

The Signs' Behavior in Autistic Children: Semiosis of an Unspoken Language

Bujar Hoxha

Department of Communication Sciences
South-East European University
Ul. Haska 12, Skopje, Macedonia
Email: b.hoxha@seeu.edu.mk

Abstract:

The present paper aims to elaborate on some of the communicational deficits in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Treating autism semiotically entails in itself a multitude of semiotic processes. We may evidence these with: the process of intermediation in communicating abilities, a special sort of reaction, as well as inter-subjective feedback within frames of the communication with the other, and/or significant other. In my view, besides, an autistic child conceptualizes his/her social reality through sensory-deficits which look unusual to the rest of the world. Owing to his/her pre-existential signs, which belong to the organic nature of the problematics, such children transform such sorts of communication into passionate tantrums and/or meltdowns, through their repetitive and stereotyped behavior. This thus makes the problematics semiotically relevant. The semiotics of passions [such as conceptualized in (Greimas and Fontanille 1993)];, as well as existential semiotics [see: (Tarasti 2000);(Tarasti 2015)], deduces a semantic taxonomy aimed at a process of semiosis of an unspoken language, thus making visible the similarities and/or differences between a typical and/or atypical sort of behavior (or: between autistic and non-autistic “worlds”). In conclusion, the “signs in action” transform themselves into meaningful semantic units in frames of the “physiologically” conceptualized actions by autistic children.

Keywords: autism; semiotics; transformation; behavior

1. Introduction: the semiotic relevance of ASD (methodological remarks)¹

Treating mental disorders and/or disabilities generally, and the phenomenon of autism specifically, from the semiotic viewpoint is not an easy task, for multiple reasons. First, it is presupposed that such individuals cannot perform an accomplished communicational process, as *some semiotically intended messages* [italics and paraphrasing mine, see: (Eco 1968)] may remain unprocessed, and/or become processed unequivocally [see: (Eco 1976)]. Second, an individual on the spectrum may show an attempt to perform and/or execute a semiotic function with

finalized semantic units on the one hand but, on the other hand, many of the other neuro-typical communicational abilities may remain unaccomplished. Moreover, not only socially, psychologically, and medically intended processes—as well as physiologically intended human activities in normal interactional human contexts—are not fully performed, but they may additionally represent a lack of meaning in terms of such individuals' interaction with others and/or significant others. Finally, many of the individuals on the spectrum either are not aware of the social reality surrounding them or live a differently perceived social reality [see:(Sicile-Kira 2014);(Bogdashina 2005)]. It is for such reasons that I consider that the matter is semiotically relevant.

Otherwise, treating Autism Spectrum Disorders Syndrome (ASD) from a semiotic perspective includes not only identifying such individuals' deficits but also includes an effort to establish a communicational process with them. My aim in this contribution shall be to offer some of the behavioral possibilities and/or techniques of acquisition of a determined delayed developmental prospective to regain semiotic functions in children with autism. I aim to number their behavioral deficits, including their sensory-integration problems [see: (Emmons, P.G.; Andersen 2005)], to identify their own “physiological” way of performing a semiotic function. Their special kind of communication ability entails stereotyped repetitiveness that creates narrative structures as possible semantic units. The semiotically intended narrative structures in the case of ASD are differently perceived and conceptualized, which requires that here they shall be analyzed within frames of the differences between *stories lived* and *stories told* [italics and paraphrasing, mine; see:(Griffin 2003)]. My analysis shall therefore elaborate the repetitive habitual actions by such children, who, due to the incapability of comprehending determined contexts, express such actions as passions. Due to such mentioned passions, one can enhance their artistic abilities, as proof of their way of existence within a socially conventional world. The semiotics of passions (Greimas and Fontanille 1993), in my view, as well as existential semiotics [see:(Tarasti 2015, 2000)], can offer a clear-cut vision of their *exceptional behavior* [see:(Hoxha 2014, 2016)], as well as deduce the meaning of it, to make it understandable to the rest of the world. In essence, their differently perceived reality shall result in a semiotic comprehension of their requests and complaints, (which is only one of the ways of their presumably manifested disabilities)², as proof of their interaction with significant others as impassioned subjects. Not only should the semiotics of passions and existential semiotics (as methodologies) play a decisive methodological role in this contribution, but other spheres as well, which indispensably become objects of scholarly analytical treatment. I am, in conclusion, to analyze some of the necessary developmental stages in human behavioral patterns, [see: (Piaget 1969)], to be able to offer a comparative view of such individuals' interaction with the rest of the world. Beyond numbering the symptoms that make the phenomenon visible or manifested, I consider that one has to treat some of the inter-human socializing processes. This shall in turn render visible the complexity of such individuals' participation in, as well as construction of, social reality differently in comparison to neurotypical individuals, as one of the preconditions

of normally lived social conditions. Besides, the multi-dimensionality of this phenomenon enables its multi-disciplinary treatment, as well as contributes to the complexity of the mentioned problematics.

