

Chapter Sixteen

THE HISTORY OF A SENTENCE (1992)

We are here to celebrate history: the history of a great institution, since its foundation so many years ago. When we say the University of Bologna has a history, we are speaking from the standpoint of today, looking back over the events that led up to this present stage of its existence. Our own celebration is itself, of course, an event in the University's history. It is an event of a particular kind: a semiotic event, as is appropriate to an institution devoted to semiosis. And as an event in history, it also has a history of its own. Semiotic events are no different, in this respect: they have their own history, of other events that have preceded them in time and in some way contributed to their happening and to their significance.

I am concerned, in this paper, with the history of a semiotic event. But not a large event, like an international symposium; a small event, like a sentence, that is accessible to micro-analysis. So I shall think of it rather as a semiotic act, or *act of meaning* as I have generally called it. And this needs two brief comments, by way of explanation. First, it is obvious that the distinction between semiotic acts and other, by implication non-semiotic, acts is a problematic one. I would start from Vygotsky's view, of semiotically mediated activity, as distinct from tool-mediated activity (Vygotsky 1978: ch. 4); but I shall not engage with this here, and shall assume that we can treat certain phenomena as semiotic acts. Secondly, I take it that not all semiotic acts are realized in language, either directly, or indirectly via other levels of semiosis (denotatively or connotatively, in Hjelmslev's terms); but I shall take account only of those that are. So by "act of meaning" I am referring to just that subclass of semiotic acts that are semantic – that is, made of specifically linguistic meanings; and this entails that all such acts are realized in the form of wordings.

First published in *Bologna: la Cultura Italiana e le Letterature Straniere Moderne*, Vol. 30, edited by Vita Fortunati. A. Longo Editore, 1992, pp. 29–45.

Why should we be interested in the history of a semiotic act? Perhaps I could suggest a number of motivating factors – although they are all ultimately related, because they have to do with the changed and changing significance of semiotic processes in our late twentieth century post-humanistic society. The first is the familiar point that this is an information society, in which we spend much of our time and energy exchanging, not goods-&-services as in earlier times, but information. Any exchange of information is constituted of acts of meaning; that is what information is. Already control of the means of information is as vital as control of the means of production; and those who are planning our future lives for us say that the heart of a twenty-first century city will be its teleport, where no trains or aircraft come and go, but only messages. Semiotic events have assumed an importance far greater than they ever had before.

Any event, however small, has a history. An event that is manifested in the goods-&-services mode, like milking a cow, or building a house, is presaged by sequences of both micro and macro events that have made it possible and determined its significance; and we can adopt the same perspective towards an event in the semiotic mode, where the act performed was an act of saying rather than an act of doing. Of course, we have not usually troubled ourselves with the history of relatively trivial events such as these. To become part of history (to “get into the history books”, as we put it), an event has to be in some sense catastrophic: winning a battle, for example. But – and this will lead in to the second reason for inquiring into the history of an act of meaning – in the meantime the concept of history itself has changed. On the one hand, marxist and populist historians replaced the single, catastrophic historical event with quantitatively massive classes of events that constituted major economic, political and sociocultural divides: whole groups of people starting to milk cows (*husbandry*) or build houses (*settlement*). And then the media took over. Whereas in the past it had been the historians who constructed history, by transforming doings into meanings (historiography) and thus providing each recorded event with a **history** of prior conditions relevant to its interpretation, in our time it has been the media who construct history, by the simple process of deciding what is news. When the University of Bologna comes to celebrate its second nine hundred years, historians of the twenty-ninth century will have a different task: the question of what is a historical event will have been decided for them, and their task will be that of interpretation, or reinterpretation, of what they find in their libraries of print or tape or film.

But what will they find there, from our present age? What is it that the media construe as “news” and so turn into the so-called “facts of history”? There are the familiar reports of catastrophes in the other, popular sense of the term: plagues, riots, floods, explosions and the like – semiotic transformations of non-semiotic events. But alongside these, and probably outnumbering them if we could find a sensible way of counting, are those items of news where the event itself is a semiotic one, and the report is thus a second order semiotic act: not a saying about a doing but a saying about a saying. A fiction about a fiction – both English and Italian used to refer to reporting and romancing by the same term (English *novel*, Italian *novella*). Here is part of a recent newspaper report, headlined “Free heroin may not cut drug crime”:

A NSW Government body has warned that the supply of heroin to registered addicts may not lead to less drug-related crime.

The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research surveyed 225 property offenders in NSW prisons and, of those who were also heroin users, nearly 90 per cent said the main reason for committing the offence was money to support their drug habit.

