

# The Roots of Textual Agency

## The Semiotics of Motivation and Demotivation

Massimo Leone

(Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia | University of Shanghai, China)

**Abstract** This introductory essay deals with the origins of textual agency and inertia. Texts predominantly work as indexes, icons, or symbols, according to Peirce's typology of signs. These three types usually exert agency to an increasing extent. The essay seeks to determine the origin of this gradient in the dialectics between motivation and arbitrariness. The more a text is received as motivated, the likelier it is that it might exert a strong agency. This hypothesis leads also to an articulation of the rhetorics of motivation or de-motivation through which communities of interpreters can promote or demote the agentive force of a certain text.

**Summary** 1 Sources of Textual Energy. – 2 The Energy of Motivation. – 3 Objective, Subjective, and Inter-subjective Motivation. – 4 Indexical Motivation. – 5 Iconic Motivation. – 6 Promoting Motivation. – 7 Demoting Motivation. – 8 Motivational Rhetorics. – 9 Perspectives on the Agency and Inertia of texts.

**Keywords** Text. Agency. Inertia. Motivation. Arbitrariness. Semiotics.

### 1 Sources of Textual Energy

No serious reflection on the inertia or on the agency of a text can start without a fundamental question: Whence does the text take its energy? Or, in the case of an inert text, how come that the source of its energy is dry? Texts can be more or less active in many ways. In all circumstances, however, their mere existence as cultural artifacts in a society as well as their interaction with receivers triggers some consequences, be they cognitive, emotional, or pragmatic. Along the dimension of their increasing or decreasing agency and inertia, texts can be ranged along a spectrum. Its two extreme poles will likely remain empty. On the one hand, a totally inert text is impossible. If a text exists, it means that it has been fabricated within the language of a community. Although the community might not exist anymore, and although the language might be unknown to all, the text continues, nevertheless, to exert a mysterious agency. In seventeenth-century Europe, for instance, nobody was able to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs. Yet, scholars like Athanasius Kircher would assume that they were – their indecipherability notwithstanding – texts, which, as

a result, would keep arousing the curiosity of those who were eager to unveil their content. On the other hand, a completely active text is impossible too. Its agency, indeed, always depends on the fact that someone at least recognizes it as a text, and deals with it as such, that is, as a source of meaning enshrined in it at another time or in another space. The first British explorers of Australia, for instance, did not realize that the red desert was a text in which natives would mentally and visually inscribe their foundational narratives. The former saw no trace of writing in the rocks where the latter, instead, would project their knowledge.

Between these two poles, however, myriads of texts are more or less active in the world depending on a multiplicity of factors, which a semiotic and pragmatic approach can dissect and articulate. Certainly, the relative agency or inertia of a text depends on the interaction between a text and its context, that is, between the internal linguistic and/or semiotic structure of a text and the way in which it somehow resonates with the circumstances of its reading. When the western contemporary visitors of the Bologna Museum of Paintings admire Raphael's *Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia* (1514 ca), for instance, they might be impressed by the quality and realism of the representation, yet their reception will be different from that of the early modern Japanese who were first shown religious paintings by Jesuit missionaries. In the former case, Renaissance perspectival depiction has already become part of a visual and cognitive habit, whereas in the latter, it would trigger an entirely new chain of cognitive, emotional, and even pragmatic reactions. According to coeval Jesuit accounts, exposing early modern Japanese natives to images of the Holy Virgin protruding out of the canvas thanks to the 'visual trick' of Renaissance perspective could even facilitate their religious conversion!

This example shows that, besides circumstantial variables determining the agentive potential of a text, its level of inertia and/or activity might also result from textual characteristics that are, in a certain sense, cross-cultural. The first task of a philosophical reflection on this subject, then, should be that of investigating the deep nature of these characteristics. The question here is to single out textual features that, when present, dramatically increase the level of agency of a text and that, conversely, conspicuously decrease it when they are absent. A corollary of such question consists in finding out whether these features are cross-cultural, and to what extent. It is likely to be excluded, for instance, that 'superficial' traits of texts might be determinant in giving rise to this 'deep agency'. The particular genre, format, or style in which a text transmits its meaning, indeed, is subject to enormous variability through time and across space, so that it is quite improbable that these circumstantial features might be the ultimate origin of a text's agency. On the contrary, it is more plausible to believe that, when these genres, formats, or styles are agentive, and are so to the point of systematically cause a response in their readers, that

might be the case for underneath these textual features lies a common denominator, which then expresses itself in various textual forms.

