

not explain how comprehension among the members of the society happens.

« 15 » In conclusion, the target article does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question about mutual comprehension in an eigenform-language: a pragmatic approach does not explain comprehension and depends on the role of an observer; the reference to society does not sufficiently explain what kind of collective a society is. Nevertheless, this concerns just a part of Gasparyan's theory and should not distract from the potential of her position as an interesting alternative to the traditional views of language, philosophy, and science.

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## On the Outside of Semiotics

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**> Abstract •** In this commentary, I would like to make two points. The first point is concerned with the typology of the concept(s) of “sign.” All of Gasparyan's examples of signs are conventional signs, in the formation of which humans, by definition, play an important role— but do her arguments apply to all kinds of signs, as she claims? The second point is about the possibility of a metaposition to semiotics. Gasparyan argues that such a metaposition is impossible and I would like to shed more light on the scope of this claim.

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« 1 » In its arguably most concise definition, an eigenform is a virtuous circle in the form of “cognition computing its own cognitions” (Foerster 2003: 265). Similarly, the basic idea of Diana Gasparyan's target article is that semiotics is an eigenform in that it is a self-sufficient system of signs that uses signs as objects for yet other signs, like the ouroboros serpent eating its own tail.

« 2 » To that end, Gasparyan by and large uses the concept of “sign” originating from the work of Charles Sanders Pierce. In his pragmatist view, every sign consists of three parts: the sign-vehicle that provides the cue for there being a sign-object, something that is designated by the sign-vehicle. In this way, a molehill is a sign of there being moles. However, the important addition to this picture is the interpretant, a subject who connects sign-vehicle and sign-object in an interpretative way.

« 3 » With this in mind, Gasparyan writes, in §5: “I aim to demonstrate that signs cannot implement their function unless they are interpreted. In other words, signs have to be interpreted in order to be signs.” However, there is an important gap between those two formulations. The first sentence says that signs cannot have any function for us until they are interpreted. The second sentence says that there are no signs until interpretation sets in. It is the latter claim that I want to discuss here – is

this a sensible claim to make for all possible kinds of signs?

« 4 » Let us take a look at Gasparyan's own example of a sign, a traffic light (§21). Arguably, in this example we are dealing with three signs, three sign-vehicles (the different lights) that are connected to three sign-objects (requirements for human behavior), in that, e.g., a red light is a sign to halt the vehicle. This sign is used by an interpreter to form a belief, e.g., “I need to stop the car,” which is itself a sign and which takes the first sign as its sign-object. In different situations and for different subjects the second sign may come about differently. And in this way we have a perpetual chain of signs, where signs are used as sign-objects for yet other signs; semiosis is an eigenform.

« 5 » As I see it, this reasoning only holds if the tripartite structure applies to all kinds of signs (as Gasparyan suggests already in §1). Put differently, there shall be no signs that have non-signs as their sign-objects. However, is this always the case? All of Gasparyan's own examples are instances of what can be called “conventional signs,” i.e., signs that come about by human intervention, and the relation between sign-vehicle and sign-object is established conventionally. However, not all signs are conventional signs. An important context in which semiotics emerged was that of medicine, where diagnosticians trust the accuracy of a different kind of sign. Take “koplik spots are a sign of measles” as an example. Here the sign-vehicle is a specific rash on the skin, the sign-object is the presence of certain viruses. In the case of what can be called “natural signs,” this relation between sign-vehicle and sign-object comes about because of purely causal reasons; no human being had to interfere or interpret them for this connection to hold.

« 6 » The question now is: if the interpretant is a necessary condition for there to be a sign at all, does this mean that koplik spots were not a sign of measles before someone described them as such? While for us, these spots have the *function* of indicating measles only since we know about this relation, would it not be sensible to say that the relation was there before – and therefore the sign was there before we grasped it?