Last week the Premier, Mr Wran, suggested that the forthcoming national drug summit should discuss giving heroin to addicts to combat drug trafficking and the crimes addicts commit to support drug habits.

The bureau’s report implies that a decrease in the price of heroin if it was offered free to addicts may result in a decrease in property crime. However, in Great Britain and other countries where such attempts had been made to control the heroin market, this had not occurred because the price of the drug had not dropped.

Among the survey’s findings another is that heroin was the most popular drug consumed by the users questioned, with nearly 90 per cent saying they used it heavily or regularly.

On average, the heroin addicts used seven grams of the drug per week but some reported using as much as 35 grams.

Cash purchase was the main way of obtaining heroin and those among the user group spent between \$100 and \$10,000 a week on the drug, which has a street price of about \$350 per gram. The average weekly heroin habit costs \$2,000 and in annual terms about \$100,000.

A large number of heroin users were found to have already committed property offences before they used heroin. This is in spite of the commonly held view that heroin addiction is the cause of criminal behaviour.

It was found, however, that as a heroin user’s consumption increased, so did the likelihood that they would be involved in armed robbery and break, enter and steal offences.

About 78 per cent of heroin users cited property crime as their main source of income.

Break, enter and steal was the most prevalent crime among the heroin users and only 9 per cent of users had never committed a burglary.

The average number of armed robberies committed annually by each heroin user surveyed was eight, while the average number of burglaries was 143.

Although nearly 70 per cent of the heroin users had abstained at least once from regular drug use, nearly half had never sought or received any drug treatment.

The authors of the bureau's report, Mr Ian Dobinson and Ms Pat Ward, expressed concern over the lack of treatment available for the 'substantial number' of drug-dependent people in NSW jails. Apart from in-house psychiatrists the Department of Corrective Services provides no drug treatment.

While the report's major finding that there is a strong economic link between heroin use and property crime has been well known for some time, this is the first detailed study in Australia to examine the link between crime and addiction.

By Paul Bailey, *Sydney Morning Herald*

The reported event is itself a report, introduced by "A New South Wales Government body has warned that . . ."; and most of the text is a historicization of its content (e.g. "The bureau's report implies that . . .", "While the report's major finding that . . . has been well known for some time"). But much of that content is itself already a transformation of other semiotic acts; e.g. "nearly 90 percent [of heroin-using property offenders] said . . .", "About 78 per cent of heroin users cited . . ."; and the one paragraph that is not about the report begins "Last week the Premier, Mr Wran, suggested that the forthcoming national drug summit should discuss . . .". It is not really surprising that, in an age when so much of the socio-economic process takes a semiotic form, the events out of which history is constructed should be largely semiotic events, meanings rather than doings. But in order to be history, such events must also have a history: not only a *context of situation* – a higher level environment of social processes and relations – but also a history of prior semiotic events, of the same order of existence as the events themselves. There is, so to speak, a history of meaning, and the interpretation of any act of meaning must rest on other such acts that have preceded it and created the conditions for its occurrence.

So the third reason for being concerned with this topic is one that is enshrined in the conception and the practice of semiotics itself, and has

to do with ways of understanding. As part of the present ideological transition the structure of knowledge is itself undergoing significant change, from the discipline-based construction that has dominated in the twentieth century, with its taxonomy of academic compartments defined by their subject matter like psychology and economics and linguistics, towards a construction that is based rather on themes: common questions and motifs that ignore divisions of content and take in any subject matter that is relevant to their concerns. The model for these thematic constructs is mathematics, which evolved around the theme of measuring things and has always stood out as an anomaly in our subject-based institutional structures; while early in the present century *structuralism* emerged as a thematic concept of this kind. Again not unexpectedly, in our information era, perhaps the most powerful concept to have developed thematically in this way, in recent years, has been that of understanding phenomena as systems and processes of meaning: namely *semiotics*.

The phenomena themselves may be of various kinds. In the natural sciences the exchange of meanings serves as **model** and **metaphor** for processes in biology, chemistry and physics. Where the processes we are concerned with are social ones they are often **directly constituted of** acts of meaning, in the form of the discursive practices of those involved; so we gain access to these processes through the analysis of discourse. And this is where the history comes in. If – to take Lemke’s (1985) work as an example – an act of meaning in the field of science education, a particular intervention by the teacher in a physics class, can be seen to play a part in constructing a *thematic system*, which in turn is carrying a particular ideological load, then this means it must have a history. No such thematic *framing* (Thibault 1986) would be possible unless the act in question was part of some historical process, and specifically of a semo-historical process in which any given semiotic event has been preceded by others that created the conditions for its occurrence and for its range of possible interpretations.

