



A biosemiotic approach to gender: against morphological freedom

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Biosemiotic approach to gender: why?

- “Is there a way to **link** the question of the **materiality of the body** to the **performativity of gender**? [...] Consider first that **sexual difference** is often invoked as an issue of material differences. Sexual difference, however, is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by **discursive practices**.” (Butler, *Bodies that matter*, 1993: 1)
 - **Is this material-discursive entity not the *sign* (or *semiosis*)?**
- I mostly propose questions for biosemiotics to pursue
- I do not have complete answers, but propose the optics:
 - Peirce’s *transhumanism* (Frederik Stjernfelt): humans as extending networks of signs

Biosemiotic approach to gender: linking the materiality of body with performativity of gender

- Challenge: thinking gender (and sexuality) from the perspective of *Umwelt*, i.e. the emergence of selfhood is mutual with the emergence of an (subjective) environment
- Biosemiotics: “Answers to questions about human affairs [...] are sought in the interrogation of modelling.” (Cobley 2016: 28)
- Model = “a semiotic production with species-specific biological features for its utilization.” (Sebeok 2001: 187)
- Gender studies are mostly glottocentric: molded onto Austin’s speech acts theory & Foucauldian discourse theory
- I propose: sexuality, not textuality (more sex, less text)
- Also, Bankov’s razor: “Biosemiotics needs to legitimize itself, needs to be taken more seriously by people outside biosemiotics.” (Bankov, Martinelli 2008: 398)
- Taking biosemiotics seriously: **if biosemiotics is relevant for cultural theory, it should better have something to say on gender (and sexuality)**

Bodies matter: avoiding glottocentrism

“Because of the centrality of **textuality** to semiotics after Lotman and Barthes, a current of thought which gained considerable traction in the humanities and the social sciences in the latter part of the twentieth century became erroneously associated with semiotics. This was the ‘**linguistic turn**’, inaugurated by **Richard Rorty’s 1967 influential collection**, which coalesced various perspectives including those that later became prominent in **Anglophone cultural studies**. **The idea that knowledge is ‘constructed in discourse’ with humans’ apprehension of the world amounting to a mere figment induced by figures in language, arose out of the ‘linguistic turn’ and (post-)structuralism.** [...] [T]he nominalism of the ‘linguistic turn’ is at odds with the Peircean realist perspective in biosemiotics. It also posits a definition of language based on ‘figures of speech’ and ‘chatter’ [...] rather than the more sophisticated cognitive perspective in biosemiotics offered by language as modelling.” (Cobley 2016: 18)

- Gender studies mostly rely on (Foucault’s) discourse theory

Difficulty: gender binarism, sexual dimorphism but also masculinism go a long way back

- Sexuality: almost all biparental organisms
- “In **baboons** communities, dominant males are in charge of what can be defined as real harems, and **females are expected to “report”** every now and then, in order to prove that they are not mixing with inferior males (thus, the show up is a signal standing for “I’m here, doing nothing I’m not supposed to do”). **Females, of course, do not necessarily like this condition, but, as occurs with humans, flirtations with other males must be kept secret.** What a couple of young “lovers” may do in this case is to couple in a discreet place (say, behind a big bush), take a break, let the female report to the Alpha, and then restart the process.” (Martinelli 2010: 96)

Taking embodiment seriously

- Body morphology matters epistemologically:
- “A philosophy must be true to bodily experiences – instead of indulging in a *a priori* philosophizing.” (Stjernfelt 2006: 16)
- “What is called for is a **concept of the body** which, in itself, makes evident the **basic semiotic competences of an organism**, i.e., a **body concept which entails semiotics**. It is to be expected, naturally that this will give rise to a more fine-grained typology of bodies depending on how complicated and sophisticated **semiotic behavior** the organism in question is able to indulge itself in.” (Stjernfelt 2006: 14)
- As semiotic behavior, gender and sexuality must be involved in **modeling**...
- ... **gender and sexuality must shape conceptual metaphors/blending; maybe image schemata?** (via Lakoff 1987, Johnson 1987, Lakoff & Johnson 1999, Fauconnier & Turner 2002)
- **Prototype theory** (Lakoff 1987) view of sex and gender: fluid, unfixed, changing
- Anti-morphological freedom in transhumanism (Sandberg 2013, Fuller 2016)

Taking embodiment seriously

- Sex(uality) and gender are semiotic behaviour ⇒
- Affordances in gender-sexuality
- The body (which supposes *Umwelt*) has gender affordances
- **Self is becoming** (Peirce via Colapietro 1989; Andacht, Michel 2005; Stables 2012), then **gender is becoming**:
- “The **self is** construed as **a sign in continuous growth** through a reflexive, interpretive dialogue that aims to integrate multiple particular identities into the unity of a generative process.” (Andacht, Michel 2005)
- **Gender as fluid diachronically and synchronically**

Bodies matter: avoiding both biological determinism and culturalism

“Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex.