I shall consider semiotics a methodology which shall intend an elaboration of determined processes (either based psychologically or socially) to create relational attitudes [such as foreseen in (Deely 2009)], as one of the semiotic preconditions within our specified context. If such is our methodological explication, then some questions may be advanced: why should ASD be treated semiotically in conditions when one can hardly see a semiotic process accomplished? Or: which is the point that semiotically relates this multi-dimensional issue, so that various procedural signification processes become a part of a general meaning deduction? Not only will so-called precise or exact semiotic functions have to be exposed here for methodological reasons [which, as explained in Saussure, can be intended by what he calls “semiology”, see; (Saussure 1959)], but other interpretational hypotheses will be presented as well, which lead to this issue’s cognitive and interpretative relevance. In conclusion, it is for such reasons that I consider that the communicational abilities and/or disabilities of an individual affected by autism can also rely on hypothetical and epistemological grounds, besides ontological ones. This last assertion presumably justifies the philosophical background of the problematics to be elaborated later in this text. Greimas and Fontanille (1993), as is known, have based their theory on such grounds, because of its rightful applicability in many realistically lived social contexts. As they justifiably observe:

It is therefore not surprising that the best-explored, and perhaps the most efficient, level of the generative trajectory is situated in that middle area between its discursive and epistemological components. We are referring above all to the modeling of narrativity and to its actantial organizations. The concept of an actant, freed from its psychological frame and defined only by its doing, is the *sine qua non* condition for developing a semiotics of action. (Greimas and Fontanille 1993, VII-VIII)

As can be seen, since one presumes that communicational and behavioral processes may not be proper, or that they may possess a different shape, one can also contribute to their meaningful manifestations through transformational processes, as is suggested by the semiotics of passions. This is the first area of my thesis and/or methodological approach to be based upon. The second is Tarasti’s existential semiotics (2015), which shall be discussed in this text, because of the “unpredictable” (and/or “predictable”) actions of such subjects, which may render disputable, as I shall attempt to explain, the movability and/or the transcendence of the “subject” notion. It is in such semiotic preconditions that I shall see such individuals’ “signs in action”, either initially regarded as “pre-existential signs” [see: (Tarasti 2000)], or later as parts of Tarasti’s (2015) “Z”, or “Zemic” model. Naturally, the matter shall be addressed in the following sections of the present text.

Otherwise, the questions which shall be answered in the following pages of this text in terms of applicative methods in semiotics, are of the following kinds: where do we see the actants, within some of the communicational disabilities of such individuals? What is the way of their semiotic visibility, to prepare them for a possible semiotic function through a way of

transformation of the semantic units mentioned? And finally, which of such performed activities repetitively by such individuals are intended by them as parts of their existence within their own “world of perception”?

It should be understood that responding to these questions shall represent a starting point for a process of semiosis, still to be resolved in this contribution. It is exactly for this procedural inexactness in terms of exemplifying autistic behavior, that semiotics of passions and existential semiotics should find a way to make determined interactional attitudes of the individuals on the spectrum meaningful, out of their presumed meaninglessness. Yet before answering such questions, which I claim to be above all semiotically relevant, one has to ask: what is Autism Spectrum Disorders Syndrome, and how can it juxtapose interpersonal communication in normally perceived contexts? These questions should have a priority in this contribution.

1.1. Interpersonal communication and the ASD phenomenon juxtaposed

If interpersonal communication is understood as comprising both kinds of human communication, verbal and nonverbal, one has to presume that developmental psychology here should have its leading part in terms of analyzing a typical or atypical kind of stereotyped human behavior in terms of individuals with ASD. This is due to the following propositions: first, we all act both intra-communicationally and inter-communicationally, (either consciously or unconsciously); moreover, such “acting” can be intentional or unintentional (a fact which links our discussion to semiotics). The first aspect is linked to our developmental stages and patterns, whereas the second is linked to our responsiveness towards others and/or significant others. Intriguingly, both aspects are taken into consideration develop in a parallel way [see: (Schwartz, Luyckx, and Vignoles 2011)] to enact complex psychological processes, such as perception, cognition, thinking processes, and/or human emotionality. Only in such circumstances can one precondition *a unification* of processes involved, as well as presuppose a semiotic functions’ existence and prevalence in terms of overall inter-human communication. If such a thesis is taken as a plausible scientific truth, then it should be evident that deficits which become visible within individuals on the spectrum may be treated from both aspects principally: one, which marks determined delaying in the acquisition of certain segments in our overall developmental process, and another one, which marks a delay or an incapacity of the interacting with the other, and/or significant other. Owing to the multi-disciplinary nature of the problem, the facts above are not the only ones that contribute to the complexity of the problem of autism. I shall try to explain such complexity in the following pages of this text. Let us now explain the problem under investigation.

Each one of us maintains or possesses the ability to express himself/herself, at least at the level of attempting or wishing to do so. Some of us can perform such processes automatically and/or seen as united, [such as, for instance, explained in terms of linguistically based semiotics in: (Saussure 1959)], whereas some others, may need assistance to do so. It is also true, however, that in the frames of normal contextual circumstances some of our interactional and/or

communicational abilities are expressed verbally, while some other ones are expressed nonverbally. Both of them represent an integral part of an interpersonal sort of communication.