In one sense this is simply the notion of intertextuality: the thematic system is an intertextual construct, and once it is recognized that any discursive formation must depend on complex *multi-accented* intertextual relations, such as are implied by notions of register and genre, then the historical principle is established. There is always a context in which any act of meaning comes into being. But the intertextual thematic system, or the *genre* in Martin’s work (Martin 1986a), is in principle timeless. It is a network of semiotic relationships within which

a given text, or a given act of meaning, is positioned and displays its proportionalities – shared features, resonances, dissonances, polysemies and the like. At some point, however, we have to introduce the arrow of time, because the extremely complex dialectic of system and process (as well as Markovian effects within the process itself) ensures that the meaning potential is constantly changing. What can be meant, at any moment in the discourse, is very much a product of history: of what could be meant, and what has been meant, before.

Of course when a semiotic event, or an event of any kind, is transformed into history, it acquires a posterity as well as an antecedence. If we treat the foundation of the University of Bologna as an event of history, it becomes a fulcrum: we have thereby defined not one category of related events but two, those leading up to the foundation and those subsequent to it. Since this particular event left an output, a lasting trace in the form of an institution, the subsequent history concerns itself with that. Similarly, an act of meaning may leave a trace in the form of a written or otherwise recorded text; and this likewise acquires a history: it may be read once and put aside, or reread, or re-enacted in performance (e.g. a dramatic text), and thus accumulate a series of different micro and even macro contexts. Other acts do not leave any institutional trace – among acts of meaning, most spoken ones are of this kind; so that their subsequent history is more like the ripples on a pond after one stone has been thrown in.

Here I am not using “history” in the sense of what occurs subsequent to a given focal event. By the “history of a sentence” I mean its prior conditions, those which led up to its production in speech or writing. And this perhaps requires one further disclaimer, at least for linguists: in referring to the prior history of a sentence I am not talking about its formal derivation. Linguists sometimes refer to the operation of generating a sentence by using the apparatus of a particular model of grammar as the “history” of that sentence. Such a sequence of logical steps is part of the interpretation of the derived form (for example, in a systemic grammar the paths taken through the network explain its paradigmatic relationship to all other forms); but it is not history. It is an analytic sequence using the metaphor of time, but it has no time track of its own. To put it another way: I am concerned with conditions that lead up to instantiation, not with the phenomenon of instantiation as such.

I think we can identify four strands or dimensions of history that are forerunners of every sentence, by virtue of which it becomes an act of

meaning. Let me refer to these as (1) the intertextual, (2) the developmental, (3) the systemic and (4) the intratextual. I will try to describe, and illustrate, each of these in turn.

1 Intertextual history

Intertextual history is the temporally prior set of acts of meaning to which the given act of meaning makes allusion. This is familiar in literature and philology as *allusion* and in semiotics as *intertextuality*, and as such needs no exemplification (for a richly contextualized discussion see Threadgold (1986: passim and esp. pp. 21–2, 24, 31, 33, 35 and 44–5). In Threadgold’s words (21–2): “At the moment of textual encounter, besides the text in focus, other discourses – discourse from other discursive formations which depend on the subject’s positioning in other practices – cultural, educational, institutional – are always in play”. (Note that this subsumes both text and subject; cf. my second heading below). What I want to do is just to examine the historical aspect of being “in play” from the point of view of linguistics – a linguistics that is situated within a general social-semiotic framework.

It is a commonplace of the history of literature that specific literary genres arise which have their own history within a culture, a history of growth, maturation and decay. There are familiar metaphors such as “golden” and “silver” periods. For example in Chinese poetry the lyric form known as *shi* is seen as growing in pre-Tang times, reaching maturity (a golden age) in Tang, and subsequently decaying – becoming imitative, rigid and formulaic. Leaving open the question whether the growth-&-decay model is generally applicable, we can trace a history of some kind in many functional varieties of a language, at least those that come to be in some sense institutionalized.

Let me take the example of scientific English. We can write a history of it (Bazerman 1988); and we can situate a particular text in some time zone of that history with a significant probability of being right – the longer the text, of course, the greater the probability, but even a single sentence may carry a rather clear signature of the semantic style characteristic of a particular period. For example:

Hence increase of temperature, at the same time as on one account it increases the absolute quantity of heat in an elastic fluid, diminishes the quantity on another account by an increase of pressure.

