estudos
semióticos

Charles W. Morris on truth.
Towards a semiotically oriented epistemology[*]

Remo Gramigna[i]

Abstract: Truth is a very complex phenomenon that has exercised a fascination upon the human mind for millennia. Discussion on truth and falsehood goes back to the earliest day of philosophy and has continued ever since. Semiotics, as an independent discipline, has shown some interest towards this subject, although the research conducted in this field has been scant. This paper focuses on one aspect of this issue for it discusses the semiotic conception of truth in Charles Morris' work. The reasons for this proposal are threefold. Firstly, in *Sign, Language, and Behavior* (1946), Morris tackles at length the problem of truth from a semiotic perspective. He offers a thorough and very technical account of truth that lays down the theoretical underpinnings for addressing this issue from a semiotic stance. Secondly, Morris develops an interesting yet overlooked conceptual apparatus. He introduced a precise and lucid set of semiotic distinction of the terms such as 'truth, 'adequacy', 'reliability', 'belief' and 'knowledge' as applied to signs, which all deserve close scrutiny. One of Morris' merits was to underscore that when such terms are applied to the study of signs, they must be kept distinct for they are independent terms. Thirdly, Morris' theory of truth deserves attention because it has been almost neglected in contemporary semiotics. Thus, the goal of this study is to rework Morris' stance on the subject, review the main theoretical distinctions that Morris formulated in regard to the semiotic conception of truth, and to discuss whether this pragmatic account on truth is still applicable today.

Keywords: C. W. Morris; semiotic theory of truth; true signs; pragmatism; theory of signs.

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i Post-doctoral researcher FACETS at the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, University of Turin, Turin, Italy. E-mail: remo.gramigna@unito.it. ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9015-7348.

Introduction: semiotics and the quest for truth

"The most important ideas come in moments of catastrophe". So wrote the Russian linguist Vyacheslav V. Ivanov (1983, p. 49) in a very lucid essay where he tributes his esteemed friend and colleague Roman O. Jakobson (1896-1982).

As Ivanov writes, although he was a few years younger, Jakobson considered himself to be associated with the generation of the 1890's which included artists, poets and thinkers that had an important influence on his thought. Ivanov writes that the people from this generation seemed "to have been able to accomplish so much because their formative period fell in a time which preceded great catastrophes of our age, such as the First World War" (IVANOV, 1983, p. 47). For Jakobson, too, this experience of in-betweenness and of catastrophe, that is, the experience of the pre-war period and the war that followed was crucial to him, both as a person and as a scholar. Ivanov considered Jakobson a thinker ahead of his time and, for this reason, he was fitting more to the next century (the 21st century) than the time he actually lived (the 20th century). He was always future-oriented, a "man of the future" (IVANOV, 1983, p. 47).

Jakobson was born in a period of profound historical change, of catastrophe, and lived between two eras, at the time when a worldview was collapsing and the new paradigm shift had yet to settle in. Later, another fine Russian intellectual, Juri Lotman, described these particular historical moments as "critical periods when one has reached the end of old paths while new paths have yet to be determined" (LOTMAN, 2013, p. 37). Something similar occurs today. I believe that both Ivanov's portrait of his friend Jakobson and Lotman's insight on unpredictability are very poignant as these ideas embody the particular significance of the historic moment of epistemic crisis − a "veridiction crisis" (GREIMAS, 1989, p. 653) − the world dwells today.

It is for this reason that I begin the present study with this particular image. In the current moment of crisis and rapid change, attending to the question of truth and its discernment from falsehoods is pivotal. Indeed, truth, fiction, illusion, manipulation, lying and deception are topics often reported in the media and treated as academic subjects (EATON, 1925; BOLINGER, 1973). Today, such matters are at the forefront of discussion arousing interest among experts and ordinary people alike. "Fake news", "post-truth" and "post-fact" have, indeed, become the new buzzwords (FERRARIS, 2017; KEYES, 2004; LORUSSO, 2018; POLIDORO, 2018).

The problem of truth is ancient. Undoubtedly, truth is a very complex phenomenon that has exercised a fascination upon the human mind for millennia. Discussion on truth, falsehood, fiction, and deceit goes back to the earliest day of philosophy and has continued ever since. Historically, philosophers have the most to say on the subject. They have generally addressed the question of what is right and what is wrong about truth-telling or lying to others. As D. Nyberg pointed out, "truth telling is morally overrated" (NYBERG, 1993, p. 25). Plato, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, I. Kant and many other thinkers have discussed this problem at length from a moral standpoint.[1] Because the purpose of this study is to outline the semiotic significance of truth, it is useful to release the term from its moral weight.[2]

Semiotic research on the subject of truth has been scant, despite the fact that U. Eco's oft-quoted definition of semiotics as the study of anything that can be used in order to lie (ECO, 1975, p. 17) should have opened up extensive studies in this area of research. However, this was not the case. As Marcel Danesi (2017, p. 20) pointed out, "it is somewhat surprising to find that virtually no one has approached sign analysis from Eco's perspective, even though it goes way back to 1976". As far as I am concerned there are only a handful of studies that tackled the issue of truth and falsity from a semiotic standpoint (BUYSSENS, 1984; ECO, 1997; GREIMAS, 1989; PELC, 1992). Whilst philosophers and linguists, as said before, spent a great deal of time treating these subjects, semioticians have yet to catch up with it.

Today, the paradigm of symbol manipulation has seen a re-emergence through the widespread use of digital media. Technological advancements have brought radical changes in the use of symbolic systems and the representation of reality. Through digital media, the messages, images, narratives, and communication have decoupled from their original sources. As a result of this, it became difficult to assess the truthfulness of the speakers and the reliability of sources (RUESCH, 1972, p. 268). This issue poses important epistemological questions, namely, how the knowledge of reality is acquired and to what extent one can assess the accuracy of information altogether.

