

Le programme de recherche SÊMAINÔ - Projet financé conjointement par l'Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) et le Fonds National Suisse de la Recherche Scientifique (FNS) - se propose de développer un tel outil méthodologique par une analyse comparative de la matière historique à travers un parcours indexé sur ses étapes les plus marquantes. Utilisé comme un “filtre heuristique”, cet outil contribuera à la découverte et à l'évaluation des analogies et des différences entre les auteurs et les doctrines à l'étude. Un regard synoptique sur leurs éléments et leurs solutions de continuité permettra non seulement d'identifier des structures récurrentes mais aussi de mieux apprécier leurs marges de développement au sein du débat contemporain.

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Présentation du projet en anglais :

“Why do we need linguistic signs?”

“What is a linguistic sign and how does it mean what it means?”

“What effects do linguistic signs have and what precautions are called for when we avail ourselves of them in order to convey our thoughts and feelings, argue with other people or try to move them in any way?”

This complex set of issues, whose roots go back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle, is still of paramount importance today, insofar as it governs the most fundamental questions we ask about language, its meaning and its uses. Throughout debates whose emphasis has shifted hence and forth between logic, grammar, theology, as well as rhetoric and literature, our understanding of what it takes for a linguistic expressions to be meaningful has come in a variety of ways. In order to make sense of this diversity, the consideration of results, even the most recent ones in linguistics, cognitive sciences and information sciences, however essential, is not enough. What is required first and foremost is a second-order model allowing us to catalogue, classify and differentially analyse theoretical patterns that have been implemented throughout history in order to account for the complex phenomenon of meaning as a property of linguistic expression, as a correlate to contents of thought, or else as a product of communication practices.

SÊMAINÔ research project is meant to develop such a methodological device by way of historical comparison between relevant authors and theories. Used as a heuristic filter, it will help us discover and assess (filter “in” and “out”) differences and similarities between them. These as well as other elements of continuity and discontinuity, whose charting is one of the project's priorities, will be instrumental in identifying both past patterns and margins for future development.

Philosophical inquiries into how language works and what signification is have much to gain from comparative description and mapping of transformations. As a matter of fact, on the one hand, we are confronted with a wide variety of theories which differ one from another by the emphasis they place on different aspects, be it physical (linguistic signs have a materiality and a physiology of their own), semantic (meaning, reference and everything that falls between), psychological (the actual handling of signs in its intellectual and affective dimension) or pragmatic (usage situations of linguistic expression, both successful and biased). On the other hand, for all their differences and peculiarities, linguistic and semantic theories are rooted in conceptual networks whose divergences often reside in matters of detail and local calibration: a number of different authors, who all have their own historical contexts, have been asking time and again similar questions about what are, in fact, linguistic signs, how can they be lent significance and what precautions are required when we make use of them.

Accordingly, SÊMAINÔ project will set out meet four main objectives:

1. The study of linguistic theories, from Antiquity to the present day, is to lead to the discovery of underlying patterns whose recurrent features have a structuring effect on the various ways philosophers have understood what linguistic signs are and how they are to be used. At this stage, it will be our priority to identify in each case and analyse the first-order model explaining the complex phenomenon of linguistic expressions' behaviour.
2. Through point-in-time comparisons, these first-order models are to be superimposed in order to show the extent of their isomorphism while restoring as much as possible the historical singularity of each as a result of the contextual factors which influence and limit their respective scopes (such as assumptions, disciplinary constraints, available corpus).
3. The comparative assessment of first-order models will enable us to construct a second-order model (or heuristic filter), whose aim is to draw a chart of language and signification's theories outlining, in each case, which elements are being put forth and which ones are left in the background
4. The application of such a meta-model or "heuristic filter" to historical information is not only likely to revisit the history of language philosophy in a rather new perspective, but it will also help clarify contemporary debates by, on one hand, reinstating today's ideas about language in the long tradition they belong to, while, on the other hand, suggesting avenues for future research.