## 2 The Energy of Motivation

A 'natural suspect' in such an enquiry is, therefore, one of the dialectic elements singled out by Ferdinand De Saussure in his structural analysis of language, that is, the concept of motivation. In the lessons converged in the *Course of General Linguistics*, the Swiss linguist would insist on distinguishing between signs and languages that are motivated and signs and languages that are arbitrary. The distinction, indeed, was paramount in order to stress the essentially unmotivated nature of the verbal language, in which, according to De Saussure, meaning does not arise from a positive relation linking signifiers and signified but from a negative relation stemming from the system of differences that composes a language's structure. Indeed, according to this perspective, there are some elements of motivation in verbal languages, yet they are secondary or derivative. A typical example are onomatopoeias, that is, expressions whose phonetic forms seek to mimic the sounds which they refer to; in this case too, however, linguistic evidence indicates that different languages mimic the same sound, such as the cockcrow, for instance, in disparate ways. The opposition between motivation and arbitrariness has played a central role not only in underlying the essentially conventional nature of verbal language but also in problematizing the difference between this and other systems of signs. The more or less arbitrary nature of 'visual languages', for instance, is a traditional matter of debate in semiotics. Also, the whole theorization on the so-called "semi-symbolical systems" revolves around the possibility of re-motivating arbitrary languages in order to increase their agency. These and other discussions, however, as well as the foundational opposition and dialectics posited by Ferdinand De Saussure, remain superficial if an underlying question is not dealt with, the question regarding the nature itself of motivation. What is the definition of motivation, indeed, and what that of arbitrariness? And why should a motivated text be able to exert more agency than an arbitrary one?

## 3 Objective, Subjective, and Inter-subjective Motivation

When a sign, a text, or even a whole language is considered by an individual or by an entire community as motivated, that means that some or even all the elements that compose it are seen as caused by the source of meaning that expresses itself in them. A relation of causality is, therefore, assumed as linking the sign and what it signifies. So as to understand the

extent to which a community holds a cultural artifact as motivated, a sort of commutation test is in order. The analyst should wonder whether the cultural artifact in question admits alternatives and to what extent. In a verbal language, for instance, words are seen as linked to the meaning that they manifest and convey. The word 'cat' in English, for example, is considered as linked to the semantic evocation of a particular animal species and its common sociocultural imaginary. Speakers of English know that, whenever they want to refer to this content, they must use the expression 'cat', and not another one. From this point of view, the word admits no alternatives. Yet, present-day English speakers also realize that, were they speaking a different language, such as Spanish, for instance, the word that they use to refer to the animal species should change accordingly. The relation between the word and its content in the two languages, then, is conventional and binding but not motivated, meaning that there is nothing in the features of the cat and its usual representations that determine the composition of the word 'cat' in English or 'gato' in Spanish.

Verbal language, however, is not entirely void of motivation. The syntagmatic construction of a sentence in a language, for example, somehow mimics the narrative logic that is predominant among speakers of that language. In most Indo-European idioms, thus, the syntagmatic position of the subject, the verb, and the object can be interpreted as mirroring the logical position that these three elements hold in the agentive imaginary of their speakers.

It would be reductive, however, to retain that language can be only objectively motivated, as in the case of the production of onomatopoeias, for instance. Language can also be subjectively motivated, as occurs in the semantic connotations of proper names. There is no particular causal relation between a person with her or his physical and psychical characteristics and the proper name that this person goes by. As it is said in English and in other languages, indeed, this proper name is a 'given' one. Parents might have chosen an entirely different name. Once that the name is given, nevertheless, and, even more, after that it has been ratified not as much by bureaucracy as by family usage, a subjective link of motivation starts to take shape between the person and the name. We become our name and our name becomes our persona, although this causal relation is, of course, not an objective but a subjective one.