Semiotics, as well as other disciplines, is called to attend to such questions and seek to provide valid answers. I contend that, in recent decades, the epistemological vocation of semiotics has been watered down. Therefore, this

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[1] For historical overviews on the philosophy and ethics of lying and truth-telling, see A. Tagliapietra (2001), M. Bettetini (2001), S. Bok (1978), D. Nyberg (1993) and J. Vincent-Marrelli (2004). From a different perspective, also very relevant are the studies of A. G. Gitter (1963), J. Forrester (1997), Lindskoog (1993), J. Campbell (2001), J. Hesk (2000), J. Barnes (1994), H. Arendt (1968, 1971). Very relevant to this debate is J. Locke, Book 4, chapter V ("On truth in general") of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). On IMT (Information Manipulation Theory), see S. McCornack (1992). On truth in science, see S. Haack (2003).

[2] On the concept of lying and deception, in the extra-moral sense, see F. Nietzsche (1873) and K. Scheibe (1980).

essay is a quest to the scholars of semiotics to reposition themselves on issues of epistemology, truth, and falsity. I argue that semiotics has left an epistemological lacuna, as it were, that future generations of thinkers should fill.

1. A neglected topic of research: Charles William Morris on truth

The thrust of this paper is that in Charles William Morris' theory of signs we can discern with clarity the rudiments of a semiotic theory of truth. Whilst for Thomas A. Sebeok Morris's *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938) is among the only two "general semiotic treatises written during the interwar period" and was highly regarded as a "miniature classics" (SEBEOK, 1975, p.15), Umberto Eco pointed out that Morris, however, was generally regarded as a philosopher rather than recognized as a semiotician in the academic community of his time (ECO, 1978, p. 8) as his works were generally addressed to logicians. Whilst Morris' studies had a wide reception (APEL, 1973; EAKINS, 1972; FIORDO, 1976; MORRIS, W. E., 1952; PETRILLI, 2011; ROSSI-LANDI, 1953, 1954), today his word is a *vox clamantis in deserto*. Regrettably, today Morris' legacy has been almost completely forgotten and dismissed in the semiotic scene worldwide. Hence, my interest in rehabilitating Morris's semiotics [3] to the contemporary debate because I believe his theory has a lot to offer. This alone justifies the present study.

The aim of the present article is not to provide a systematic treatment of Morris' theory of signs in all its facets, as this endeavor would require a much lengthier and in-depth analysis.[4] Morris was a versatile and prolific writer, who touched upon numerous and various subjects, from semiotics (MORRIS, 1927, 1938, 1946) to aesthetics (1939, 1954), to axiology (MORRIS, 1946, 1948, 1949) and psychology.[5] The scope of this paper, thus, is limited to one aspect of Morris' theory of signs, namely, his account of truth as it was laid out in *Signs, language, and behavior* (1946). This is the main focus of the present study as it sets the limits of the present enquiry on this particular issue.

In what follows, thus, I shall attempt to do two things: firstly, to extrapolate from Morris' semiotic theory his account of truth and to discuss and review it. Secondly, to show why this theory is relevant for contemporary research in semiotics. In order to address these points, I will be drawing on the philosophy of pragmatism and, in particular, on the work of Charles Morris, *Sign, language,*

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[3] Morris did not use the term "semiotics" but he consistently employed the term "semiotic". In this respect, see the explanatory terminological note written by Sebeok (1971, p. 9-10) published in Morris' *Writings on the general theory of signs*.

[4] The most useful study on Morris' theory of sign is Eakins (1972).

[5] For an extensive and exhaustive bibliography on the writings by Charles Morris and studies about Charles Morris, see "Writings by Charles William Morris" (MORRIS, 1993, p. 107-122).

and behavior (1946). This will constitute one of the main primary sources for this study, although other sources will be relevant as well.

It is my contention that Morris' insights about the uses of signs, the typology of adequacies of signs and the fine-tuned theoretical differences he pointed out, is a fruitful approach to understanding how semiotics can approach such a complex, difficult, and overrated problem such as truth. As we shall see in what follows, Morris introduced a very technical set of terminology such as 'truth', 'adequacy', 'reliability', 'belief' and 'knowledge', which, I argue, not only should make up the toolkit of any semiotician, but helps in grappling with the concept of truth. One of his merits was to underscore that when such terms are applied to the study of signs, they must be kept distinct for they are independent terms (MORRIS, 1946, p. 111). In what follows, I will return to this point.

A full-blown re-working of Morris' position on the subject would require a much lengthier and more in-depth discussion as this topic cannot be disposed of in a few words. However, it is worth reviewing the main theoretical distinctions that Morris formulated as such distinctions help to navigate the conceptual cluttering concerning the study of phenomena of truth and falsity as these concepts are applied to the study of signs.

2. Theoretical background

Before obtaining a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1925 with a dissertation entitled *Symbolism and Reality. A Study in the Nature of Mind*, Charles William Morris (1901-1979) studied science, biology, and psychology. He gained fame within the domains of semiotics and philosophy of language with his book, *Signs, Language, and Behavior* published in 1946, which deepens and expands upon the theory of signs he laid out in his previous monograph, *Foundations of a Theory of Signs* (1938). The latter was published as the second volume of the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*.

Foundations of a Theory of Signs is important in many respects as it pointed out a threefold division of the dimensions of semiosis, which Morris termed as syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. Such a division remains a landmark in semiotic theory and it is a useful distinction. The theoretical influences on Morris' theory of semiotics are numerous. Besides behavioral sciences (Charles Osgood, Clark Hull, Edward Tolman) and psychology (B. F. Skinner), one should mention that Morris drew on *The Collected Papers* of Charles Sanders Peirce, the pragmatism of William James, John Dewey, and Hebert Mead (of whom he was a student), the philosophy of Rudolf Carnap – who was visiting the University of Chicago due to Morris' own initiative (HARTSHORNE, 1979, p. 193) – Bertrand Russel, Ernst Cassirer as well as the linguistic theories of Edward Sapir, Manuel Andrade, and Leonard Bloomfield, which, according to Morris

himself, constituted "the background against which Foundations of a Theory of Signs appeared in 1938" (MORRIS, 1971, p. 7). As Eakins pointed out, Morris' work is "greatly indebted to Peirce. Indeed, his work is a detailed commentary on Peirce's theory of signs with behavioral qualifications and explanations added. And he, too, is a philosophical behaviorist" (EAKINS, 1972, p. 287).

