

# Sign System Studies and Modern Socio-Anthropomorphism

Research Article

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**Abstract:** The article examines the individual and social, practical, and theoretical presumptions (“idols” and “beliefs”) that constitute the conscious and unconscious re-construction of the social reality and reality of different conventional sign systems that represent and are represented by society. It is shown that in everyday life and in theoretical studies, we quite often analyze sign systems as if they were autonomous and empirically “given” realities. The work explains how this “natural belief” originated and developed. It is argued that conventional sign systems cannot be reduced to the reality of material “sign vehicles” because in society, sign systems are both subjective and objective, internal and external, and process and object.

**Keywords:** *semiotics • reification • representation • conventional signs • socio-anthropomorphism • institutional facts*

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## 1. Introduction

Usually, primitive mind is attributed “wrong” ability to endow reality with human and social characteristics, but, indeed, “modern” mind is also integral part of modern social “mythological” system that reproduces itself by means of nongenetic mechanisms of inheritance [1, 2]. Like “primitive” mind, we don’t realize our own “mythological” system (worldview) and how we construct and are socially constructed by it [3]. Nevertheless, social and individual “myths,” with all their *idola fori* and *idola theatri* [4], can be revealed by the analysis of sign systems because in such systems, social worldview objectifies (reifies, embodies) itself. The analysis of this self-reproducing and memory-mediated worldview [5, 6] that forms and is formed by the usage of different conventional sign systems (spoken and written languages, road signs, money, numbers, socially significant actions, etc.) is the main aim of this paper.

In social system, all its constituents are causes and consequences of each other, but in everyday life and in theoretic studies, sign systems (systems of sign vehicles) were abstracted from social system or social interactions and were turned practically and theoretically into autonomous reality determining “by themselves” other “autonomous” social realities [2, 7, 8, p. 128–129]. In this regard, other tasks of the paper are (1) to return semiotic analysis of conventional sign systems (sign vehicles) back into analysis of social system, (2) to show that social system by itself is semiotic system, and (3) to explain why sign vehicles were practically and theoretically abstracted *in the context of* social system from that system.

First, let us consider why does social system is semiotic (sign, symbolic) system and why do sign systems must be re-presented through the re-presentation of social system?

## 2. Social reality as a system of signs

It is more or less accepted by many researchers that social reality (ontology) cannot be reduced only to “brute facts” [1] and be considered just as purely objective, empirical, natural phenomenon. Social reality is “object” that exceeds the bounds of natural reality because it is socio-anthropomorphic construction, hyper-reality with its own “super-natural” laws and characters. Main thesis of (subjective) idealism: “there can be no object without subject”

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perfectly conforms with the very nature of society, because dynamic, self-maintaining existence of social reality and its “institutional facts” presupposes existence of active, distributed, continuously reproducing social worldview and “collective intentionality.” Institutional facts (state boundaries, president of the country, days of week, etc.) are not purely objective, immediately “given” realities that can be “reflected” empirically. Therefore, for researchers, learners, or people of other cultures to “reflect” social reality, it means to *re-construct* social worldview symbolically re-presented (embodied) in external objects and processes [9].

Usually, in our everyday life, social objects and processes, for example, road traffic, lectures at school, policemen, circulation of money, private property, and others, are “presented” for us as “immediately given,” “objective” “natural” realities *independent of human* mental, semiotic, and even physical activity. However, we do not realize that social reality is partly semiotic reality continuously constructed by our activity because in daily life, we are not aware of our practical and theoretical presumptions (beliefs, mental constructions), which, mostly unconsciously, were constructed by social reality and constantly construct it. For example, actual “observation” from childhood of such *conventional* division of time as days of weeks creates belief in their “natural” existence, and that belief (tradition, rule), in its turn, becomes mental groundwork for our physical actions that create and recreate in everyday social reality week and its “week-ends.”

