same process we are talking about.

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