In *Foundations of a Theory of Signs,* Morris defines "semiosis" as "the process in which something functions as a sign" (MORRIS, 1938, p. 3). He also qualifies semiosis as a process involving three elements, namely, "that which acts as a sign, that which the sign refers to, and that effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter. These three components in semiosis may be called, respectively, the *sign vehicle*, the *designatum*, and the *interpretant*; the *interpreter* may be included as a fourth factor" (MORRIS, 1938, p. 3, italics in original). Paired with these three elements of the sign, is the "interpreter" (which is not to be confused with the "interpretant") of which Morris underscored the importance. An "interpreter" is someone that operates in a given socio-cultural context who is the receiver of a sign or a set of signs. It should be noted that Morris assigned to the "sign-vehicle" a specific function of mediation.

In *Signs, Language, and Behavior,* Morris defined the sign as a preparatory stimulus that causes in some organisms a disposition to respond in a certain way. The preliminary definition of the sign he provides in this treatise is the following: "If something, A, control behavior towards a goal in a very similar way (but not necessarily identical with) the way something else, B, would control behavior with respect to that goal in a situation in which it were observed, then A is a sign" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 7).

The Italian scholar F. Rossi-Landi considered Morris as a scientific empiricist and as a behaviorist (ROSSI-LANDI, 1954, p. 12). As such, Morris' behavioristic theory of signs was not exempt from criticism. As compared to his earlier study, the theory of signs laid out in *Signs, Language, and Behavior* shows a more pronounced behavioristic outlook so much so that Morris' semiotics has been often termed as "behavioral" or "behavioristic semiotics" (BLACK, 1947). Such a distinctive "behavioristic" overlay attracted quite a lot of criticism at the time of the publication of Morris' monograph and was the object of heated debate.

Max Black, for instance, remarked that "the extent to which 'behavioral' definitions, so narrowly circumscribed, can provide a vocabulary fit to describe the full range and complexity of the human uses of language" is questionable and he proposes "to show that Morris' terms are ill-defined and excessively narrow for fruitful application to human language" (BLACK, 1947, p. 259).

Before discussing Morris' understanding of the concept of truth, it is important to set his theory against the background of the main theories of truth

that were discussed at his time. The relevance as well as the originality of Morris' contribution can be adequately assessed only by a consideration of this more general frame. Undoubtedly, Charles S. Peirce's theory of truth and belief is relevant as it was pivotal for the development of the approach known as pragmatism. Peirce's theory of truth and belief is as complex as it is multifaceted and, for the purpose of this paper, I can only briefly touch upon it.[6]

According to Meyers, Peirce's theory of belief "as a habit of action" not only is well-known but it is often couched in terms of the questions of the pragmatic maxim or inquiry and often discussed in tandem. However, the doctrine of belief has value in and of itself (MEYERS, 1966, p. 4). For the purpose of this paper, it is important to stress that, in Peirce's terms, beliefs and actions are interlocked so much that belief is predicated upon the habit of action it establishes: "the essence of belief is the establishment of a habit" (5. 397).

Peirce discusses the nature of belief and its properties in "How to make our ideas clear" as well as in other articles published in the years 1877-1878. According to Peirce, belief has three main characteristics: "First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say, for short, a habit" (5.397). It is very useful to understand the establishment of a habit by means of a belief in terms of the disposition to respond in a certain way. Very explicit in this regard is Meyers (1966, p. 5-6), who considers the third characteristic as pivotal and out of the three features, the most important. This means that a belief influences "how we are prepared to act under certain circumstances" (MEYERS, 1966, p. 5). Thus, beliefs prepare for actions because beliefs predispose the subject to act in a certain way by means of a habit of action. There is, thus, an apparent link between beliefs and a disposition to behave in a certain way, which operates by means of the "habit".[7] Peirce defined the notion of "habit" as follows:

> [A habit] denotes such specialization, original or acquired, of the nature of man, or an animal, or a vine, or a crystallizable chemical substance, or anything else, that he or it will behave, or always tend to behave, in a way describable in general terms upon every occasion (or upon a considerable proportion of the occasions) that may present itself of a generally describable character (PEIRCE, 1931-1958, 5.538).

[6] For a detailed account of Peirce's theory of truth, see Geyer (1914), *The Pragmatic Theory of Truth as Developed by Peirce, James and Dewey*, and Meyers (1966), *Belief and Truth in Charles Peirce*. I drew on both studies in order to expound Peirce's doctrine of belief.

[7] For a detailed account on Peirce's concept of habit from a semiotic perspective, see, West and Anderson (2016).

3. The uses of signs and how to test them

Before venturing into a discussion of the theory of truth, an examination of the uses of signs is in order because the two issues are interlocked. A discussion of the uses of signs is, thus, instrumental for understanding Morris' take on truth. This one aspect of Morris' theory of signs dwells on the production of signs and the articulation of types of discourses. This is an account of the ways in which signs are used and for what purposes people use signs.

Whilst in the first part of *Signs, Language, and Behavior* Morris discusses the nature of the sign, its main features, as well as the "modes of signifying" (designators, appraisors, prescriptors and formators), in the second part of the book the author expounds on the production of signs, the truth of signs and the types of discourses. The first part of the book is geared toward the study of signs from the perspective of the interpreter or sign-receiver. Indeed, the study of the modes of signifying entails a consideration of the point of view of the interpreter and, more precisely, it focuses on how different signs prepare the interpreter towards a specific behavior. Hence, the first part of the book is devoted to the study of the relation between signs and their interpreters.