Some researchers state that there are social constructions (beliefs) that do not have direct “place-holders” or symbolic embodiments. For example, Barry Smith argues that air-traffic corridors and border of Colorado are “fiat borders,” corresponding to no underlining physical reality [10, p. 289]. However, in spite of the fact that these borders are abstract social constructions that cannot *be induced* from some physical facts, but only ascribed to them, all people *act physically* (practically) as if they are “real facts.” It happens because these “constructions” form and are formed by *indirect* symbolic embodiments (for instance, maps, instructions, people’s actions), which construct and can be re-constructed as tokens that indirectly re-presenting these “realities.” Without such direct and indirect “re-presenters” (signifiers), it would be impossible to reify social reality (social constructions) and regulate/determine peoples’ actions. Therefore, borders are presented there where they are not re-presented because they are re-presented there where they are not presented. It means that in social reality, objects can be easily presented (constructed) as “objectively given” in some part of objective world being re-presented in another part of the world.

Sometimes studies of symbolic systems explicitly or implicitly present conventional signs as an autonomous and objective system (similar to natural signs), which essence and content are theoretically abstracted from society (social interactions) and considered *per se*. In studies of language, this position was expressed by proponents of linguistic determinism [11] and by F. de Saussure who wrote: “the only true object of study in linguistics is language, considered in and for itself” [12, p. 230]. However, this position holds only half of the truth. Indeed, there are external *objects* used as signs, and there are *people* without signs, but there are no objective, autonomous, self-sufficient realm of sign systems with *their own* system of meanings. Institutional facts that constitute any social system and “representational properties” of thing that helps to implement social processes are both re-presented by dynamic of social worldview and re-presents it in the form of objective social processes that have symbolic functions. That is, social system is a cause and effect of conventional sign systems; they are coupled, co-evolving systems [13, 14] that re-present (reveal, implement) each other and have to be studied through each other [15, pp. 59–61].

In contrast to people, with their specific social roles (meanings), material objects and processes functioning as signs are not able to implement their functions by themselves (therefore, they are not also signs *per se*), but they are used in the different systems of individual or social activities (values, meanings, functions) as their (symbolic) implementers or re-presenters, and *thus*, by virtue of their functions, they become “re-presenters” or “signs” of these functions (social realities). It means that any material object (process), functioning as “transmitter” (“re-presenter,” “embodiment,” “implementer”) of social activity, *re-presents and is re-presented by this activity as its sign* or even as this activity (value, meaning, function) as such. Therefore, any conventional sign system can be defined as *co-relative, memory-mediated intersubjective reality that forms (determines) and is formed (determined) by physical and mental activities of individuals and society*.

The process of objectification (reification) of conceptual constructions (beliefs) through their *mental representation* and *physical implementation* in social actions or in the form of symbolic signifiers representing these social constructions (e.g., in the form of road signs) can be called *practical objectivation and reproduction of social reality*.

There is also *theoretical and educational objectivation* of conventional sign systems, which is an effect and cause of practical objectivation. In theory, social reality (sign system) is divided into autonomous reality of signs and social reality (worldview) that they represent. For example, if in everyday life nod is agreement (greeting), in

theory it becomes *sign* of agreement (greeting). The reasons for *objectivation* (reification) of “signs” as autonomous realities differing from realities they stand for are functional and casual inversion between social functions and their implementers (social reality and its re-presenters). Objects and processes functioning in social reality for long time as its implementers (re-presenters) can be turned (reified) by this reality into the “natural,” self-sufficient bearers (re-presenters) of this reality. For example, some polite manners were naturally born from human politeness, but then it becomes possible to replace politeness *per se* by performance or imitation of polite *manners* as such. That is, different “styles” of polite *manners* became in different societies *autonomous* re-presenters (bearers, embodiments) of politeness. Furthermore, politeness itself (and its study) can be even reduced only to manners (e.g., other ways to express politeness can be treated as impolite or barbarian). This example shows *typical semiotic antinomy*: polite manners are not politeness, but there is no politeness without polite manners. That is, politeness can be induced from polite manner but cannot be reduced to them. This is paradox of any sign system—it is what it is not, and what it is not, it is it.