With regards to religious meaning, then, the most interesting case is neither that of objective nor that of subjective but, instead, that of intersubjective motivation. There are circumstances in which entire communities decide to attribute a motivational aura to the relation between some signifiers and their signified. That partially happens also as regards the relation of speakers with their 'mother tongue'. This expression is particularly suggestive and appropriate so as to indicate that, for the speakers of a language, a particular feeling of belonging and assurance arises

from the fact of speaking that language and not another one. In antiquity, that even led to dismiss as 'barbaric verses' the language of the other and, in particular, that of the enemy. Such inter-subjective attribution of motivation to one's language – or, anyway, to one language – also returns in modern times in cases of linguistic nationalism, chauvinism, or ethnic conflict. One's language is, then, reputed as more sophisticated than all others, or more apt at expressing certain ideas or feelings. For Martin Heidegger, German was neither conventionally nor arbitrarily but, rather, essentially more a philosophical language than all the remnant European languages – with the exception of ancient Greek, of course. It is evident that, in such trends, a religious dimension starts to emerge. This dimension, however, emerges not because the attribution of motivation to a language is intrinsically spiritual but, on the opposite, because many religious cultures usually hold spiritual meaning as motivated, so that, when the same motivation is attributed to a non-religious sphere, such sphere tends to acquire a religious motivation.

#### **4 Indexical Motivation**

Before considering the construction of religious language as a particular instance of inter-subjective attribution of motivation, it is necessary to specify that motivation between signifier and signified, as Saussure would say, or between expression and content, as Luis T. Hjelmslev would say, can take different forms. Two of them are essential and have been singled out and theorized by Charles S. Peirce. First, a sign can be considered as motivated because there is something, in the reality that the sign contributes to express and convey – that is, to represent and make present – that physically causes the totality of the sign or, at least, its most relevant features. Someone's signature, for instance, is partially non-motivated, meaning that its shape, color, and texture depend on such variable contextual features as the predominant material techniques of writing – ink pen, fountain pen, paper, parchment, etc. – and the particular penmanship the signing individual has acquired in its writing context and training – signatures of the same historical epoch or society tend to resemble. A signature, though, also works as a motivated sign when it is considered not in its gestalt, that is, as an arbitrary symbol, but in its capacity of conveying the idea of the physical presence of the signing individual at the time and place in which the signature itself was produced. In this case, the physical and, therefore, causal and spatio-temporal relation between the signifier and the signified brings about its indexicality and, as a consequence, founds its aura of motivation.

In indexicality, the signified itself causes the motivation of its signifier by producing it. That does not mean, however, that no dimension of

conventionality and, therefore, arbitrariness is involved in the creation of such motivational link. Although the imagination of a relation of causality is one of the most common features in the anthropology of the human perception of reality, it is, nevertheless, a narrative – or, better said, ‘meta-narrative’ – framework that is historically and culturally developed, to the point that, in certain circumstances, it might be ignored or even replaced. In simpler words, cultures collectively ‘learn’ how to establish and represent links of causality and, therefore, indexicality, underpinning the meaning of certain signs, texts, or entire languages. When these links are singled out and become part of the ‘narrative common sense’ of a community, however, they are seen as stemming from the signified themselves.

## **5 Iconic Motivation**

There is a second dynamic of semiotic motivation. If smoke can signify fire, that is so for the latter has produced the former. A photograph of the same fire, instead, also signifies it in a way that entails the creation of a motivational link, yet this motivation does not stem from the signified but from the signifier. A photograph of fire is not caused by such fire in the same way as smoke is caused by it. In the former case, indeed, a relation of causality and, therefore, spatio-temporal contiguity and indexicality holds between the fire and the photograph, yet such relation is not immediate but mediated by a device whose functioning consists exactly in translating a certain configuration of reality in the production of a sign that represents it. This representation, however, cannot be read as a direct index of what it represents – although it ultimately causally derives from it – but as mediated signification of such causality, that is, as icon. An icon, indeed, is a sign in which the motivational link between a signified and a signifier is not manifested immediately but through the mediation of a device. In an index, we read the causal impulse of the signified that has produced it; in an icon, we read the translational impulse of the signifier that has rendered an underpinning causal impulse. The more this translational impulse is predominant, the less the underpinning causal impulse can be detected in signification. When admiring the photograph of a fire, we still think that an actual fire, albeit indirectly, has motivated the creation of the photograph. When admiring the painting of a fire, instead, we concentrate more on the translational impulse of the iconic mediation and less on the subjacent causal impulse. The painter might have seen a real fire, and has actually probably seen it, but this is not considered as pertinent in the semantic reception of the sign.