However, Morris holds that this is a partial way of looking at signs because it covers only one aspect of the sign relation. There is, indeed, another important aspect of the study of signs to take into account which considers the production of signs. More precisely, this point of view considers the goals for which a sign is produced by an organism. Whilst the modes of signifying tackle the issue of signs from the point of view of the interpreter, the study of the uses of signs is concerned with the sign-producer and it focuses on signs in terms of goal-oriented behavior. This shift of perspective is significant because it addresses the questions as to the purpose for which an organism produces a sign and the questions of the ends that the organism intends to achieve through the production of signs. What is, then, the 'use' of a sign, and how does Morris define it?

Morris provides the following working definition of the *use* of signs: "A sign *S* will be said to be *used* with respect to purpose *y* of an organism *z* if *y* is some goal of *z* and if *z* produces a sign which serves as means to the attainment of *y*" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 92). For instance, if in order to gain money a certain author writes a book, the gaining of money is said to be the goal of the organism that produced the signs – the writing of the book.

Having defined 'use' along these lines, a corollary to this definition would be to consider to what extent the sign produced is able to achieve the goal the sign-producer aims to achieve. Were the signs produced by the organism for a particular purpose instrumental to achieve that specific goal? Did it successfully achieve the goals set? Here, Morris introduces a new concept in his theory in

order to account for the degree to which a sign achieves the intended goals. Hence, he turns the discussion to the problem of what he terms the 'adequacy' of signs.

According to Morris, from the standpoint of the relation between signs and sign- producers, one needs to consider the *adequacy* that signs have to fulfill certain purposes. In Morris' terminology, 'adequacy' is defined as "the degree to which it [the sign] achieves the purpose to which it is used" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 93). The adequacy of signs and the use of signs are interlocked, although they have their own scope and place in Morris' theory and are distinguished one from the other.

In order to discuss the extent to which a sign is 'adequate' and in light of the relation between use and adequacy of signs, Morris thinks that one needs to consider the various uses of signs and identify a typology of distinct signs usages. Signs can be used for a plethora of purposes:

> Signs may serve as means to gain money, social prestige, power over others; to deceive, inform, or entertain; to reassure, comfort, or excite; to record, describe, or predict; to satisfy some needs and to arouse others; to solve problems objectively and to gain a partial satisfaction for a conflict which the organism is not able to solve completely; to enlist the aid of others and to strengthen one's own independence; to "express" oneself and to conceal oneself. And so on without end (MORRIS, 1946, p. 93).

Indeed, people use signs for different purposes and these usages can be classified into four primary groups: (1) "informative", (2) "valuative", (3) "incitive", and (4) "systemic" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 95). These are the four main usages of signs taken from the perspective of a goal-oriented behavior that signs elicit.

As Morris (1946, p. 95) pointed out, "signs accordingly may be used to inform the organism about something, to aid it in its preferential selection of objects, to incite response-sequences of some behavior family, and to organize sign-produced behavior (interpretants) into a determinate whole".

Table 1: The four uses of signs.

Uses of signs	Description	Modes of signifying
Informative	To inform an organism about something	Designators
Valuative	To aid an organism in its preferential selection of objects	Appraisors
Incitive	To incite responses of some behavioral family	Prescriptors
Systemic	To organize interpretants into a whole	Formators

Source: The author.

The correspondence between modes of signifying and uses of signs is not univocal. Whilst each mode of signifying has a preferential use, this does not mean that other modes of signifying cannot be employed for different use. In other words, whilst it is accurate to say that designators are primarily used to provide information (informative use) also appraisors and prescriptors could be used to give information.

4. Key terminological distinctions: beyond the conceptual cluttering around the notion of truth.

Morris' account is very technical and there is a good reason for it. Morris strives towards the formulation of a very precise and technical terminological apparatus. The term 'meaning', for instance, which surfaces in many publications and was epitomized by the seminal work of Ogden and Richards, *The meaning of meaning*, is ruled out from the set of basic semiotic terms that Morris singled out because he thinks this term is not precise enough for conducting scientific analysis. As Morris remarks, "accounts of meaning usually throw a handful of putty at the target of sign phenomena, while a technical semiotic must provide us with words which are sharpened arrows" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 19).

In what follows, I will insist on the importance of the key terminological distinctions laid out by Morris because the identification of precise technical terms helps in decluttering the terminological confusion and vagueness around the notion of truth when it is applied to the study of signs. In doing so, I believe to preserve the ethos and initial intention of Morris' work.

It is worth noting that to each use of signs it corresponds a different type of adequacy. Thus, the four uses of signs Morris identified are coupled with four different types of 'adequacy' of signs. The correlation of the use of sign to the type of adequacy related to each use yields a matrix of four different types of adequacy of signs. As Morris pointed out:

> 'Truth' is often a synonym for the adequacy of a sign, but since the term frequently blurs the distinction between denotative reliability and adequacy, it had best be avoided as a synonym for 'adequacy.' We shall somewhat arbitrarily call a sign that is informatively adequate 'convincing'; 'effective' will be used for valuative adequacy, 'persuasive' for incitive adequacy, and 'correct' for systemic adequacy (MORRIS, 1946, p. 97).

Therefore, by matching the four uses of signs with the type of adequacy associated with each use, a four-fold matrix of different species of adequacy of signs can be singled out, as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Types of adequacy.

Uses of sign	Types of adequacy
Informative	Informative adequacy (convincingness)
Valuative	Valuative adequacy (effectiveness)
Incitive	Incitive adequacy (persuasiveness)
Systemic	Systemic adequacy (correctness)

Source: The author.

Let us briefly discuss each type of adequacy. As Morris (1946, p. 100) remarked, "in the informative use of signs, these are produced in order to induce someone to act as if a certain situation possessed certain characteristics" and, therefore, "a sign is informatively adequate (or convincing) when its production causes its interpreter to act as if something has certain characteristics". For example, if A uses a sign to inform B that the road x leads to Rome, and if the sign produced by A causes B to act towards x as having the characteristics described (that road x is the way to Rome), then, the sign may be said to be 'convincing', that is, informatively adequate.