Theoretical and educational objectification itself are derivative of practical objectification that excludes from *re-construction* of “sign systems” their own and other people’s mental and physical activity (pragmatic aspect). In theoretical reification, sign vehicles are considered as autonomous “bearers” and “causes” of social functions (meanings, intentions, values). Therefore, theoretical re-construction of particular signs, even if they are signs of dead languages or cultures, happens as if sign system itself is “reflected.” However, researchers do not take into account their own *constructive* activity that *re-constructs* functional activities (mythology, worldview) implemented by means of these sign vehicles. Therefore, “reflection” of semiotic objects coincides with their construction; to reconstruct semiotic objects, we need to construct them.

For example, any sport game is not purely objective (because it cannot be reduced to brute facts) or purely subjective reality, indeed, sport game is physical and mental process *re-presented* and *re-constructed* by those who play and those who watch. Still, *in theory*, any sport game is “explained” (described, reified) as objective, autonomous kingdom, especial *objective* world with its own objective rules and characters that exist *independently of subjects*. But those who play/watch describe/understand this world or writing/reading book about it actually *re-construct* reality of this game by means of available outfits of thoughts, words, and actions.

Another “anthropomorphic” presumption concerning sign vehicles is belief that they (directly) determine human activity. For example, from the “natural standpoint,” bad/good grades at the university are *causes*, and people’s thoughts, emotions, and actions are *consequences*. In reality, this is application of physical, *linear causality* (one object is cause and other is its effect) to sign systems. It does not work properly in social systems because the same grade (number or letter) can “cause” different processes in different social and cultural contexts (educational systems). More congenial for an analysis of interplay between sign vehicles and personal (social) reality is *circular causality*. The concept of “circular causality” holds idea that in complex system or in “coupled system,” constituents of the system and the system itself are cause and effect, producer and product of each other. Sign vehicles and social reality are such “coupled system” with circular (reciprocal) causality. For example, road signs regulate road traffic. However, *they* regulate because (good) drivers *attribute* meanings to them and act in according to “their” meanings. Most time of our everyday lives, we do not realize re-constructive work of our worldview, and how we attribute or impose our social “beliefs” (meanings, values, functions) on persons, things, and processes, but we must realize it when we theoretically re-construct social reality and nature of sign system.

### 3. Conclusion

Consequently, “myth” is *not only* fictitious worldview verbally transmitted (inherited) from one generation to another, *but it is also* all other symbolically functioning objects and processes through which social worldview (reality) implements (embodies, re-presents) and develops itself. Objectivity of social reality, as well as objectivity of signs, cannot be reduced only to traditional “physical reality” (brute facts) or to subjects and their mentality. Society is dynamic, symbolic, intersubjective, self-reproducing reality that *continuously* creates and is created by *mental and physical* activities of individuals; it is worldview or memory afoot [5]. Commonness of our “mythological system” (“worldview,” “collective intentions,” “social memory”) is created by and creates medium of understanding (coincidence of “output” and “input” information), “social roles” (president, policeman, teacher, and etc.), main “bricks” of economic activity (laws, contracts, brands, money, and etc.), and many other inventions essential and significant for functioning of social reality.

Study of sign systems as autonomous objects is useful in everyday life and, in humanities, for *didactic* aims, but it is ineffective paradigm for *holistic* and *objective research* of *system-defined and system-defining processes* where physical objects and processes functioning as signs (tools). It is very important to emphasize that most problems concerning studying of sign system are caused by wrong “causality paradigm,” which is applied to explanation of system-defined objects and processes. The concept of “circular causality” gives the clue that can put in order relations between sign systems, mind, and society. Correct and consistent application of this type of causality can reconcile extremes of externalism and internalism, linguistic and cognitive “turns,” and other one-sided approaches. This article reveals socio-anthropomorphism only in the domain of sign system studying, but search for Baconian “idols” can be continued in other scientific fields.

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