Otherwise, seen generally, one should first consider that it covers conventionally established cultural categories, such as language [see, for instance: (Samovar, Larry A. Porter 2004)]. Second, it covers human interaction, as a tool directed towards creating social reality and/or context [such as explained in (Schwartz, Luyckx, and Vignoles 2011); (Bruke, J. Peter & Stets 2009)]. Third, it covers human behavior, as an interaction with the self and the other, as one of the traits related to our social responsiveness. Finally, all mentioned fields have their relational counterparts, thus ready to create correlations as one of the semiotic functions. All such facts consider generally communicational deficits in terms of the syndrome based behaviorally. But recent studies represent a counter-thesis of the phenomenon, a thesis which moves and/or transforms the problem into the medical, genetic, and biological level [see: (Roubertoux 2015)]. Naturally, as shall be understood, this paper cannot foresee all related fields, owing to the complexity of the problem. I shall instead try to perform a semiotically treatable methodology here, which shall attempt to create an applicative model based on the semanticity of transformable units. Out of the semiotic viewpoint, the following question should be advanced: what do communicational processes have in common with the human impossibility of a verbal expression and/or with an unusual kind of behavior, in the sense that can be exemplified with the special or specific social context of individuals living with autism? It should be remarked also that besides generalizing determined behavioral deficits of such individuals [such as shall later be seen according to DMSV; see: (Sicile-Kira 2014)], one should be aware of the differentiation within; almost every child on the spectrum behaves differently. This renders the problem more complex, as there cannot still be such an issue as a definite *model organism within the spectrum* (the paraphrasing and italics mine), but there can be instead an attempt *to seek a model organism in terms of other living organisms as well* [the paraphrasing and italics mine, see: (Roubertoux 2015:2)]. According to scholars, more samples should be considered, to establish a framework and/or a strategy for their modeling. In conclusion, one has to present here determined definitions of the problematics (either from the behavioral or neurodevelopmental point of view), in order that the analytical object of this contribution is more precisely established. My task here, seen from the semiotic point of view, is not to give data which would seek the consequences or causes of such situations described as human disabilities, but on the contrary, shall endeavor to comprehend such sort of living organisms, either as an interrelationship between the Self and the Other, or as parts of relational attitudes, as for instance foreseen by Tarasti's "Z" or "Zemic model" (2015). My intention, as I hope to be able to show, is overcoming Greimasian modalities by existential semiotics in terms of exemplifying autism, for the sake of designating what I shall call a semiotics of autism. The matter shall be elaborated in the further sections of this paper. Let us now see what autism actually is, and how the signs "behave" in terms of an individual affected by autism.

1.2. On some of the symptoms that make autism recognizable

The most striking difficulty in ASD is its etiology, and/or its exact provenience and causes [see: (Bogdashina 2005); (Sicile-Kira 2014), and (Mash, Eric J., Wolfe 2004)]. During the second half of the previous century, many studies were conducted that aimed at such a goal. It remains an open question whether such phenomena should only intend behaviorism, and/or determined attitudes of human interactionism (such as a failure to interact properly with the other, the inability of speech [and/or the dilemma whether an autistic child holds *internal speech behavior*, such as can be instanced in: (Bogdashina 2005)]), or it should represent a neurobiological disorder (which can be instanced in an “inadequate brain information processing”, as well as a genetic provenience of the symptoms; see: (Roubertoux 2015)]. Recent researchers regard it as a neuro-developmental problem. My task in this contribution is to seek semiotically analyzable components within the phenomena, which like I hope to be able to show cannot represent oneness and/or uniformness of treatment for all individuals involved. It is for such reasons that one should, at least semiotically and communicationally, see such individuals' behaviors manifested, to conclude the applicability of the semiotic method in the circumstances concerned. Let us now show the recognizable symptoms of an individual living with autism.

As one would presume, the initial steps of human development (either biologically or psychologically considered) do not include verbal expressivity. Such kinds of communicational abilities, which are usually performed either consciously or unconsciously, emerge as a necessity of our basic organic and physiological functions. For instance, a first baby's cry when facing external reality is evidence of this. This has to do with processes of adapting oneself to the brand-new surroundings, as well as with the process of contextualization with the newly faced social reality. Later on, other kinds of communication gradually appear, which certainly belong to our developmental patterns of behavior, as long as a child does not reach the *symbolic representational stage* [the paraphrasing and italics mine, see: (Piaget 1969)]. In conditions of an individual living with autism, such stages and/or patterns of a child's development usually lag. In difference to other similar mental disorders (and/or additional diagnoses, which may come consequently because of ASD's manifested behaviors), in terms of autism, only some of the patterns/ and or human developmental processes delay, whereas some other ones may have an accelerated development compared to normal developmental growth. Let us now number and/or identify some of the general symptoms, and/or behavioral deficits of children on the spectrum.