At this junction, there is an important corollary to take into account. Morris is very sharp in clarifying that the informative adequacy of the sign needs not to be confused with the denotative reliability of the signs employed. This point is worth pondering because it bears significance to the subject of truth. Indeed, one may be inclined to think that when a sign is used informatively it also describes something in a truthful fashion because providing a piece of information adequately is very often equated to or confused with providing information truthfully. This is not always the case and for this reason, the two issues – informative adequacy and denotative reliability – must not be mixed up together. According to Morris, indeed, these are two different levels of analysis and must be discerned and kept distinct.

Although it may seem paradoxical, from the point of view of the uses of signs discussed above – the goal-seeking behavior perspective – it should be pointed out that the phenomena of disinformation (intentional deception included) fall into the same basket of the informative use of signs. In order words, from the viewpoint of the use of signs, informing or misinforming someone are not different things, because this aspect does not touch upon the question of truth and denotation, but concerns exclusively the way signs are used to inform. As Morris remarks, "in the informative use of signs, signs are produced in order

to cause someone to act as if a certain situation has certain characteristics" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 97).

To test whether a sign is informatively adequate or not means to assess whether the production of this sign caused the receiver of the sign to respond to something as if it has the characteristics conveyed by the sign producer. Therefore, whether the information provided is truthful or untruthful is irrelevant here and pertains to another level of analysis, which I will take up later on. From the point of view of the adequacy of signs, thus, misinforming someone with the intention to deceive as well as providing inaccurate information inadvertently, both fall into the informative use of signs. Morris is very clear on this point and insists that the informative adequacy is not equivalent to the truth of signs nor is it the same thing as the reliability of signs.

Figure 1: The informative use of signs encompasses both information and misinformation.

Informative use of signs

Deliberate misinformation   Providing inaccurate information inadvertently

Deception   Providing accurate information
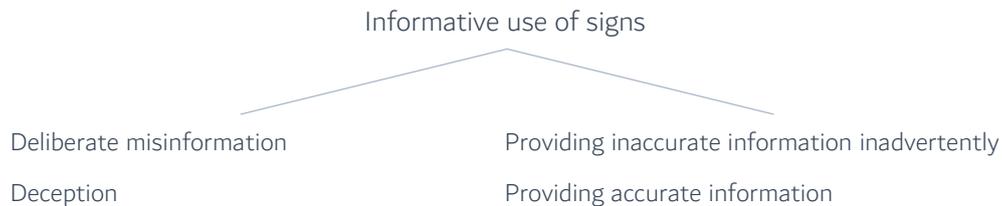
Source: The author.

Morris insists that the 'convincingness' (informative adequacy) of signs should not be confused with the denotation of the sign nor with the question of truth and falsity of the sign. These are three aspects that ought to be discerned and for the sake of clarity must be kept distinct.

In this regard, Morris provides very useful terminological distinctions which are worth considering. He distinguished between 'truth', 'reliability', and 'adequacy' of signs. As he pointed out:

> A sign is informatively adequate (or convincing) when its production causes its interpreter to act as if something has certain characteristics. Since such convincingness is a matter of the uses of signs, it is not to be confused with the question of the denotative reliability of the signs employed: to inform someone convincingly of something is not necessarily to inform him truly. *A* may convincingly inform *B* by a poem about himself in the sense of causing *B* to act toward *A* as a certain kind of person, without *A* being in fact such a person. The term 'inform' is frequently limited to those cases where the sign is not only adequate, but is "true", that is, 'inform' is contrasted to 'misinform' as 'conveying true information' is contrasted to 'conveying false information'. For our purposes it is convenient to distinguish the informative use of signs (and hence

convincingness) from the question of truth or falsity of the signs used; hence to 'misinform' a person deliberately or unknowingly is still, in this usage, to inform him. Signs may be informatively adequate even if the signs in fact denote nothing (MORRIS, 1946, p. 99).

This distinction is pivotal as these aspects should be discerned and not be mixed up together. To sum up, what Morris terms as 'convincingness' has to do with the informative adequacy of signs, which does not overlap with the level of the truth and falsity of signs. This leads to the interesting thesis that a discourse can be very 'convincing' – and, thus, 'adequate' from an informative point of view – although it may not be a truthful discourse. In my view, Morris is very sharp in pointing out that the informative adequacy of signs needs not to be confused with the denotative reliability of signs. And this is praiseworthy.

We can, by way of illustration, apply this distinction to the domain of science. According to Morris, the "scientific discourse" falls into the basket of the informative use of signs, being "the most specialized form of designative-discourse" and its task is to convey "true information about what has been, does, or will exist" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 126). The point to note, however, is that although the signs used in this type of discourse may be informatively accurate – in the meaning Morris gave to this term – this does not necessarily imply that these signs are truthful. Discerning the problem of the truth of signs from that of the informative adequacy clears out the field of many doubts and misunderstandings that often arise when discussing the age-old question of truth. Acknowledging this distinction paves the way to understanding why scientific discourses, as well as any technical discourse based on a designative-informative mode of signifying, can be intentionally misleading although informatively accurate. The possibility of deceit is, therefore, enmeshed in the way semiosis operated and deception is nothing but a corollary of the informative use of signs:

> Lying is the deliberate use of signs to misinform someone, that is, to produce in someone the belief that certain signs are true which the producer himself believes to be false. The discourse of the liar may be highly convincing. The mere making of false statements is not lying, nor are all forms of misrepresentation lying – as in a painting, which portrays objects with characteristics which they do not in fact have. Lying is connected with the informative function, regardless of which kinds of signs are used for the purpose of misinforming (MORRIS, 1946, p. 261-262).

This view has significant consequences for an understanding of science as discourse. Science is often given the status of being informatively adequate, reliable, and truthful. However, such criteria may not overlap at all thus yielding to situations in which an interpreter may be led to think that scientific discourse

is true whilst this is not the case. As Morris puts it, "Our terminology does justice to both the similarities and the differences between various kinds of ascriptors and rescues semiotic from the clamor of those who assert that 'science alone is true' or 'art alone is true' or 'religion alone is true'" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 108).

