

Sociological Theory II  
SOS3506  
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The Symbol Theory I

NTNU, Trondheim  
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Literature:

- Elias, Norbert. 1991. *The Symbol Theory*.  
London: Sage  
– Introduction by Kilminster + Elias 1991:1-64

## Preface

- “Elias is interested in establishing the mode of existence of symbols, as learned means of communication, in a diachronic manner in an evolutionary framework which includes social development as its continuation on a higher level.” (Kilminster, p.xv)

## Introduction I

- Street plan vs town reality: model vs real world
- A model is a symbolic representation
- A language is a symbolic representation of the world of a language community: “anything that is not symbolically represented in the language of a language community is not known by its members” (p.3)
- Communication by means of symbols is a singularity of humankind
  - Founded on the biological organisation of human beings
  - Sound patterns are not genetically fixed but learned
  - The flexibility of the sound patterns is a precondition for innovation and learning

## Introduction II

- In the case of language learning there is a mutual interdependence of biological readiness for learning and social opportunities for learning. Language require both.
- “The ability to control patterns of knowledge and speech in a society is usually a concomitant of the distribution of power chances in a society” (p5)
- Hume: Individuals cannot on through their own experience discover the concept of causality. So how do they learn about causes and effects?
- Kant proposed one answer: it is a characteristic of reason itself a priori. The reasoning was not transcendent to human experience but transcendental
- Elias rejects this philosophical relativism and argues that such ideas are learned as part of learning a language

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## Introduction III

- A language is a cumulative storage of knowledge transmitted from generation to generation
- The world may be seen either as nature (governed by laws) or as history (governed by the sequence of contingencies)
- A knowledge complex (language, knowledge, thoughts, memory, ...) have various functions but will here be treated as interdependent aspects of the complex. It is not seen as either individual or social but as both at the same time
- Humanity is ultimately the social unit of knowledge growth
- What is the mode of existence of objects of knowledge independent of oneself?

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## Part 1.1

- Why can different sound patterns in different languages mean the same thing?
  - There is one humanity and a host of different languages
    - A common biological potential to learn language
    - A local social propensity to construct language
    - An individual propensity to learn language
- Academismus: projecting current departmental divisions onto the real world
  - Biology considers relevant only potential for language
  - Sociology has not yet discovered the significance of the multitude of languages
  - They do not see how the relationship between biological evolution and social development depend on each other
- [One might call it the double helix of learning: from DNA to language to libraries to ?]

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## Part 1.2

- Current sociology of communication is excessively tailored to individual action theory missing the significance of a common language as a constructed social fact
  - Language as independent of individuals is central
  - Search for beginnings is irrelevant. Many aspects of the real world have no beginning
  - The interdependence of evolution and development is what we need to study
    - How is information on means of survival transmitted across generations?
    - Evolution is transmission by genes, including a disposition for learning languages
    - Development is transmission by (learned) symbols

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## Part 1.3

- Nature and society are not antagonistic fields
  - But why do humans outcompete other apes?
  - Lack of intermediary species make our perspective too short. Teaching apes human language overlooks both the unique biological foundation of it and its social construction
  - Developments of language became independent of biological evolution
  - For a long period one may imagine the two processes to have been interdependent

## Part 1.4

- Problems of conceiving how entirely new structures emerge from within a continuous process
  - Need attention to the long time spans (million of years)
  - Humans are neither just another animal (biology)
  - Nor are they ontologically a special case
  - Malleability is a characteristic of society in general compared to the biology of humans
  - Languages (symbols) as means of transmission of knowledge is a key to this characteristic
  - The social order is an order *sui generis*

## Part 2.1

- Languages are not just culture. Their preconditions, vocal apparatus and hearing as well as memory storage of language sounds and their interpretation are very much nature, and unique for humans
- The possible variation in both generation of sounds and in the assignment of meaning generates the large variety of languages
- In socialisation the interplay between experience and knowledge learned through language is difficult to disentangle
- Language is group specific rather than species specific
- Concepts such as 'nature', 'culture', 'society' indicates separate spheres of reality each with a fog-like aura of ideological undertones
- They are not separate spheres but intertwined

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## Part 2.2

- Human languages
  - Have to be acquired through individual learning
  - Can vary from one society to another
  - Can change over time within one and the same society
- Sound patterns are symbols representing all aspects of the world that the community of language users know as relevant to their existence
- The natural and the social, the social and the individual are inseparable
- The division between an animalic way of communication and a human way is not one of separation but one of subsuming and superseding creating a post-animalic world where individual learning took precedence over genetic (species) learning
- Endowing humans with adaptability of a new order of magnitude without genetic change

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## Part 2.3

- Languages make people think in opposites such as nature vs culture and infuses assumptions about their ontological status that are problematic they are symbols less of facts than of value orientations
- Humans acquire a fifth dimension of existence: the symbol dimension (in addition to time and space)
- Knowing requires symbols. The process of symbol making takes a society from the unknown to the collectively known

## Part 3.1

- The symbol function of the sound pattern produced by voice communication
  - Sender and receiver attributes the same meaning to it
  - Meaning is learned in educating the young child
  - A language is a group specific emergent characteristic unlike anything in the animal kingdom
  - The child acquiring language illustrates an intimate interrelation between nature and culture/ society
  - The genetic evolution of ability to make sound patterns, hearing the sound patterns, and ability to learn sound patterns are preconditions for the emergence of language
  - Once this is a fact a new level off evolution is created

## Part 4.1

- Similarities vs differences of human-animal behaviour
  - Difference: ability to use symbolic analysis and symbolic synthesis of changes in situations for orientation and steering and adapting behaviour to changes
- The common sense individualistic theory of concept formation does not take into account the link between sound making speech and language development. Communication requires both senders and receivers. Languages develop in collectives, and requires a modicum of integration and control
- “What cannot be represented by the web of symbols of a specific human group, is not known to its members.” (p57)
- There is a genetically evolved need for acquisition of symbols, but the ability also made fantasy objects possible
- Moving between fantasy and real world objects poses a peculiar problem sometimes blocking the search for better links between reality and symbol
  - Case: the individualistic theory of concept formation structured on the innate tendency to explain events in cause-effect terms

## Part 4.2

- Concept creation
  - Bacillus – from the Latin word for stick
  - Father – from an undefined common Teutonic language
  - “to develop” changed in level of abstract generality from its concrete meaning of “unpacking” the counterpart to envelope
- The ability to manipulate abstract concepts are linked to individual capacities but also and perhaps more importantly to the overall development of concepts in the society. We need comparative language studies
  - Ancient Greek, Egypt, Babylon: what happened?
  - What about the Phoenician language?
  - What about the Renaissance?
  - What about the modern scientific languages?

## Part 4.3

- The language provides a symbolic representation of the world as distilled from the historical accumulation of experiences of the society
- Individually we experience the world directly but the experiences are also given a secondary colouring by the communication about these experiences and we are well able to keep the two types of experiences apart
- The link between sound pattern, symbol and symbolized object is in one respect fortuitous but in another respect binding on each individual wanting to communicate
- The constellation of languages both within and among societies reflects a power structure

## Part 4.4

- The margin of deviation in producing sound patterns and interpreting them in a meaningful way creates a condition of flux in the life of a language and is one force behind changes in language. But to large deviations leads to breakdown of communication
- How the symbol-network of a language developed out of the animalic, pre-language forms of communication among our forbears and developed into the present diversity of languages is a fascinating research frontier
- The capacity to communicate by means of the sound-symbols of a language must have provided a high survival value for a group. All humanoid groups without this has vanished.