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.” (Butler 1999 [1990], p. 9-10)

- Need for a non-dualist notion of matter (and mind)
- Affordances in the body-sex-gender relations?

Bodies matter semiotically

“In traditional semiotic thought, the body used to be almost completely ignored. In structuralist semiology [...] we should expect that the body be treated like any other concept in language.

Structuralists would emphasize that the body concepts differ in various languages and cultures, in short, in different semiotic systems, and that a study of such systems would produce just as many cultural representations of the body. [...]

Thus, the body concept would be conceived of as subjected to the free arbitrariness of semiotic systems – and no special attention would be paid to the body as a crucial prerequisite of semiotic articulation.” (Stjernfelt 2006: 14)

- Gender studies inherited the culturalism of structuralist semiology
- ... and early anthropology, linguistic relativism, the linguistic turn, discourse theory...
- This is one way in which biosemiotics (and sociobiology) is queer
- Also: structuralism overlooks diachrony, as implied from Saussure’s (1959) distinction between language and speech,

Bodies matters VS. morphological freedom. **An ethical (human rights) question, at first**

- “[...] an **extension** of one’s right to one’s body, not just self-ownership but also the right to modify oneself according to one’s desires. Different human rights can be derived from each other [...].” (Sandberg 2013: 56)
- “From the right to freedom and the right to one’s own body follows that one has a right to modify one’s body. If my pursuit of happiness requires a bodily change – be it dying my hair or changing my sex – then my right to freedom requires a right to morphological freedom. My physical welfare may require me to affect my body using antibiotics or surgery. On a deeper level, our thinking is not separate from our bodies. Our freedom of thought implies a freedom of brain activity. If changes of brain structure (as they become available) are prevented, they prevent us from achieving mental states we might otherwise have been able to achieve. There is no dividing line between the body and our mentality, both are part of ourselves. Morphological freedom is the right to modify oneself.” (Sandberg 2013: 57)

A sophism: *I am free to change my body because I am free to change my mind...*

- My answer: Mind and body are the same because **cognition is embodied** (e.g., Varela et al. 1991; Lakoff, Johnson 1999)
- The argument is not only ethical (or a matter of human rights): it is epistemological

Morphological freedom: an epistemological matter

- **Fuller (2016)** approaches the epistemological question (e.g., the equation of personhood and individuality), takes seriously the dualism of morphological freedom (contemporary stoicism):
- “[...] transhumanists place much greater emphasis on extending human capacities along specific dimensions (e.g. greater longevity, memory storage, computational power, motor skills) than on defining the grounds for saying that such an enhanced individual is ‘the same’ as its unenhanced predecessor. In this respect, **morphological freedom is more about your being who you want to be (now) than with your being yourself (over time).**” (Fuller 2016: 40)
- *Morphological freedom* is **NOT** aligned with **Butler’ gender performativity**
- In this view: **synchrony overwrites diachrony**, the present (only) has proper ontological status

Morphological freedom: transracialism

“[...] considerations that support transgenderism extend to transracialism. [...] [S]ince we should accept transgender individuals’ decisions to change sexes, we should also accept transracial individuals’ decisions to change races. [...] I [...] argue for **an account of race that allows for racial membership on the basis of social treatment**, and, I will add, **self-identification**. [...] [I]f some individuals genuinely feel like or identify as a member of a race other than the one assigned to them at birth—so strongly to the point of seeking a transition to the other race—we should accept their decision to change races.” (Tuvel 2017: 263)

Biosemiotics: epigenetic / ontogenic balance, sexual selection

“ [...] **natural semiosis** is still intact in human beings, and goes on roughly to the same extent as it used to before language appeared. What has crucially changed is the **decoding stage**: precisely because human language is admittedly a very efficient strategy for informing (or deceiving) each other about several topics and conditions, the human being learned to pay attention mostly to that, losing – or better: stiffening up – his/her abilities in non-verbal communication. In other words: **there is not a single pheromone less spread by a person who is sexually attracted by another person, but it is likely that the two people concerned will negotiate this attraction by means of words rather than armpit smelling.**” (Martinelli 2010: 70-71)

The main question to tackle: gender performativity

“how [...] does the notion of **gender performativity** relate to this conception of materialization? [...] [T]he regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.” (Butler 1993, p. 2)

- **The biosemiotic take:**

1. Avoid culturalism & biological determinism: gender and sexuality as semiotic behavior (more complex than merely performative acts)
2. Critical awareness of the power of language and culture to **model** gender and sexuality