First, a child with autism shows atypical behavior instead of the typical behaviors, in comparison to his/her biological age. Such behavior can be identified in the following way: performing actions of the same kind, such as stereotypically playing with one beloved toy in his/her way. Such playing may become repetitive and unusual and may last longer than usual. Second, such a child doesn't maintain eye contact upon call. He/she seems closed into his/her own “shell” or context. Third, such a child may not be capable of rightful perception and/or cognition of the objects around them, in the sense of determining their actual and/or symbolic

(reference) function. Fourth, such a child may not be social, i.e. may be escaping from various kinds of socializing with peers of his/her age. Fifth, such a child can have other neurological abilities, such as physical abilities in the sense of overcoming the biological age of his/her peers, by way of compensating for his/her mental disabilities. Out of this point, it would perhaps be more exact to suggest that such a child possesses an atypical neurological system (or, such individuals possess neurodiversity) [see: (Sicile-Kira 2014)]. One of the definitions of such a condition within an individual on the spectrum has been presented in the following way:

Autistic disorder or autism is a severe developmental disorder characterized by abnormalities in social functioning, language and communication, and unusual behaviors and interests, it includes every aspect of the child's interaction with his or her world, involves many parts of the brain, and undermines the traits that make us human – our social responsiveness, ability to communicate, and feelings for other people. (Mash, Eric J., Wolfe 2004. 84)

Owing to the complexity of the problem, this should not be considered as the only definition of ASD. In terms of the Diagnostic Manual, one has to consider the fact that causes—either of behavior, neuro-biological, or any other kinds of origin—are still in the course of their examination. This is because not just one scientific and/or practically training perspective can be foreseen as contributions to a possible solution of the problematics. The complexity of the problem appears because of its multi-dimensional competence, which regards such questions as follows: which parts of the brain are affected? How can behavior treatment assist if determined parts of the brain are damaged, and/or partially dysfunctional? Which is the definite inner brain structure of the biochemical ingredients involved? The syndrome certainly belongs to determined fields, such as psychiatry, psychology, special education, medicine, biology, and genetics. Out of such reasons, as well as owing to the intensive empirical research recently performed in determined scholarly treatable fields, we shall here present some other additional definitions of the phenomenon of autism, so that one would have a comparative view in terms of recent research. As has been observed:

ASD is considered a neurodevelopmental disability, meaning that it affects the functioning of the brain. Autism typically appears during the first three years of life and is thought to be four times more prevalent in males than in females. (Sicile-Kira 2014,21)

Although the definition seems general, it is clear that the behavioral deficits of the problem emerge from neurodevelopmental inadequacy. It is also true, however, that autism may be defined in the following way:

As a result, ASD is not seen as either a single psychiatric entity or a multifactorial disorder. It now appears to be a collection of rare diseases, most of them with a genetic component. The heterogeneous

etiology of ASD may be compatible with the within-group brain variation observed in both brain imaging studies and biochemical analyses. (Roubertoux 2015, IX)

As will have been noticed, scholars recently consider autism to be a genetic problem, thus define it as a “rare disease’ (see the citation above). According to them then, an abnormality within the structure of the human brain is noticed either in terms of genetic ingredients (or: as scholars claim: “a variety of genes is associated with ASD”, my paraphrasing, p. 29), and/ or in terms of overall brain biochemistry. Such factors consequently make behavioral deficits visible as well as identifiable as symptoms possessed by an individual on the spectrum. It should be understood that the biologically and genetically relevant matters shall not be discussed in this paper, due to the complexity of the issue. Seen from the semiotic point of view, however, as well as in the context of the present contribution, we shall intend by a communicational process *the consequences of the mentioned kind of interaction*, to execute a semiotic function in the frames of affected subjects by the syndrome. Otherwise, according to DMS V, the diagnostic criteria include the following:

1. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, in areas described below, that the individual currently displays or did in the past:
 - a. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity (for example, failure to carry on a back-and-forth conversation, failure to imitate or respond in social interaction, nor having appropriate social approach behaviors),
 - b. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction (for example, abnormalities in eye contact and body language, lack of facial expressions),
 - c. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships (for example, difficulties in adjusting behavior to suit various contexts, difficulties in sharing imaginative play, or making friends).
2. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities as demonstrated by two of the following behavior, that the individual currently displays, or did in the past:
 - a. Stereotyped or repetitive motor behaviors, use of objects, or speech (for example, echolalia).
 - b. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence or routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal speech (for example, difficulties in moments of transitions, insistence on same food).
 - c. Highly restricted, fixated interests that abnormal in intensity or focus (for example, strong preoccupation with or attachment to unusual interests or objects).
 - d. Hyper- or hyposensitivity in sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (for example, does not appear to feel extreme cold or heat, excessive touching or smelling of objects. (Sicile-Kira 2014: 30-31)

As can be seen, the most important behavioral issues have been emphasized. It is important to say that most of the problems manifested within individuals on the spectrum emerge from sensory-integration deficits [see: (Bogdashina 2005); (Emmons, P.G.; Andersen 2005)]. Owing to the facts that shall be described below, one has to describe such matters when speaking of ASD.