« 7 » Gasparyan could reply that in this construal of natural signs I was not “constructivist enough,” since I should not make a distinction between natural and conventional signs to begin with. All signs are part of our constructed, interpreted world and never of an unconstructed, uninterpreted reality. Strictly speaking, there are no “natural signs” because there is no world without an interpretant. It seems that in §45 she offers an argument along these or similar lines via the concept of recursion, but, not being familiar with the work of George Spencer Brown to which it refers, it is not obvious to me whether the argument is successful.

« 8 » In any case, taking the constructivist background more seriously results in the following general question: according to Gasparyan’s theory of semiosis, how can we learn new things about the world? Specifically: How was it possible to find out about the connection between koplik spots and a specific type of virus? If the interpreter shapes the object in the process of semiosis – along which lines does she do so? Put differently, if a mind-independent reality does not limit our interpretations, what else does? Gasparyan suggests an answer in §29 that “interpretations are limited by other interpretations,” which allegedly prevents “absolute arbitrariness in our linguistic communication” and in the end, our culture confirms the validity of interpretations. However, is this a sensible claim to make for cases such as “koplik spots are a sign of measles”?

« 9 » And furthermore, which culture has this limiting function? Is it always the society of the interpreter that “has the last word” in this respect? For the ancient Egyptians, the absence of the Nile-tide was a sign of Osiris being angry. Why is this in our Western culture no longer a sign? Is it sufficient that a critical number of people take something to be a sign for there to be a sign? Certainly, in our Western culture, the absence of rising water does not signify emotional states of Osiris, but on what grounds are we preferring our own interpretation over the ancient Egyptians’?

« 10 » So far, I have asked many questions; now I want to focus on their general thrust to answer them as concisely as possible. Every plausible theory about semiotics

(be it realist, pragmatist or constructivist) must be able to explain the widely endorsed difference between conventional and natural signs, i.e., signs that owe their existence to deliberate actions of humans, and signs that exist because of purely causal reasons without being established by humans. Gasparyan only mentions the former, but how do natural signs fit into her theory? **Q1**

« 11 » Now let me turn to my second point. Gasparyan states in §13 that “linguistic semiosis [...] is such a proper form (eigenform), in relation to which a human being cannot take the stance of an external observer,” and in §17 she says that it is impossible to leave the domain of signs. The interpreter is part of the world, exactly like everything else. Our world consists of signs and in this process of semiotics, human language and consciousness co-evolve (§14). Put differently, there is no metaposition to semiotics.

« 12 » The problem with such an assertion is the following: either it is self-contradictory, or it is not of much help. In the usual understanding, “there is no metaposition” is an assertion made from a metaposition. To say that there is no outside of semiotics means placing oneself outside of semiotics and being able to distinguish semiotics from non-semiotics and then declare one of these sets to be empty. Then again, the set of non-semiotics does not seem to be completely empty for Gasparyan, since she writes in §36: “signs do not create the physics of the world. However, they do create the meanings (interpretations) of objects. To use language is to deal with interpreted signs and not directly with ‘objects.’” If there is no metaposition to the semiotic process – how can anyone know that? **Q2**

« 13 » The second possibility is to say that the assertion “there is no metaposition” is not an assertion on a metalevel but is itself part of the infinite chain of signs, as everything else is. However, then the question is what is the use of making this claim? As far as I can see, the non-metalevel statement that there is no outside of semiotics does not add anything to her argument, but it reinforces the danger of being swamped with dubious metaphysical constraints and paradoxes (i.e., the whole set of realistically inclined arguments against constructivism).

« 14 » Therefore, I would prefer a strengthening of Gasparyan’s own concluding remark in §48, where she says that she “tried to show that research into the ‘world external to language’ is unproductive and pointless.” This claim is much less problematic, since it does not lead into any self-contradictions, and it does not try to show that something is impossible that many philosophers take indeed to be possible. It tries only to show that it is simply not very interesting. As I take it, such a light-hearted indifference to traditional metaphysical ideas, the attempt to set sail for new endeavors instead of dwelling in a well-known pond, would do justice to the imaginative powers of constructivism.

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