We note that the sense of ‘how hot?’ has been represented nominally as

quantity of heat, and likewise the sense of ‘become hotter’ as *increase of temperature*; and that these are entities which act on each other, and on another entity *increase of pressure*. The way they act on each other is by ‘causing to become greater’ and ‘causing to become less’, realized verbally as *increases* and *diminishes*. Historically this falls somewhere between an earlier semantic style in which *temperature* would have been nominalized in this way but not *increase of temperature*, at least not as Actor in a clause of this kind; and a later style in which *increase* would more probably have been *causes an increase* (later still: *is the cause of an increase*), and likewise *causes a diminution*. This suggests the nineteenth century, and earlier in the century rather than later. It is in fact from John Dalton, *A New System of Chemical Philosophy*, which was published in 1827.

The sentence carries with it its history at all levels, up to as far as we can pursue it along the chain of realization – up to the level of ideology, if we follow Martin (1986a). A physicist could locate it at its place in the history of knowledge. But that is a level of interpretation that is specific to this variety; whereas every text creates meaning at the semantic and lexicogrammatical levels. Obviously, this sentence is significant only as part of its text; and any one sentence may be untypical; but being untypical can be defined by reference to being typical, and what is typical is itself defined for a moment in history.

Typical, of course, does not imply univocal; the typical text is a polyphony, and often a cacophony, of voices – but this too can be as much the property of a single sentence, once we use our understanding of grammar to reveal it.

For this we will need a rich *grammatics*, an interpretative model of wordings and meanings which is based on – and explicitly problematizes – the concept of *realization* (cf. Threadgold 1986: 33). This is the only means of animating all levels of semiosis both **within** and **outside** language (the distinction may disappear in the process) while encompassing the contextual parameters of the text: who are acting in the given semiotic encounter, what they are enacting, and how the enactment is *semioticized* (the *tenor*, *field* and *mode* of a systemic theory). These concepts in turn enable us to introduce and operate with the mediating category of “register” as the concrete manifestation of intertextuality, and therefore of this aspect of history. This is not a taxonomic category; *a register*, like *a dialect*, is a useful fiction to live by, but it is a fiction – a more or less stable, and sometimes institutionalized, concatenation of semantic motifs which may at any

time (and typically will, in society as we know it) embody tensions, contradictions, and conflicting voices (Kress 1985).

It is in this sense that we can talk productively about the register of scientific English, to refer to a complex set of semantic motifs, and their lexicogrammatical realizations, that emerge historically as a recognizable semantic style. We know it when we see it. But the same theoretical perspective forces us to recognize that these motifs do not constitute some mythical organic unity (though they may, through the power of language, create a world which then gives the appearance of organic unity) but represent – not in any direct way, but through that same chain of realizations – the heterogeneous components that make up the socioeconomic order within which the scientific ideology arose. By examining the grammatical history of the favourite scientific clause as it evolved from Newton onwards, we see emerging a form of discourse which is highly explicit in its construction of argument (experimentation, formulation of general principles, logical steps in reasoning, and so on) and by the very same grammatical tokens highly implicit in its construction of content – so privileging the expert and perpetuating an intellectual elite (Halliday 1988a; Lemke 1990b; see also M. A. K. Halliday, *Collected Works*, Volume 5, Part 3).

This aspect of history – the intertextual one – is to the fore when we are considering institutionalized registers such as the discourse of science, political rhetoric, pop lyrics and the like. Here the accumulating body of related texts, clearly set apart by their context, form strong intertextual bonds through the closely shared experience of those who produce and consume them. Hence the semiotic history of the individual interactant tends to be subordinated to, or incorporated into, the history of the whole *speech fellowship* (Firth 1957d: 186–7). Even here, of course, the creation and interpretation of text is constrained by the individual's linguistic ontogeny; and this leads me on to my second strand, that of ontogenetic or developmental history.

2 Developmental history

Each interactant in an act of meaning has his or her own individual history as a **meaner**; including at one end of the scale the experiences, semiotic and other, that are unique to that individual, and at the other end the universals of human semiosis development – protolanguage (“child tongue”) before language (mother tongue), speech before writing, generalization before abstraction and so on. In between these

extremes are the shared experiences of particular communities: different social groups or sub-cultures within which children learn the linguistic construction of received reality.

The history that is unique to an individual is of interest in so far as we can learn from it about general principles of semogenesis. So when Nigel, at age two years and one month, says

Catch that dragonfly on Pauline's green toothbrush!

we may be amused at it, because it is not usual to hunt dragonflies with toothbrushes, nor – if you are doing – does it seem particularly relevant what colour the toothbrush is or who it belongs to; but it scarcely seems to deserve serious attention. However, if placed in its developmental context (this one is part of a longitudinal study of one child), almost any sentence will illustrate some significant points. The present one reveals, in its grammar, something of the ontogeny of clause construction (transitivity and mood) and of nominal group construction (modification); and displays a semantic system in which the distinction between descriptive and defining, as functions of the modifying elements, is not clearcut. Features like these emerge as part of its history.