Otherwise, we all use our senses to render the form and the meaning of everything surrounding us. A process of an overall integration (and/or engagement) of all senses is what occurs. Besides, we use the word *sensational* in cases of facing an object or a subject that has for a certain period and/or moment occupied all our senses. In other contexts, for example, such a situation can be instanced within witnessing a work of art (which has a component of uniqueness that makes it different from the rest of external reality). What does sensory integration represent? As has been observed:

Sensory integration is a child's ability to feel, understand, and organize sensory information from his body and his environment. In essence, sensory integration sorts, orders, and eventually puts all individual sensory inputs together into a whole-brain function. When the functions are whole and balanced, body movements are highly adaptive, learning is easy, and [good] behavior is a natural outcome. Sensory integration is also reflected in a child's development, learning, and feeling about himself. The connection between sensory integration and social and emotional development should not be underestimated! How a child integrates through the sensory systems provides a basis for their reality. *Not your reality, not my reality, his reality – and his unique perspective on the world around him* (Emmons, P.G.; Andersen 2005,14)

It may be presumed that, in terms of individuals with autism, they all seem unbalanced, and/or disproportional. For instance, instead of the actions of doing, such as performing various kinds of simple commands, the child may possess auditory or visual sensory needs. If all such sensory inputs, and or stimulations from the external reality come at once—or are contemporarily witnessed by the child (in the fashion, naturally, that the child might perceive them, due to his/her brain dysfunctionality)—then such an individual may experience sensory overload. Such overloading stimuli (which for neuro-typical individuals usually represent socially accustomed and/or contextualized conditions) seem to an autistic child as if coming from everywhere, to render him or her anxious, and/or eager to be released from them, either through tantrums (which usually are based on a consciousness level), or meltdowns (which may unexpectedly or unconsciously face the child).

The uniting and/or compounding of all such activities in the frames of an autistic child (which, as is obvious, are seen as stereotyped and/or repetitive activities), is what such an individual may lack. An integration process in the communicative sense of the word means equivocal information processing. From the communication and semiotic point of view, such a process which we name communicational (and/or in other circumstances informational) [see: (Eco 1968);(Shannon and Weaver 1948)], should contain equivocalness, uniqueness, and proportionality of the transmitted material, ready to be processed throughout all its constituent components. Thus, a child on the spectrum performs his/her communication abilities/disabilities specially; i.e. through the sensory integration problems, he/she possesses, as we have already stated, due to inadequate processing of information by the brain. In conclusion, therefore, one should

presume the necessity of mediation, so that an accomplished communication and semiotic process may be performed.

2. Attempting to establish a semiotic function in individuals with ASD

My understanding of a “semiotic function” here shall have a twofold nature: one which shall pertain to the linguistically and psychologically based semiotics, [in the sense that can be witnessed in Saussure, (1959), Piaget (1969), and (Eco 1976, 1975)], and another one, which pertains to interpretative semiotics and semantics [such as can be witnessed in Greimas and Fontanille (1993), and Tarasti (2015)]. Understandably, the second one is a complex “semiotic function”.

In terms of my explication of what sort of “function” I seek, for methodological reasons, I shall quote Eco (1976), also because I consider that his definition comprises what I aim to explore in terms of autism:

A sign-function is realized when two *functives* (expression and content) enter into a mutual correlation; the same functive can also enter into another correlation, thus becoming a different functive and therefore giving rise to a new sign-function. Thus signs are the provisional result of coding rules which establish *transitory* correlations of elements, each of these being entitled to enter – under given coded circumstances – into another correlation and thus form a new sign. (Eco 1976,49)

As can be seen, and as is emphasized by Eco, there are two issues to keep in mind here: one, that “expression” and “content” get *united*, in the metaphorical sense of the word, and second, that each and all of these elements (tiniest elements named “signs” here) find themselves in a state of correlation with each other. Before our further explication of the semiotic functions needed for the *semiotics of autism*, which we consider should be performed with practical examples, let us now try and elaborate the problem of ASD from the standpoint of the semiotics of passions.

2.1. Exemplifying autistic children’s passions through techniques of acquisition

In this section of the paper, I shall attempt to apply the semiotics of passions as a methodology, to be able to present some of the techniques of acquisition of social reality by such subjects, as well as to explicate their semiotic comprehension.

A mediator’s, a parent’s, and/or a therapist’s role, in the sense of a *knowable subject*, is compulsory in the case of demonstrating a semiotic function in terms of individuals on the spectrum. Here, I shall attempt to show two different techniques of various contexts’ acquisition, which shall hopefully describe a trajectory of semantic units, expressed as passions. I shall in conclusion consider two different techniques of acquisition here: PECS (Picture Exchange Communicative Systems) and ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis), [such as suggested in: (Bogdashina 2005)]. It is worth observing here that both techniques and/or methodologies to approach an individual affected by autism rely on the behavioral acquisition of determined contextual circumstances. Except for psychological and organic reasons (some of which have

already been explained in this text), the techniques hold their semiotic relevance as well. If successfully applied, one can then differentiate between the intentional and unintentional communicative attempts of such children. We shall give an example. Allowing the child to guess the right objects or subjects around him/her, after visualizing them, then categorizing them, to produce a verbal expression, can argue a basic semiotic function. All such processes (in other neuro-typical social contexts) are intended as automatically processed but should, in terms of individuals possessing neurodiversity, be seen as separate processes (or better: such that should be performed one after another). The interruption, stop, or the time needed for an autistic child's reaction in the communicative sense of the word represents a meta-communicational process. Let us attempt now to elucidate some practical matters.