It is common sense, among students of semiotics, to believe that icons signify their signified because of the resemblance that they manifest in relation to it. The concept of resemblance, however, is of difficult –if not

impossible – definition. The painting of a fire resembles to it in a different way as a photograph or an ekphrastic literary depiction of it, yet semioticians would agree that they are all icons of the fire. What matters in these signs, then, that is, what all these signs share, is the fact that, in all of them, a relation of causality, spatio-temporal contiguity, and, therefore, indexicality is filtered through the translation of a specific device and its particular usage.

## **6 Promoting Motivation**

These subtle disquisitions on the apperception of motivation are necessary in order to realize that, in the different inter-subjective constructions of motivation, what semiotically happens is that the indexical component of a sign is extolled to the detriment of all the other semiotic dimensions. That is fundamental in the creation of a motivational aura in religious discourse. An example will clarify it. A Renaissance painting representing the face of Jesus is not an index of it. The painter has certainly not seen Jesus. He might have seen previous depictions of his face that, in turn, were created with reference to anterior visual representations that, ultimately, might indeed be somehow related to the visual and perceptual experience of those who actually saw Jesus and depicted his countenance through images, words, or other signs. The indexical origin of the Renaissance painting is so remote, though, that its iconicity is certainly preponderant: when admiring the painting, we conventionally see Jesus, but what we see is not as much the face that produced it as the hand that depicted it. Actually, the translational impulse might be so preponderant in the creation and appearance of the painting, that we end up receiving it not as much as an icon as a symbolical and, therefore, arbitrary and conventional representation of Jesus's face. Present-day observers of Antonello da Messina's *Salvator Mundi* (1465-75) recognize the face of Jesus in it, yet they certainly exclude that this representation might have been brought about by causal contiguity with the actual face of Jesus, and even surmise that it is, indeed, out of a convention that we tend to identify as Jesus someone who is represented with long hair, longish beard, an oblong face, etc. Would we recognize the same face as that of Jesus if it had short hair, no beard, and a big smile on it?

Therefore, an inter-subjective attribution of motivation consists in downplaying the translational impulse underpinning the existence and phenomenology of a sign and in extolling its indexicality, no matter how remote it might be. Beholders of Antonello da Messina's painting might collectively tend to downplay the translational influence of the device, the technique, the format, the style, etc. and to emphasize, on the contrary, the indexical source of the painting, up to the point of considering it not any more as a

conventional representation of the face of Jesus but as an iconic depiction of it in which the indexical dimension is, nevertheless, held as predominant and determinant, as though it was a sort of photograph. The historical and cultural reasons for which this motivational switch from symbol to icon occurs may vary, yet the semiotic dynamic of the switch remains the same: the translational impulse is downplayed, the indexical source highlighted.

Before we return on the nature of these reasons, it must first be underlined that such motivating process can be further accentuated so that not only a predominantly symbolical representation is turned into a predominantly iconic depiction, but this too is transformed – in the collective perception of a community – into a predominantly indexical sign. That is the case, for instance, of all paintings that are treated as relics. Reliquary paintings are attributed a motivational aura that stems from entirely excluding any translational impulse: not only there is no conventionality in the icon, but the icon itself has been produced as an *acheiropoieta* image, as a signifier produced by its signified. The painter of a reliquary icon of the face of Jesus is Jesus himself.

## 7 Demoting Motivation

This semiotic modeling of the processes of motivational attribution is heuristic also because it can be reversed: on the one hand, a painting of a face can be treated like a photograph of it, and, further on, a photograph of it can be treated as a mortuary mask; on the other hand, subtracting instead of adding motivation, a mortuary mask can be treated as a photograph or, further on along the subtraction of indexicality, as a painting or even as a symbolical representation. On the one hand, one could argue that the mortuary mask of Napoleon is a motivated and, therefore, truthful sign of his face; on the other hand, detractors could argue that this effigy is due to a technique, to iconic conventions, to a symbolical imaginary, up to nuancing or even effacing all aura of motivation surrounding the mask.