Main question to tackle: gender performativity

“The centrality of the marriage ceremony in J.L. Austin's examples of performativity suggests that the heterosexualization of the social bond is the paradigmatic form for those speech acts which bring about what they name. 'I pronounce you...' puts into effect the relation that it names.” (Butler 1993: 224)

- Butler's resolve: the paradigm of *queer*
- Simplifying, Butler's reaction is the same as the biosemiotic position: don't tell me what to do, you do not get to “pronounce” me...
- The underpinning reason is different: discourse/power (Butler) vs. anti-glottocentrism (i.e., I am free to be what I am independently of your language)
- Biosemiotics is queer to start with (among natural sciences, cultural studies etc.)
- Not to forget: language is great for lying (because it is highly symbolic)

A question of boundaries and of becoming

- “Why should our bodies end at the skin or include at best other beings encapsulated in skin [...] For us, in imagination and in other practice, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves. We don’t need organic holism to give impermeable wholeness, the total woman and her feminist variants (mutants?).” (Harraway 1990: 220)
- Yes, we do not need holism. We need to erase boundaries:
- “The boundaries of organisms [...] as Friston blankets [...] have a markedly Peircean, irreducibly triadic form. The boundary itself is a mediator between the agent’s external and internal states.” (Pietarinen, Beni 2021: 503)
- sensory states are meaningful representations (Pietarinen, Beni via Ramstead *et al.*, 2020 Friston *et al.* 2006)
- Boundary as mediator = skin

The semiotic body: skin is not the end

- “to try seeing the world ‘from the skin’s perspective.’” (Hoffmeyer 2006: 171)
- “The **skin keeps the world away** in a physical sense **but present** in a psychological sense.” (Hoffmeyer 2008: 172)
- “On one hand, the **skin** thus serves us as a kind of **topological boundary**; while, on the other hand, **its semiotic capacity opens up the world to us**—so that **the question of where our ‘self’ begins and ends is not at all an easy question to answer scientifically**. Are not the impulses generated by the blind man’s stick really a part of his ‘self’?” (Hoffmeyer 2008: 173-174)
- Embodied cognition (Lakoff, Johnson 1999; Varela et al. 2001)
- Exbodied cognition:
 - “**the body portrays**, i.e. **exbodies**, how the person [or organism] conceptualizes and understands [...] abstracta.” (Mittelberg 2013: 776)
 - “This allows for construing the **body** as **that which externalizes the mind**, that which does the **exbodying**. At the same time, the **body** is also that which **internalizes the mind**, which does the **embodying**.” (Olteanu 2021: 787)

Final causation: self is becoming, and gender with it

- **Evolution** in light of final causation (non-Lamarckian, non-Darwinian, transhumanism, anti-vitalist):

“[...] the family of thinkers in the modern era called ‘evolutionists’, who differed considerably over the means and ends of such ‘evolution’, have nevertheless shared a ‘continuist’ turn of mind that tends to reduce differences of kind to differences of degree.

I credit this insight to Charles Sanders Peirce, whose own thinking had been energized by John Duns Scotus’ opposition to Thomas Aquinas.” (Fuller 2021: 248)

- **Semiotic causation:**

- “[...] causation of **bringing about effects through interpretation**, as when, for example, bacterial movements are caused through a process of interpretation based on historically defined needs of a sensitive system [...].” (Hoffmeyer 2006: 152)
- Interpretant as final causation, always located in the future (*esse in futuro*, e.g. CP 2.148)
- Transhumanism without morphological freedom!

Final causation: gender is what (I) could be, i.e. gender is abductive and relational

- “[...] **organisms** are in the business of **finding evidence** for their own existence, not necessarily *in actu* but also in terms of what **could, would or might constitute** such **evidence** in the **future states** of affairs.” (Pietarinen, Beni 2021: 506)
- “[...] models are conceived as real possibilities that could, would or might be the case in the future. Those possibilities are part of the objective reality in the same sense in which the possibility of raising my hand or rolling six on the throw of the dice is real, even when the time comes such eventualities do not come to pass. Peirce epitomised his version of realism as “the possible is what can become actual” (R 288, 1905; Pietarinen, 2008) and came to advocate this version in his mature philosophy as the proper pragmatistic (or “scholastic”/“scotistic”) restatement of realism (Lane, 2019; Pietarinen, 2014).” (Pietarinen, Beni 2021: 507)

Concluding: biosemiotic approach to gender

1. Gender is performative &
 2. Performatives rely on what could be
 3. Gender is a semiotic production &
 4. Shapes (further) semiotic production
- Implications:
5. Gender is **embodied** (and embodying)
 6. Gender is **exbodied** (and exbodying)
 7. Gender is **environmental** (involved in and resulting from *Umwelt*)
 8. Gender is fluid **diachronically and synchronically**

Thank you!

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