We can also learn from this example something of the ontogeny of reality construction if this is on our agenda. But when we move up to this level we are more likely to want to focus on history that is shared among the members of a social group. In her paper on the ontogenesis of ideology, Ruqaiya Hasan investigates the development of the concept of “work” in early childhood and shows how a child's semantic feature network for *work* as something that excludes what women do in the home is constructed out of exchanges such as this one (Hasan 1986: 132–3):

- Alison: Is Pop home?
Mother: No. They're all out. They're all at work.
Alison: Bob and Mark are working.
Mother: Yes, Bob's at work. Mark's at work. Everybody's at work.
Alison: I not at work.
Mother: No, you're only little.
Alison: You's at work?
Mother: I don't work. I look after you. . . . Who'd look after you if Mummy went to work, eh?

Alison is then three years and five months, and this little exchange becomes part of the history of any subsequent discourse in which she engages, as speaker or listener, that is concerned with work. Now since Hasan finds comparable passages with many of the other mother–child

dyads in her sample, in which the mother is building up a negative image of housework and child minding (not **real** work, boring, tiring etc.), she concludes that this is an aspect of the development history of all children growing up in this particular sociocultural context – a modern Australian city – and that the mother who says *I don't work. I just look after you.* has herself been through such a history in the course of her own childhood.

This is to look at the history of a sentence from the standpoint of its place in the transmission of ideology. This is indeed how ideologies are transmitted; not just as discrete components, such as the concepts of work, but rather as complex constructions – constructions that are typically discordant and rich in internal conflicts but function for the members of the group as coherent systems of beliefs and values. Such constructions are semantic ones: they are constituted out of the meaning potential of language, as instantiated in informal spontaneous discourse, and they depend on certain universal features of human development, and specifically language development. By these I do not mean concrete universals like the order of acquisition of grammatical elements, but the abstract principles underlying the development of every human being as one who can mean. These are principles such as: from protolanguage to language – children first construct a sign system like that of other species (as far as we know), without a grammar, and then transform it by introducing a distinct level of semiosis, a lexicogrammar; from micro-functions via macro- to meta-functions – meaning becomes simultaneously a mode of action, of reflection and of information, and thus every clause has a threefold grammatical structure; from generalization through abstraction to metaphor – these forming the foundation, respectively, of spoken language (embodying commonsense knowledge), written language (educational knowledge) and technical language (specialized knowledge).

So the developmental history of a sentence is the prior semiotic experience of those who enact it, as performers or receivers; and this ranges from experience that is unique to the individual, through that shared by a group, to that which is common to the human species as a whole. But in interpreting this experience we have had to refer, throughout, to features which pertain to language considered as a system: categories of transitivity and mood, for example, or lexico-semantic networks, metafunctional categories and so on. And these also have a history, which I will turn to next.

3 Systemic history

Individuals grow, mature and die; developmental history is a history of growth. Systems evolve; systemic history is of an evolutionary kind. Behind any sentence lies the evolution of the semantic systems and the lexicogrammatical systems (syntax, morphology, vocabulary) that have gone into making it up.

Let me take another example from scientific English – but this time from a school science textbook (year 6, age 11–12):

This experiment will let you make some more observations about the direction in which water moves through a thin plant wall.

The Process Way to Science, TPS book C, p. 55

All the grammatical properties of this sentence have evolved as part of the history of the English language. For example, in the structure of the nominal group: the sequence of nouns, as in *plant wall*; the embedding of prepositional phrases and clauses with defining function in postmodifier position, as in *some more observations [about [the direction [in which ...]]]*; the morphology, both Anglo-Saxon and Græco-Romance; the technical vocabulary, e.g. *observation*, *experiment*, *plant wall*; the grammatical metaphor, as in *make observations*, *the experiment will let you ...*; the verbal group complex *let ... make*; the tense *will let*; and so on. All these are instances of systemic categories within the overall system network of English grammar.

Each can be approached historically. To take the example of tense: here the writer has used the simple future, realized analytically as *will + let*. In Modern English this forms part of an iterative system which can generate tenses of considerable semantic complexity (I shall give an example in the next section). These forms evolve in speech, not in writing, so our access to their history is limited; but on the basis of the written evidence it is possible to construct some picture of how the system has been evolving since the earliest known pattern from some 1200 years ago (Strang 1970). This suggests an expansion, along particular lines, of the meaning potential associated with the location of processes in time one relative to another.