Having said that, I will now turn to the second type of adequacy Morris singled out: the valuative adequacy or 'effectiveness'. As pointed out before, to use signs valuatively means to use signs in order to induce a preferential behavior towards certain objects, things, events, people, etc. The valuative adequacy of signs ('effectiveness') is measured according to "the degree to which a sign gives to something a preferential status" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 100). The tests of signs used valuatively are whether they "are effective in achieving the purpose of inducing some organism to accord to something or other a desired preferential behavior" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 101). Morris also explains that although convincingness and effectiveness are two different types of adequacy, often effectiveness of signs depends on convincingness.

In the incitive use of signs, signs are employed in order to determine how the interpreter of sign acts towards something. In other words, this has to do with the production of signs in order to incite certain responses of the sign-receiver. The range of the responses called out by the sign may vary. Morris termed the incitive adequacy of signs 'persuasiveness' and this constitutes the third type of adequacy. Thus, a sign that is incitively adequate in Morris' account is persuasive. In this case, the adequacy is assessed by checking whether the sign produced has induced the behavior in the way envisaged by the sign-producer.

The fourth type of adequacy is the 'systemic adequacy' (correctness). As compared with the previous ones this type of adequacy is more complex and was later abandoned by Morris in his later writings.

5. Truth, denotation, and reliability

Morris explains that the account given hitherto remains rather incomplete inasmuch as the presentation of the four types of adequacy tells us only whether the signs produced had actually influenced the interpreter to whom the sign was directed in order to achieve a certain goal This account is, thus, partial because such a presentation reveals very little about the truth and the reliability of the signs used. Hence, after dwelling on the types of adequacy – that is, the degree to which a sign is fit and successful to achieve its goals – Morris turns his discussion to the question of truth. We can say that the previous discussion on the uses of signs and the types of adequacy paves the way for a semiotic understanding of what truth is. As Morris clearly pointed out:

> The convincingness of a sign is not the same as its truth or reliability; an effective sign may not give a preferential status to

objects which actually satisfy the needs of its interpreter; a persuasive sign may incite behavior which does not in fact efficaciously reach the goals of its interpreter; a systematically correct sign may not appropriately organize behavior. In all these cases there seems to be some underlying "factual" components which are distinguished from adequacy as that term has been hitherto used, and which in some sense affect the adequacy of the signs. These neglected factors are the truth and reliability of signs (MORRIS, 1946, p. 106).

We shall now define what 'reliable' and 'truth' mean when such terms are used in relation to signs. For Morris, a sign is 'reliable' "to the degree it denotates in the various instances of its appearances" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 106). If Mr. White uses a finger pointed outside his window in order to signal to another person that there is snow outside of the window, and every time Mr. White produced this sign there was snow outside of the window, then, the sign is said to be 100 percent reliable. Reliability of signs, therefore, is predicated upon the relation to the number of times that the sign actually denotes.

There are two points to consider from the outset. Firstly, one could object that the term 'reliable' used in a form that is applicable to signs is a misnomer, because, generally speaking, people are said to be reliable rather than signs. However, this is not the sense in which Morris used this term and he argues that signs can be discerned as well according to whether they are reliable or not reliable. As we can glimpse from the glossary of semiotic terms he set up, a "reliable sign" is defined as follows: "a sign is reliable to the degree that members of the sign-family to which it belongs denote; otherwise unreliable" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 353).

The second point to consider is the problem of denotation. Denotation and reliability are not the same thing and should not be confused. In the example above, the pointed finger of Mr. White may denote snow outside his window and yet be an unreliable sign. Conversely, there may well be the case when a very reliable sign in one particular instance does not denote. Denotation and reliability are, thus, disjunct.

The issue of denotation was treated by Morris earlier in his treatise when he laid out the basic terms of semiotics. Because denotation is brought up again in the discussion of truth and reliability, then, it would be useful to retrieve this term and see what it is about. Morris (1946, p. 347) formulates an important principle that should be borne in mind: whilst all signs signify, not all of them denote. What does it mean, thus, when we state that a sign does or does not denote?

To start with, let us start with clarifying the basic terms Morris employed:

Any organism for which something is a sign will be called an *interpreter*. The disposition in an interpreter to respond, because of

the sign, by response-sequences of some behavior-family will be called an *interpretant*. Anything which would permit the completion of the response-sequences to which the interpreter is disposed because of a sign will be called a *denotatum* of the sign. A sign will be said to *denote* a denotatum. Those conditions which are such that whatever fulfills them is a denotatum will be called a *significatum* of the sign. A sign will be said to *signify* a significatum; the phrase "to have signification" may be taken as synonymous with "to signify" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 17).

An example would clarify this terminology:

A person on the way to a certain town is driving along the road; he is stopped by another person who says that the road is blocked some distance away by a landslide. The person who hears the sounds which are uttered does not continue to the point in question, but turns off on a side-road and takes another route to his destination (MORRIS, 1946, p. 6).

By applying the aforesaid semiotic terminology to this concrete example, the driver is the interpreter; the spoken words to the driver are signs; the disposition of the driver to respond in order to avoid the landslide is the interpretant; the actual landslide that occurred in that particular road is the denotatum; the conditions of being a landslide at that place is the *significatum*.

Having said that, let us now concentrate on the relation between the sign and the *denotatum*. Morris is sharp in remarking that whilst a sign must signify, it may or may not denote. This point is worth noting. This is important because it is linked with the problem of the reliability of signs, although these are two different matters. It has been said that the landslide at a certain place is the *denotatum* of the sign. The words uttered to the driver may or may not denote because the landslide may in fact not exist at all. In the case that the landslide does not actually exist, the sign is said to signify but it does not denote.

With this in mind, we can now go back to the problem of reliability and the truth of signs. Reliability is a matter of the degree to which the sign denotes. As Morris pointed out:

A sign is *reliable* to the degree that the members of the sign-family to which it belongs denote; otherwise *unreliable*. The degree of reliability (and so the degree of unreliability) of a sign is capable of quantitative formulation. If the dog obtained food 90 per cent of the times the buzzer sounded, the buzzer sign is 90 per cent reliable (MORRIS, 1946, p. 23).

