

Review of: "[Research note] Semantic Systems Theory"

Victoria Reeve

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I found this paper enthralling and was excited to see Thomas Fröhlich making use of theories relevant to my discipline of literary genre theory. Fröhlich emphasises generic roles and relations, enacted by agents that render the de-temporalized role specific by bringing to bear unique perspectives or actions (acknowledging that the theory applies to contexts beyond human agency) when he writes, “For roles to be played in an interplay, the properties ascribed to an element in its de-temporalized, categorized form only serve as a frame, allowing a variety of situationally informed roles to be played”. Thus, *role* might be broadly defined as a pattern of behaviours made specific through enactment by an agent. A role is also a meaning in that it calls itself into being through its purpose.

I do feel that the paper would benefit from examples that help the reader think about the application of semantic systems theory in ordinary life. The chemical analogy was useful and helped me grasp nuances of the theory, but, if I may suggest, an example like the following would help many readers see the usefulness of the theory beyond science. Let’s imagine, for instance, that I work at a service station where people pull up, refuel their vehicles, and come in to pay. There are several roles in play, but let’s focus on two: customer and staff. Before I even took the job or the customer entered the premises, these roles were already formed in a de-temporalized frame (relative to other roles like business owner, manager, etc.). Once agents become involved, each role is filled by each agency enacting their given role. As co-creators of *both* roles (staff and customer), since you (more or less, in practical terms) can’t have one without the other (and because the system of the service station is “a divisible whole ... [that is] functionally ... indivisible [as a] unity with emergent properties”^[1]), agents enact their individual role in the context of the service station and its shop in “a mutually adaptive co-play as a transient convergence of roles enacted in a context” (Fröhlich). To demonstrate this further, let’s say I serve a customer who has just refuelled. And let’s imagine that individual is also a friend of mine. Our friendship and earlier associations inform our interaction as customer and staff, and may even substantially alter the way I do my job. I might, for instance, allow them behind the counter to search for the account book I cannot find or ask them to mind the shop while I serve a customer who needs help operating the pump. Yet, other customers, strangers to myself, will stimulate an interplay that is quite different. A customer, used to the operational context of the service station, may simply walk in, wave their credit card at the card reader, and leave.

Genres (and roles in their generic guise) only operate in non-space (i.e., they are semantic in nature and exist in conceptual space to be brought into existence in space and time through the specificities that enact their patterns, or which bear likeness to their patterns). They are potentialities (like Derrida’s supplement, in a way^[2]) that may, through their conceptual non-existence, lead to actions taken in response to them. This is fundamentally the process of social construction. For example, the doctors and nurses and other medical staff, the building, the beds, the patients and their

visitors, the carpark, the helipad, the ambulance bays, and the paramedics in their trucks are not the hospital. The hospital is enacted through the interplay of these many different roles. And these roles have been forged and shaped over time through the complex interplay of generic and agented contexts—through conceptual and specified enactments of caring for the sick and injured. (Derrida's supplement^[2] brought, not into being, but reified through the complex network of behaviours operating around the imagined hospital, which is not the bricks and mortar, or the board of directors, or any other element within the semantic system that we call a hospital).

Thus, roles, as genres, are extrapolated from earlier moments (of their enactment), tied to the Derridean supplement through processes that reify their otherwise conceptual existence, somehow preserved (as per Fröhlich's observation that "the minute constituents of each semantic system are moments pointing toward their structured future"^[3])—they describe potential (i.e., formal/semiotic and syntagmatic) emergences in "the unified temporal, transient, non-spatial 'space'"^[4]. They are, ultimately, the specificities of (past) space and time generalised into the non-space of meaning "enacting a meaningful world that in turn continues to shape the system itself."^[5]

Language, for example, is generic until it is spoken; then it combines with the other agents in speech to identify specificities that produce generic models of semantic patterning in spatialised formal and relational (semiotic and syntagmatic) terms. Thus, Fröhlich's semantic systems theory provides a means of understanding language as "emerging from and limited to an attuned, resonating interaction" through speech, that survives the moment because the "interacting agents' structuring agency" persists "beyond that moment" and is extended through ongoing "attuned encounters of interactionally adaptive agencies ... open to further interactions"^[3].

Fröhlich's writing beyond this paper is amenable to Derrida's theories^{[2][6]} on speech and enactment.^[4] The supplement, in Derridean terms, is the trace of creative emergences in processes that may yet bring into being, through complex interrelations across networks of biopsychosocial experience, that which has yet to move from semantic content to form because the necessary syntagmatic relations have yet to be forged. One example – I might pitch my hopes to far flung futures and never see these realised, yet I can easily plan to resolve an immediate problem by imagining how I might do so. I cannot achieve the former because there are too many elements at play beyond my agential reach. Semantic systems theory, beyond other organisational theories,^[7] offers incredible scope for analysing a range of complex situations and semantic systems. I have highlighted a couple of instances (medical and linguistic). But imagine such a system brought to bear on some of the issues pressing on humanity today? That's exciting—particularly given that semantic systems theory leans into complexity and demands attention to the relational shifts and changes that build the system itself.

It is exciting to see meaning-making central to creative evolutionary processes like those outlined by Fröhlich. I am truly grateful for the experience of engaging with this paper.

References

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