Instead of a self-initiated way of communication, a child on the spectrum may communicate unintentionally, or even unexpectedly. All sorts of nonverbal communication are included there: they may be certain unconscious movements (based on neurological impulses), or conscious ones, such as body language, eye contact, internalized speech attempts, and behavior, etc. The "Picture Exchange Communicative System," as a matter of fact, represents an attempt to make such children's communication intentional and meaningful although, as may be supposed, their actions are already *meaningful* for their perception, and/or through their attitude. The aim of the technique mentioned, however, including the assistance of the specialist, the "active subject" in the semiotic sense of the word, [see: (Greimas and Fontanille 1993)], is to offer the child both-sided communication abilities, and a complete process of contextualization.

A process of a gradual acquisition through pictures (with a special emphasis on the nonverbal child), in a structured way, is what occurs with the usage of this technique. Practically speaking: not only does a child intentionally choose a rightful picture, but he/she can also be shown to undertake actions of doing which, in later acquisition stages, aim to become functional. In the semiotic sense of the word, the child attempts to unite form and content, which represents the giving and/or adding of meaning to objects around him/her. In addition to the fact that the signs visualized by the child here gain motivation, in later stages, instead of the process of perception only, such signs may also gain their interpretative and cognitive status. So that such a status be achieved, the therapist, the knowable subject, uses the other method mentioned here: the ABA therapy. As has been observed:

To teach language in autistic children Lovaas (1966) employed a "behavior modification" procedure, based on reinforcement learning theory and shaping techniques to develop a "program for the establishment of speech in psychotic children" (Lovaas 1966). The methods of this program include discretionary training, incidental teaching, the natural language paradigm, and time delay. Applied Behavior Analysis or ABA is very well documented (both favorably and unfavorably) (Bogdashina 2005:248).

The process of changing and/or transforming behavior would mean reducing sensory deficits, instructing the child to get contextually accustomed with the therapist, and teaching relational

attitudes, as three early steps towards gaining full communicative status. A process of signification, as should be evident, relies on these processes of acquisition.

By conditioning the child through the ABA technique, in an attempt to gain modification(s) in his/her behavior, the child acquires new contexts. We shall mention here some of the improvements as a consequence of “knowable subject’s” intervention, which in turn, themselves represent a part of the signification process, in the semiotic sense of the word. Not only can eye contact with the child be established, but also, a relationship with the object(s) that the child wishes to use in terms of his/her specific context. More importantly, however, in later stages of development, by the process of conditioning the child, many “actions”, habits, etc., of the child may become substitutable or replaceable by other actions, which would belong to a neuro-typical sort of human behavior.

From the semiotic viewpoint, the term “transformable” (and/or “transformational”) is of crucial importance to us. The rewarding, reinforcing, and/or punishing process by the therapist, for instance, is of high importance for achieving results. If an object is offered (or various kinds of functions) to an individual affected by autism, such an action then should be conditioned with an attempt to recognize the function of the object on the part of the child, and/or an attempt to name it verbally. If the results of this sort of action are positive, the child should be rewarded. Such a step-by-step behavioral modification can be achieved after difficult attempts which aim towards an improvement of the given situation. Each accomplished step (in terms of overall contextual acquisition) represents a segment of a signification process. The child acquires contexts: that is, gives and/or learns meaning(s) for each issue that he/she learns. Recognizing an object by the child represents a step forward in terms of the acquisition, therefore, it contributes to the progress in terms of behavioral patterns, as far as psychological development is concerned, especially concerning establishing a relationship with the therapist. The following steps of such behavioral acquisition of context (by the side of the therapist) may move the process towards an encoding and decoding process, which would otherwise gradually reveal the metaphoric meaning of the objects or subjects within the frames of the determined surroundings of the child. This would finally entail the acquisition of the cognitive capabilities of the child, besides the perceptive ones (that a child might otherwise possess). The task of the therapist, therefore, is to offer the child different types of contexts, to enable him/her to develop receptive as well as representative skills. Both skills include at least a basic semiotic function.

To sum up: relationship formation, as one of the initial issues of learning on the part of the child, creates what we call a semiotic function (even if considered in Eco’s sense, as I have emphasized above), not only in the frames of perception and cognition processes acquired but also in the frames of including the meaning and/or meanings to determined external objects and phenomena. The repetitiveness (and/or the process of repetition during “teaching” the child) enables the child to develop short term memory (STM), as opposed to long-term memory (LTM) [see:(Goldman 1986)], thus enhancing the child towards recognition of meaning (and/or

semantic units) in the semiotic sense of the word. Each repetition (by the therapist) is an attempt to acquire reality in its structured and conventional shape (either behaviorally, taxonomically, or emotionally), thus uniting all mentioned processes as one. This sort of conceptualization of the “memory” notion enables a process of semiosis; which understandably, also in Peirce’s terms, is then, uninterrupted, and/or as he says, unlimited [see: (Peirce 1960; Eco 1962)]. It should be clear that the “memory” notion may have a different semiotic comprehension in various discussable contexts, therefore in the case of semiotics of autism, it shall keep the importance as defined in developmental psychology [as, for instance, defined in: (Piaget,1969)].