Why do such evolutionary changes take place? This raises, obviously, the question of the nature of historical explanations; and historians of language have been discouraged from asking such questions since cultural explanations went out of favour. There is good reason why they did: it is futile to focus on particular changes in the system of a language and try to relate them piecemeal to the history of society. But

it is not futile – indeed it is highly effective – to relate changes in one part of the grammatical system to changes in other parts of the system over the same period of time, because such an overall view helps us to trace and to understand the history of prevailing semantic styles. This in turn can give us considerable insight into the fashioning of semiotic framing structures and into the development of ideologies (compare the example of scientific English given earlier).

It should be made very clear, in the light of current debate in semiotics, language and ideology, that to talk of the grammatical system is not to imply that meanings are somehow “fixed” or “given out there”, or that the thematic and ideological constructions are manifested item by item in the outward forms of the grammar. To refuse to attend to the wording of language on the grounds that some linguistic theories are reductionist or “totalizing” is simply irresponsible – yet another pretext for refusing to engage seriously with language. On the contrary, there is no possibility of understanding these higher-level semiotic processes except by attending to the lexicogrammatical processes of which they are constituted. What is now urgent is that we should properly problematize the fundamental relationship (recognized in post-Saussurean linguistics as “realization”) that articulates these various levels of the semiotic act.

While stressing the systemic dimension of history, however, as a coda to this part of the discussion (and in transition to the next and final heading) we should be reminded that the part played by the system in the history of any particular act of meaning is variable. Many sentences are stored readymade; they are more or less formulaic for the speaker and for the listener, and any given instance of their occurrence harks back to previous instances of the same wording rather than being engendered afresh by choosing within the system. Examples from English are:

Take it or leave it!
I couldn't believe my ears.
It's a contradiction in terms.
He doesn't know what he's talking about.
Not by any stretch of the imagination.
You can't change human nature.
You must keep your eye on the ball.
etc.

Of course these items are still located within the system and derive their meaning ultimately by semantic proportionality in the usual way; but their immediate source is the trace of earlier occurrences. (This is

sometimes seen as a form of intertextual effect; but it is actually rather different. Intertextual potential is strongest where the act of meaning exploits the full resources of the system; it tends precisely to be weakened where the act of meaning is locked into a formula, since this inhibits the **search** for other semiotic input.)

4 Intratextual history

The school science text from which I quoted above contains, at intervals across two pages of text and illustrations, the following three sentences:

In this topic you will experiment with solutions and a thin wall made from plant material . . .

This experiment will let you make some more observations about the direction in which water moves through a thin plant wall . . .

Then try to explain your observations by using your hypothesis about the movement of water through plant walls.

Note how the grammar of this text unfolds in time: *a thin wall made from plant material* becomes *a thin plant wall*; *water moves through [a wall]* becomes *the movement of water through [plant walls]*. These are not likely to occur in the reverse sequence. Compare the following chain of expressions taken from an article in *Scientific American*:

[the mechanism by which] glass cracks
 [the stress needed] to crack glass
 as a crack grows
 the crack has advanced
 will make slow cracks grow
 speed up the rate at which cracks grow
 the rate of crack growth
 [we can decrease] the crack growth rate [1000 times]
 (T. A. Michalske and B. C. Bunker, 'The fracturing of glass',
Scientific American, December 1987)

If we focus on the last of these we can see that it has an intratextual history: the wording (*decrease*) *the crack growth rate* has evolved step by step from the original *glass cracks*. *Crack growth rate* is a new semiotic entity that has been created by the flow of the discourse. Or rather: it has not been created by the flow of the discourse; it has been created by the grammatical system of English catalysed by the flow of the discourse. The systemic history of the English nominal group and the

instantial history of this particular text converge to produce a wording that functions to package the information as required by the argument at that particular point in the construction of the text.

This kind of text dynamic is not simply a feature of planned written discourse. Here is an edited version of a passage of spontaneous conversation I noted down years ago; the labels show the tense selected at the verbal group:

	TENSE
Can I use the synthesizer?	
Well I'm afraid we <i>use</i> it ourselves in the morning	present
What, every morning? <i>Are you using</i> it now?	present in present
Yes, 'fraid so.	
How about this afternoon? <i>Are you going to be using</i> it then?	present in future in present
No. But this afternoon's no good.	
Why not?	
It's <i>going to be being tested</i> .	present in future in present
Come off it! It's <i>been going to be being tested</i> for ages.	present in future in past in present
It'll've <i>been going to've been being tested</i> every day for about a fortnight soon.	present in past in future in past in present

The first part shows a typical build-up of tenses from a simple one-term tense choice, here present, *we use it*, to tenses of two and three terms: *are you using it*, *are you going to be using it* – a sequential pattern that is very characteristic of dialogue. Although in this particular instance the temporal sequence was from simple to complex, tenses of up to three terms are all very frequent and do not need a textual precursor; it would be perfectly normal to begin a conversation with *are you going to be using this machine this afternoon?* But tenses of four and five terms are much rarer, and usually need a text history of this kind to lead up to them – especially a dialogue, which is often a kind of semiotic *folie à deux* leading to all sorts of grammatical extravagances.