This model, moreover, is conducive to a better understanding of the reasons and the effects of the processes that it semiotically diagrammatizes. There are recurrent causes and effects, indeed, related to either the increase or the decrease in the attribution of a motivational aura to a sign or series of signs. Causes and effects are, in fact, linked and exactly revolve around the agency of texts, around their potential for exerting a force in the world or, on the contrary, around their remaining inert and ineffectual. In general, and quite evidently, the more a community holds a sign as motivated, the more that same sign will also be seen and *will actually be* efficacious in prompting transformations in the world. Engaging an inter-religious war in order to reconquer a space that is considered as truthfully touched by a deity in its mundane passage, for instance, is



quite different from engaging a war in order to reconquer a space where, the community contends, it is conventionally believed that a deity has descended upon. Those who fight for Jerusalem do not fight either for a symbol or for an icon anymore but for a land that has been collectively turned into an index, into sacred land.

More abstractedly, the pragmatic efficaciousness of a motivated sign depends on the fact that no alternative is seen to it or to its most important features. A sacred text, a sacred image, a sacred land, etc. exert an agency, and a powerful one, for they are considered as inalterable, irreplaceable, and unique: there is only one stream of action stemming from the meaning of a text, because this text has no alternative and could produce no alternative meaning. The more a community considers that a sign, text, or language is conventional, that is, might be different from what it actually is, the more this perception of potentiality entails a de-potentiality of the agency that stems from signification. Why acting in response to a sign, if this sign could be different?

## **8 Motivational Rhetorics**

From a semiotic and external point of view, however, the relation between motivation and agency that has just been singled out, described, and analyzed must also be exposed as the possible object of rhetorics of mystification or demystification. From the internal point of view of a community of believers, indeed, a sign prompts action because it is considered as motivated. From the external point of view of semiotic analysis, however, a community ends up considering a sign as motivated because it must prompt an action. From this perspective, for instance, it is not true that land considered as sacred by two or more religious communities exerts a bellicose agency; rather, the opposite is true: two communities that must fight for some reasons – including for the primacy of their symbolical status and not only for structural or economic resources – end up motivating that land whose posited indexicality will ‘oblige’ them to fight.

The reversal of causality link between attribution of motivation and textual agency can be observed also in the opposite direction. On the one hand, it is indeed sometimes the case that, as a sign or text loses its motivational aura, acting in its name, for its sake, and prompted by its agency becomes increasingly difficult. On the other hand, though, exactly as a rhetoric of textual agency can build on an inter-subjective attribution of motivational aura, a symmetrically opposite rhetoric of textual inertia can build on an inter-subjective downplaying of the motivational aura of a sign. Is it so important to hang or not to hang crucifixes in Italian public schools? After all, it is a conventional symbol of Christianity, or even a conventional Italian custom, whose indexical links with the actual crucifixion of Jesus

are, therefore, so weakened that nobody really cares anymore about this sign, whether it is there or not.

## **9 Perspectives on the Agency and Inertia of Texts**

All the essays gathered in this collection reflect, from different perspectives and in relation to various sociocultural settings, about the same semiotic dynamic of motivational promotion or demotion. They rather privilege, as it was inevitable, the social construction of textual agency over the social deconstruction of it, for the emergence of agency is, indeed, related to the former process, whereas the latter is likely to manifest itself in dynamics of textual anesthetization – including those involved in the secularization of religious texts. Despite this inevitable positioning, however, they all point out, with unprecedented clarity, that human communities and individuals are moved by signs in different ways depending on the intrinsic semiotic nature of these signs, and that some signs in particular – such as the religious one, e.g. –, exert an agency that is often disruptive precisely because they all share the same motivational aura. Collective rhetorics can, however, hijack and instrumentalize these semiotic dynamics, reversing the relation between causes and effects: motivation is inter-subjectively added or subtracted, so as to exert collective agency or maintain social inertia. Scholars should not be preoccupied with the correctness of these calls but must nevertheless suggest lucidity on the semiotic processes and rhetoric agendas underpinning them.