In order to address the problem of truth and to introduce a semiotical formulation of this concept, Morris introduces the notion of T-ascriptors. In order to grapple with this concept, we need to bear in mind that when we talk

about truth and T-ascriptors we are dealing with denotation rather than the use of signs. This means that in order to assess the truth and the reliability of signs the scholar must take up the point of view of the interpreter. In order to assess and test the truth of a sign, Morris refers to the term T-ascriptor, which stands for True ascriptor. For Morris T-ascriptors are ascriptors that denote.

> 'True' is a very ambiguous term in ordinary speech, and the identification of it with 'T-ascriptor' accords with only one of its many significations.[...]
> The important point for semiotic is not to analyze the various significations of 'true' nor to prescribe one of these significations but to clarify the similarities and the differences between ascriptors (MORRIS, 1946, p. 107-108).

6. Belief and knowledge as applied to signs

The fact that the concepts of adequacy, reliability, and truth of signs were discussed by Morris independently from the notions of belief and knowledge allows him to treat these concepts as two separate aspects. As with the notion of truth, also the concepts of 'belief' and 'knowledge' are given a semiotical formulation.

First of all, we need to position the point of view from which Morris carries out the analysis of such terms. Indeed, belief and knowledge concern the side of the interpreter, who is said to believe something or has knowledge about something. Thus, belief and knowledge are connected to the cognitive dimension (the state of mind and knowledge acquired) and the attitude of the interpreter.

To start with, Morris provides a working definition of 'belief' as follows:

> Belief in general may perhaps be regarded as readiness to act as if something has certain properties. In any case, belief about signs (as T-ascriptors, as reliable, as adequate) is here regarded as a readiness to act as if the signs in question had certain properties. Since there are degrees of readiness to act under certain conditions, there are degrees of belief about the properties of signs (MORRIS, 1946, p. 108-109).

With the aforesaid in mind, it can be stated that an interpreter believes that an ascriptor is a T-ascriptor to the extent that he or she is ready to act as if the ascriptors denotes. Likewise, an interpreter believes that an ascriptor has a certain value of reliability X to the extent that he or she is ready to act as if the ascriptor has reliability X. In a nutshell, belief is assessed on the basis of the interpreter's disposition to act as if the sign denotes or is reliable.

Having defined belief along these lines, Morris distinguishes it from knowledge. The latter is evidence-based. An interpreter is said to know that an ascriptor is a true ascriptor to the degree that he or she has evidence that the

ascriptor denotes. Likewise, an interpreter is said to know that an ascriptor has reliability X to the degree that he or she has evidence that the ascriptor has reliability X.

Morris insists on keeping these two terms–belief and knowledge–separate and he posits that this approach is fruitful for a semiotical study of these issues is as much as it allows to tackle the problem of truth as an empirical problem. As he rightly pointed out:

> I see advantages in siding with this latter usage, since then 'truth', 'belief', and 'knowledge' may be regarded as independent terms, neither of which is an implicate of the other" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 109).

Saying that belief and knowledge are independent terms and are not the implicate of the other does not equal to say that there are no relations between them. In fact, belief and knowledge do entertain in complex relations with each other. However, for analytical as well as practical purposes is advisable to keep them separate. Morris poses the relevant question as to whether the terms 'truth' and 'reliability' are inter-dependent terms. He is clear in stating that, whilst in common usage these two terms may not always be independent terms, in the terminology of semiotics these are not one the implicate of the other (MORRIS, 1946, p. 109). Thus, an ascriptor can be a true ascriptor whilst not being a reliable ascriptor and viceversa, a reliable ascriptor may not be a true ascriptor. Writes Morris, "truth (as "T") and reliability are therefore independent concepts (MORRIS, 1946, p. 110).

To sum up, there is an important principle that can be gleaned from this discussion. When putting together the concepts discussed up to now it is pivotal to distinguish that there are different levels of analysis that concur together a semiotical approach to truth. These levels of analysis can be summarized as follows: 1) truth and reliability of signs; 2) the interpreter's belief about the truth and the reliability of the signs; 3) the interpreter's knowledge about the truth and the reliability of the signs which is based on evidence; 4) the interpreter's knowledge about the belief that signs are true or reliable.

Moreover, Morris (1946, p. 262) insists that this would be the direction towards a semiotically oriented epistemology and suggests that the works of Dewey, Carnap, and Reichenbach are relevant in this regard.

7. Locus of signifying, locus signified, and locus of confirmation

In the previous sections, we have remarked that knowledge is based on evidence. In the next section, we will see that evidence is of two sorts: direct and indirect. Before dealing with the types of evidence, Morris (1946, p. 111) draws

attention to the fact that "what is distant in time and space can be signified and known as well as the directly encountered world, and no narrow limits can be set to such signification and knowledge". How do we make sense of such situations that occurred in the distant past or may be occurring in the future or those occurrences that take place in a different place as compared to our own location? This issue is worth pondering because signs "may denote objects at temporal and spatial locations different from the time and place of their occurrence" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 112).

In order to attend to these questions, Morris distinguishes between three elements: 1) the *locus of signifying*, 2) the *locus signified*; 3) the *locus of confirmation*. These distinctions introduce the criteria of time and space in the discussion on truth and denotation. The interpretation of signs by an interpreter entails that an organism is located at a certain place in a given time. These temporal and spatial signposts are the primary and essential coordinates involved in a sign process. A problem, however, arises in that the time and place when the sign occurred, what is signified by the sign and the eventual confirmation or confutation may not match. In order to address this problem, Morris introduces this threefold distinction. The *locus of signifying* is the time and place in which the organism interprets something. The *locus signified*, instead, does not refer to the time and place when the interpreter interprets the sign, but it refers to the time and place in which what is signified occurred or will occur. For instance, if someone in the afternoon states the sentence /it rained this morning/, these signs designate an event that occurred at a time prior to the time of signifying. In this example, the *locus of signifying* is the time and place when the utterance is spoken, whilst the *locus signified* is the time and place when the occurrence took place. Evidently, these two locii do not overlap. The third component to add to the picture is the *locus of confirmation* and it refers to the time and place in which a confirmation or a disconfirmation that something has occurred is provided. Whether the sign denotes or does not denote depends on the *locus signified*. The locus of confirmation is the locus where the interpreter may or may not find evidence to test whether what has occurred is true or not. In the example /it rained this morning/ the interpreter may be able to find some proofs or cues as evidence to the truth of the statement: "he may observe puddles of water, note the condition of the ground, use his memory or notes he made in the morning, consult the newspaper, ask other persons" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 12). All these types of evidence, however, refer to something that has occurred at a time that is prior to the time of signifying, and for this reason, is important to set out and discern between these temporal and spatial locii.