2.1.1. The transformational process itself: on some passional configurations

Because some semiotic processes lie on epistemological grounds as well, it is necessary to emphasize that, within frames of the individuals on the spectrum, one can exemplify a process of reaching a peak of tensitivity. Since a narrative process has to be established, such situations can be witnessed in a parent’s experiencing some of the repetitive actions performed by individuals affected by autism.

The proprioceptive deficits for instance, in children with ASD, which in turn are repetitive, suggest that their manifestations contain a narration component. In what way, though? On the one hand, all such activities performed by the children on the spectrum are meaningful from their perspective (thus, containing their well-planned strategy, the goal, etc.), but on the other hand, are meaningless for the rest of the world, (and/or for the receivers of their messages), since they look to us *meaningless*; or contain in themselves a lack of meaning. Due to the circumstances mentioned, the following “conflictual situation” would be created: one which pertains to the child’s “physiologically acquired and accustomed context”, and another, one which pertains to the rest of socially perceived contexts. This conclusion leads us to the known semiotic dichotomy between seeming and reality (above all, in the Greimnasian sense of the word). In appearance, an autistic child seems to lack meaning in terms of his/her suitability to determine contexts that a given environmental condition might pose as a challenge to him/her. On the other hand, however, or in reality, an autistic child exhibits various communicational attempts, as we have already claimed, through the sensory integration deficits, which seem meaningful and/or socially conventional within frames of his/her “world.” It is then logical to conclude that, due to such a lack of meaning, specifically speaking between the child and his/her significant other, tensitivity (according to Greimas and Fontanille), is what occurs.

To regain a communication process in the given circumstances, one has to enact a modality in action, in the sense of Greimas and Fontanille (1993), cited earlier. We consider that here, the word “regained” is appropriately used, because of the symptoms and/or the specific way of the “signs’ action” within the behavior of an autistic child. Thus instead of the transition from the sensory-motor stage of the child’s developmental patterns to the symbolic representational stage [at least, in the sense that we have already mentioned, according to Piaget (1969)], the child

simply delays or remains at the mentioned stage, or at least continues to possess sensory-integration deficits. When a significant other and/or a parent (thus, becoming an impassioned subject) face the condition mentioned or becomes aware of his/her child possessing a delayed developmental growth, he/she becomes desperate. The passion of despair, in conclusion, is what one observes here.

As we have claimed above, using a modality in action, and/or enacting an active subject here, means enabling a transformational process. The process itself aims at substituting and/or replacing determined activities offered to the child, which would foresee a possible accomplishment of a communicational process. Since, as we have stated at the beginning of this text, some of the signs remain unprocessed, the active/knowable subject replaces the child's performed actions with other ones, or specifically speaking: by such actions which are presumably understandable to the child. The terms "replacement" and "substitution" here are of crucial importance. Thus, replacing movements, actions, with new ones, is a process that is usually performed by the mediation of the active subject (be it a therapist, or a parent). Semiotically speaking, the process is a starting point for the transformation procedure, if one pertains to the component of inter-communicating between the child and the other, thus contributing to the syntagmatic axis, in the Greimasian sense of the word. The replaced activity of the child (such as: instead of mouthing an object as either a tactile or a degustation sensory need of the child, he/she is offered, he/she starts at acting on doing properly or functionally), gradually becomes displaced either with a functional usage of such an object or by an expressivity of the child's passions (as an expression of the impossibility of performing determined assignments given by the therapist). Such an axis of "seeming", as we have observed here, shall represent a child's state of affairs which, due to semiotic processes and/or behavior interventions (in the context of the present text), is being transformed into an axis of "reality", which understandably for us represents the state of feelings. If the impaired activities of the child are not rightfully replaced by functionality, using an object and/or referring to a subject, then he/she shall be subdued to passions. Taxonomically speaking, such passions as anger, joy, a wish, and/or a complaint, cannot be permanent, in the sense that one can identify them in other related or discussable contexts. We should bear in mind that the children discussed still are in the course of the physiological development of their brains. It is for such reasons that the child's passions may be (and, theoretically, they should be) changeable throughout various developmental stages during early childhood. Such sort of a syntagmatic axis (in the sense that I have attempted to show), which is competent for the substitution of taxonomic notions understood as semantic units and/or related passionate experiences, represents not only one of the semiotic functions applied, but also a next developmental stage, in the frames of the overall communicative abilities/ disabilities of an individual labeled on the spectrum.

3. Concluding remarks: a process of semiosis

In the present text, as may be noticed, I have attempted to elaborate on two different sorts of

conceptualizing and/or semiotically comprehending the consequences of an autistic child's behavior. The first one relies on the communicational and psychological conditions of an autistic child, whereas the second one relies on the existential comprehension of an autistic child's presence in a conventionally social world.

The various sorts of behavior manifested in the previously described circumstances represent the action of signs and/or "the sign's way" [see: (Deely 2009)] in individuals diagnosed with ASD. The phenomenon that I have attempted to demonstrate, taken from either its "physiological" or semiotic point of view, implies a meta-communicational process in terms of individuals with autism, rather than an accomplished one. It is for the reasons already elaborated that I maintain that semiotics of autism would be competent for a "semiotic" solution of the problematics. What should it contain, though?