Of course, the relevance of intratextual history is not confined to instances such as these; they merely serve to underline its potential significance. Any act of meaning has a history along this dimension. The exception, of course, would be one that initiates a text. Clearly the concept of *intratextual* history implies that there is a point where a text begins, whereas in many registers at least we would find it hard to identify text boundaries. There are two relevant considerations here,

however. One is that a text boundary is established semantically and in the lexicogrammar by cohesion: if a sentence is accessible from another, later sentence by some cohesive relation then it can be concluded that the two fall within the same text, and such cohesive patterns in fact constitute an important aspect of this dimension of history (Hasan 1984c). The other is that of transitional probabilities: if the grammar of a language is represented as a probabilistic system, as I would consider it to be, then the intratextual history of any sentence is the perturbation of its inherent probabilities by the selections made earlier in the text (as in the tense example above). The boundary of a text is then the frontier across which such effects do not obtain.

Text A

September 11, 1986

Dear tenant

IF YOU JUST WANNA HAVE FUN ...

Come to *your* MOONCAKE NITE THEME PARTY next Saturday. That's September 20 – from 7.30p.m. until the wee hours!!

A sneak preview of the exciting line-up of activities includes:

- * Mr/Ms Tenant Contest
- * Find *Your* Mooncake Partner
- * Pass the Lantern Game
- * Bottoms Up Contest
- * Blow the Lantern Game
- * Moonwalking Contest
- * DANCING
- * PLUS MORE! MORE! MORE!

For even greater fun, design and wear your original Mooncake creation, and bring your self-made lantern passport!

But don't despair if you can't because this party is *FOR* you! Lantern passports can be bought at the door.

Just c'mon and grab this opportunity to chat up your neighbour. Call yours truly on *ext. 137* NOW! Confirm you really wanna have fun!! Why – September 20's next Saturday.

See you!

Public Relations Officer

P.S. Bring your camera to "capture" the fun!

Perhaps then we can think of the history of an act of meaning in terms of these four dimensions. It is unlikely, of course, that all these strands of history will be significant in any one instance; hence they are difficult to exemplify in relation to each other. Nevertheless let me try. In principle we could choose a sentence from any realm of experience, in any interpersonal setting and with any rhetorical force; I take one from a text (see Text A) that illustrates a well-known contemporary political phenomenon, the “disneyfication” of western man. (The targeted victim is typically male.) I shall focus on the last three lines actually consisting of four written sentences:

Just c'mon and grab this opportunity to chat up your neighbour. Call yours truly on *ext.* 137 NOW! Confirm you really wanna have fun!!
Why – September 20's next Saturday.

Let me try to offer a brief sketch of its history, taking these four dimensions in the reverse order to that in which I introduced them.

Intratextually: there must be a **history** for the cohesive *this* in *this opportunity*, namely *the party* referred to throughout. But there are also a number of other antecedents: the repetition of *you wanna have fun*, the repetition of the date, the expression *yours truly* (the text has begun as a letter, so this functions as a coy variant of ‘the writer’), and the way in which the mood and transitivity choices chime with those of the first paragraph: imperative + material: action in the first clause, declarative + relational: time in the last. The focal passage is obviously climactic (cf. the NOW!); if read aloud as a commercial, it would have the prosodic and paralinguistic features of the final sell.

Systemically: the passage derives from the **core** grammar of late-twentieth-century English in the Disneyland dialect. It combines a very simple grammar (no clause or clause complex structures that would not be found in the speech of a two-year-old) with bureaucratic vocabulary (*opportunity*, *confirm*), mixed with colloquialisms (*grab*, *chat up*) and garnished with comics-style orthography (*c'mon*, *wanna*). The interpersonal flavouring is that of condescension (*just*, *really*, *why* . . .!).

Developmentally: this dialect has no native speakers (as far as I know!), so it has been learnt as a second dialect; both writer and readers must be presumed to be at least adolescent, because of the grammatical metaphor in *grab this opportunity to . . .*. Since the dialect functions as a trade jargon the writer has learnt it, perhaps under instruction, in the course of professional training. It allows no **play** for individual variation, so there is no trace of the writer's own developmental history up to that point.