This discussion yields a discernment of the types of evidence that an interpreter can use in order to have a confirmation or disconfirmation of what has occurred. For Morris, there are two types of evidence: direct and indirect.

This distinction is predicated upon whether what is used as evidence is itself a sign or not. Direct evidence that an ascriptor denotes is obtained by reacting to the region identified. If the responses which the ascriptor prepares takes place, the ascriptor denotes—is a T-ascriptor. As Morris pointed out:

> If the ascriptor is designative, the evidence is that objects have the characteristics which support the response prepared; if the ascriptor is appraisive, the evidence is that the interpreter of the sign accords to the object or objects the preferential behavior to which he was disposed by the sign; if the ascriptor is prescriptive, the evidence is that the interpreter of the sign does act to the object itself in the specific manner he was disposed to act because of the signs. In all these case ascriptors which signify that objects have certain properties are tested by the behavior of the interpreters of the ascriptors when in the presence of the objects in question. Behavior to objects is here the evidence, and such behavior is not a sign. The evidence is then said to be direct (MORRIS, 1946, p. 113).

For what concerns the truth of statements referring to past or future events direct evidence is unattainable. In this case, one relies on 'indirect evidence' as, for instance, the testimony provided by another person as evidence of the truth of a statement or relying on people's memory. This type of evidence is termed 'indirect' because the evidence that the sign denotes is not provided by "the direct response to a denotatum of the sign but by interpreting another event as a sign that the sign in question denotes" (MORRIS, 1946, p. 113). Because indirect evidence is itself a sign then it is subject to the same principle of being or not being reliable that we have discussed above.

Conclusions

In this study, we have traced Morris' numerous distinctions in order to present his semiotical formulation of truth and related terms. We have thus distinguished between a) denotation, reliability, and adequacy of signs; b) knowledge (evidence) about whether signs denote, are reliable or adequate; c) belief of someone about whether the signs denote, are reliable or adequate. Not only does Morris make these important and sharp distinctions but he notices the reciprocal inter-relations.

Morris (1946, p. 121) pointed out that the importance of T-ascriptors (true ascriptors, true sentences, signs that denote) lies in that the expectations based upon such signs will not be disappointed. If we take Morris' classic example of the bell that signifies food for a dog, if this sign not only signifies food but

also denotes food, the expectations of the dog will not be frustrated. In the animal kingdom, the rule of thumb is that organisms tend to follow the lead of signs that are reliable and this is predicated upon the laws of learning and the formation of habits. In the realm of human behaviors, Morris identified some general tendencies according to which reliability of signs tends to feedback on people's beliefs, which, in turn, influence the adequacy of signs. In general terms, there is a strong tendency for people who modify their beliefs according to the reliability of signs:

> At the human level, where signs are themselves signified, great effort is spent to find out what signs are true and what reliability signs have, and the resulting knowledge about signs becomes an additional factor determining which signs are to be followed in behavior. Such knowledge is gained not only about the denotation of signs, but also about the adequacy with which certain signs fulfill certain purposes. And this knowledge, as well as knowledge about the truth and reliability of signs, tends to influence the adequacy of signs (MORRIS, 1946, p. 121).

Moreover, Morris underscores some counter-tendencies that outmaneuver and counter-balance the tendencies outlined above. In the case when certain beliefs became calcified habits that are very resistant to change, even when the signs expressing these beliefs are shown and proven to be unreliable, the individual will refuse to believe the evidence. Despite this issue of the resistance to change due to the calcification of habits, it can be concluded that beliefs tend to change in accordance with the reliability of signs. ●

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Abstract: La verità è un fenomeno molto complesso che esercita un certo fascino sull'uomo da millenni. Il dibattito sul problema della verità e della falsità risale agli albori della filosofia e continua ancora oggi. La semiotica, come disciplina indipendente, ha mostrato un certo interesse verso questo argomento, sebbene le ricerche condotte in questo campo siano poche. Questo articolo si concentra su un aspetto specifico di questo problema poiché discute la concezione semiotica della verità nel lavoro di Charles Morris. Le ragioni di questa proposta sono tre. In primo luogo, in *Segni, linguaggio e comportamento* (1946), Morris affronta a lungo il problema della verità da una prospettiva semiotica. L'autore offre un resoconto completo e molto tecnico della verità che stabilisce le basi teoriche per affrontare questo problema da una prospettiva semiotica. In secondo luogo, Morris sviluppa un apparato concettuale interessante, che è stato purtroppo trascurato. Morris ha introdotto una precisa e lucida distinzione semiotica di termini come 'verità', 'adeguatezza', 'affidabilità', 'credenza' e 'conoscenza' applicati ai segni, che meritano tutti un esame attento. Uno dei meriti di Morris è stato quello di sottolineare che quando questi termini sono applicati allo studio dei segni, essi devono essere mantenuti distinti perché in quanto si tratta di termini indipendenti uno dall'altro. In terzo luogo, la teoria della verità di Morris merita attenzione perché è stata quasi trascurata dalla semiotica contemporanea. Pertanto, l'obiettivo di questo studio è rielaborare la posizione di Morris sull'argomento, rivedere le principali distinzioni teoriche che Morris ha formulato riguardo alla concezione semiotica della verità e discutere se questa teoria pragmatica della verità sia ancora applicabile oggi.

Parole chiave: C. W. Morris; teoria semiotica della verità; segni veritieri; pragmatismo; teoria dei segni.

Como citar este artigo

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