Existential semiotics, for instance, focuses on the "subject" and its Being. Regarding the "being" of an autistic child, questions should be advanced: is an autistic child aware of the surroundings, or as rightfully observed in Tarasti (2015), of his/her "environment"? How much is this sort of environment suitable to his/her contextual requests? Is his/her "being" ("subject") representing himself/herself, or their being's transcendence, in an attempt to relate to others?

In existential semiotics, the communication process is enacted and/or enhanced by the subject. This means not only in the shape of transmitting the message on the other side of the communication channel, [in the sense as shown in "classical semiotics", see: (Tarasti 2000, 2015)], but rather, making it moveable. Such sort of movability by the part of the "being" of an autistic child entails his/her action. The mentioned action, in conclusion, becomes complete, and/or obtains a full communicative status (or, phrased differently: the communication process is accomplished), if the "Being" is transcendental. In the sense of autistic children, however, the term "transcendence" shall intend relatedness of such children with others and/or significant others. What do I mean by this? Here I refer exactly to what Tarasti means by the term "Dasein" ("being there"), meaning: "being" does not mean only "my existence", but also "the others' existence" [see:(Tarasti 2015:5), the paraphrasing is mine]. In conclusion, therefore, the autistic child's interaction with the other here is itself intended: either in its conventional shape, or in the sense of the child's atypical behavior (thus, metaphorically speaking, obtaining a semiosis of an unspoken language). By an "unspoken language" in this context, I imply all possible communication attempts, which, with the process of intermediation, aim at becoming functional.

Semiotics of autism should therefore scientifically elaborate the different semiotic "roles" played either by the child or his/her significant others: either in the cognitive sense of the word or in the pure semiotic sense of the word. *The transcendence* of the "being" of such a subject, suggests a change, and/or a movability from one state to another, as it also includes the "negation", which in our case means the refusing of the child to perform various tasks assigned by the therapist, therefore, including the "Zemic" model, as one of the possibilities of the semiotic representational model. Existential semiotics not only covers the two final states of

the autistic child in the semiotic sense of the word, but also his/her “Being” in differently perceived levels: therefore, in different meta-modalities, which entail all sorts of requests and complaints by an autistic child, be they matters of their existence, or various sorts of understandability of their actions, understood as signs in permanent movement.

Endnotes:

1. This paper has been inspired by my own child’s autistic behavior.
2. The issue shall be explicated later in the text.

References:

- Bogdashina, Olga. *Communication Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Do We Speak the Same Language?* London: Jessica Kingsley, 2005.
- Bruke, J. Peter & Stets, E. Jan. *Identity Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Deely, John. *Purely Objective Reality*. Berlin, New York.: Mouton, de Gruyter, 2009.
- Eco, Umberto. *Opera Aperta (Forma e Indeterminazione Delle Poetibe Contemporanee)*. Milano: Bompiani, 1962.
- Eco, Umberto. *La struttura asent (la ricerca semiotica e il metodo strutturale)*. Milano: Bompiani, 1968.
- Eco, Umberto. *Trattato di semiotica generale*. Milano: Bompiani, 1975.
- Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Edited by Thomas A. Sebeok. Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press, 1976.
- Emmons, P.G.; Andersen, L.M. *Understanding Sensory Dysfunction Learning, Development of Sensory Dysfunction in Autism Spectrum Disorders, ADHD, Learning Disabilities and Bipolar Disorder*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2005.
- Goldman, I. Alvin. *Epistemology and Cognition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Greimas, A.J., and Jacques Fontanille. *The Semiotics of Passions: From State of Affairs to States of Feelings*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Griffin, Em. *A First Look at Communication Theory*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003.
- Hoxha, Bujar. “Normality vs. Abnormality in a child's Behavior (A Semiotic Perspective).” *European Scientific Journal* 10.14 (2014): 1857–7881.
- Hoxha, Bujar. “On Some Passions of Autistic Children: Compensating Functional Language with Technology (a Semiotic Perspective).” In *Book of Proceedings of the International Conference of Language, Literature, and Culture*, edited by Kolegji AAB. Kolegji AAB, 2016. 120–31.
- Mash, Eric J., Wolfe, David A. *Abnormal Child Psychology*. 3rd-d Editio ed. Belmont, CA, Australia: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (Volume I: “Principles of Philosophy” and Volume II: ‘Elements of Logic’)*. Edited by Charles & Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. London: The Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1960.
- Piaget, Jean. *The Psychology of The Child*. Kindle Edi. New York: Basic Books, 1969.
- Roubertoux, L. Pierre. *Organism Models of Autism Spectrum Disorders*. New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2015.
- Samovar, Larry A. Porter, Richard E. *Communication Between Cultures*. Edited by Annie Mitchell. 5th-th Edition ed. Belmont, CA, Australia: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004.

- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Albert Belly, Charles; Sechehave. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.
- Schwartz, Seth J., Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles. *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*. New York: Springer, 2011.
- Shannon, Claude Elwood, and Warren Weaver. *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1948.
- Sicile-Kira, Chantal. *Autism Spectrum Disorder (The Complete Guide to Understanding Autism)*. New York: Penguin Group, 2014.
- Tarasti, Eero. *Existential Semiotics*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Tarasti, Eero. *Sein Und Schein (Explorations in Existential Semiotics)*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, Mouton Editions, 2015.