Text B

30.8.86

Dear tenant

Celebrate Mooncake Nite With Us On September 20!

Buy your lanterns now! Because come September 20, they will be your "passport" to our Mooncake Nite at the Silks Lounge/Poolside on level 5. From 7.30 pm onwards!

Mooncakes, Chinese tea and pomelos will be served. So, do have an early dinner. There will be a Mr and Ms Tenant Contest where points will be awarded for *originality, presentation, appearance and talent*. All Mr and Ms Tenant hopefuls, please complete and return the attached form to the Concierge by *September 12*.

Prizes will also be given to the best "moonwalker" (as in dancing), the winners of the Bottoms Up Contest (with Chinese tea, naturally) and other fun games. Remember to bring your camera, lah!

Make sure *you* come. Call me at *ext. 137* to confirm your coming and please do so by *September 12*. You can count on our Mooncake Nite to be lots of fun! Just don't forget to bring your "passports!"

Yours sincerely

Public Relations Officer

Intertextually, there is an immediate intertextual reference to another text enacted two weeks earlier (Text B), both specifically in the wording (e.g. to *call me at ext. 137 to confirm your coming*) and in the general reference to the same future event; note, however, that the earlier text is in a mixed dialect, only partly disneyfied. Beyond this, there is intertextual resonance with countless other preceding texts in this dialect having comparable contexts of situation and culture; with particular items like *happy hour* (recalled by the present *have fun*). Behind these again lay texts in other, related registers: primarily perhaps television commercials, Disney story books and cartoons, and office routine such as appointments diaries.

What this brief historical sketch brings out – and a great deal more could be said about this example – is a semiotic act that looks at first sight like an impossible farrago of unrelated and partially conflicting features: some childhood ones, some "childist", some adult commercial and some adult professional. But that reveals the text for precisely what it is: an act of meaning addressed to adults endowed with minds like children, the assumption being that the off-duty executive (and the

tenant that is being addressed is tenant of an *executive residence*) relaxes by regressing to childhood. Presumably the regression is only temporary; although in view of the well-known observation that people tend to behave the way they are treated (and that includes the way they are treated semiotically), perhaps what we are seeing is the regression of a whole culture into early adolescence, where it can then destroy itself with its arsenal of dangerous toys.

Clearly much of what I have been saying, and illustrating, would form part of any critical approach to text from a social-semiotic standpoint. But it does require one condition: that our interpretative resources should be solidly grounded in what I call **grammatics**: a theory of grammar within a realizational framework – grammar being the systemic powerhouse where meanings are ultimately made.

But in choosing this particular perspective, of the “history of a sentence”, I had two further considerations in mind. One was that it seems to me important, when we are dealing with discourse, to be aware of its temporality; and this not only in the familiar sense, that a text unfolds itself in time (the linearity of the text process), but more deeply, also, in the sense that meaning is itself a historical process. Meanings are made by people who have meant before; they relate to prior acts of meaning; and their source is a meaning potential that has been transmitted, as a metastable system (one that persists by constantly changing, in interaction with its environment), over a very long time. The impact of a text is dependent on its location in this complex semo-history, at the intersection of the various dimensions of that history where we ourselves are located when we enact it or hold it up for investigation.

The second consideration was a more practical one. It has often been observed (I have laboured the point myself) that one of the shortcomings of semiotic debate, much of which purports to be about discourse, is that very little of it actually engages with the text. This is partly because of a continued reluctance to base the study firmly in grammatics – on the pretext that this can lead to a sterile formalism, whereas meaning is “not just words”, the meanings are “located in the reader” and so on. No doubt it is easy to point to examples of excessive concern with linguistic forms; but it is perverse to throw away the most powerful tool just because you have found someone else misusing it. It must also be recognized, however, that it takes a great deal of time to analyse a text – and still more time to present one’s analysis. One could write a book about almost any text that is of interest and still not

exhaust what is worth saying about it. So most of the time we find ourselves citing single sentences; and this narrowing of focus has serious limitations and dangers. One way to lessen and overcome these is to locate the sentence in its semiotic context of system and process; and that means construing for it a history. Only if we know what went before an act of meaning can we reasonably claim to judge its effect on what came after it.

And last of all, if I may end as I began: we are here to celebrate nine hundred years of continuous discourse, all of it building on that which has gone before. This is a quite remarkable piece of semohistory, and we can hardly avoid adopting a historical perspective on a time-enriched occasion such as the present one.