

ACTES SEMIOTIQUES

What we meant by that was “let’s do this”
The interpretive metatext as pending account

Ce que nous voulions dire par là, c’est qu’« il fallait faire ceci »
Le métatexte interprétatif comme un compte d’attente

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Abstract: This paper investigates the use of a semiotic macrostructure called a pending account as an interpretive metatext to configure strategy texts’ motivational affordances and lend authority to deontic claims. Interpretive metatexts tell us what another text means; if they use a pending account to do so, they tell us what it means by telling us what we should do; and they tell us what we should do by telling us what inclines us to act in a certain way, either by verbalizing habits or convoking scripts and passions. Pending accounting is a speech genre oriented towards inducing action. Peircean and Greimasian semiotics suggest two different ways in which emotion is coupled to other sensemaking registers to set up these inducements. If Peirce teaches us how feelings set off an effortful inquiry oriented towards the fixing of belief, Greimas explains how passions (as well as scripts) play an important part in sanctioning and thereby (de)commissioning action. The paper shows how the two semioticians can be combined to explain how emotion is used to articulate and authorize pending accounts, based on an illustrative analysis of four interpretations of the 2020 Brexit withdrawal agreement.

Keywords: authority, emotion, feeling, hypothesis, interpretant, metatext, metaconversation, passion, pending account, presentification

Résumé : Cet article examine l’usage d’une macrostructure sémiotique, que j’appelle le « compte d’attente », comme métatexte interprétatif pour configurer les « affordances » motivationnelles des textes stratégiques et conférer une autorité aux revendications déontiques. Les métatextes interprétatifs nous disent ce qu’un autre texte veut dire ; s’ils ont recours à un compte d’attente pour faire cela, ils nous disent ce que ce texte veut dire en nous disant que faire ; et ils disent que faire en nous disant quelque chose sur nos inclinations à agir d’une certaine façon, soit en verbalisant des habitudes, soit en convoquant des scripts ou des passions. Le compte en attente appartient aux genres discursifs qui nous orientent vers l’action. Les sémiotiques de Peirce et de Greimas suggèrent deux manières distinctes d’associer l’émotion aux autres registres de *sensemaking* pour mettre en place ces incitations. Si Peirce nous apprend comment les sentiments déclenchent une enquête volontaire orientée vers la fixation de la croyance, Greimas explique comment les passions (mais aussi les scripts) jouent un rôle important dans la sanction et, par extension, la (dé)commande des actions. L’article montre comment les deux sémiotiques peuvent être combinées afin d’expliquer l’usage de l’émotion dans l’articulation et l’autorisation des comptes d’attente sur la base d’une analyse indicative de quatre interprétations de l’accord de retrait entre l’Union européenne et le Royaume-Uni en 2020.

Mots clés : autorité, émotion, sentiment, passion, hypothèse, interprétant, métatexte, métaconversation, compte en attente, présentification

1. Introduction: the basic structure of the pending account

At a ceremony in Brussels on 22 January 1972, Britain, Ireland, Denmark and Norway signed the Acts of Accession to the European Economic Community. In his celebratory address, Franco Maria Malfatti, Commission President, figuratively passed the baton from what he called ‘the Six’ to ‘the Ten’:

We representatives of the Community of Six are proud to have made today’s historic meeting possible, having fanned the spark into a flame. It is now for the Community of Ten to transform it into the great flame of united Europe.

The reason dignitaries from ten European states had gathered in Brussels was that something was *culminating*:

The signatures placed today under the Acts of Accession are the culmination of a political process [...]

But this process was not, in fact, finished, for it was:

[...] a political process pregnant with extraordinary and positive implications.

This speech, typical of what institutional spokespeople say when organizational treaties, agreements or strategies are officially adopted, employs a semiotic macrostructure which can be termed a pending account. Malfatti leaves the ‘implications’ of the ‘political process’ *pending*. ‘Their accomplishment is transferred to the responsibility of the audience’ (Törrönen 2000: 83). The speaker is proposing that the object towards which participants are co-orienting (here the Acts of Accession) will only attain its full meaning when interpreted dynamically by an audience (here comprising political leaders of member states). These transfers of deontic force from message sender to message receiver can be understood, this paper will show, with recourse to either Peircean or Greimasian semiotics. Reasoning with Peirce, Malfatti emits an *emotional interpretant* (pride) in order to call forth an *energetic interpretant* (some action or movement) that he hopes will in turn produce a *logical interpretant* (some habit-change or fixing of belief in relation to the idea of a united Europe). Reasoning with Greimas, the account is left pending in two senses: there is a suspension of the action immediately after the qualifying test – implied by the phrase ‘made possible’, which positions the ‘Community of Six’ and the existing Treaties as helpers to an audience positioned as subject. This is how Törrönen conceptualizes the pending account. But Malfatti’s discourse also sanctions (‘we are proud’, ‘culmination’) and commissions (‘it is now for’, ‘pregnant with implications’), spanning old and new action cycles by juxtaposing emotional and deontic claims. This articulation constitutes a strong inducement to act.

In what follows I first provide theoretical background for the claim that this rhetorical construction with an action-inducing pragmatic sense is integral to the discursive configuration of moments of organizational change. After describing my data and methods, I present a two-part reading of four texts chosen to illustrate conversations in which rival pending accounts compete for authority to interpret a newly-approved strategy. First, using Peirce, I show how political leaders evoke *feelings* to

construct pending accounts that competentialize them as hypothesis-testers and managers of habit-change or habit-confirmation. Then, using Greimas, I show how partisan media convoke *passions* to sanction past expectations and either authorize pending accounts commissioning what should happen next or authorize accounts framed not as pending but final. The conclusion summarizes the main insights, including the pragmatic consequences of disambiguating deontic claims.

2. Theoretical background

The concept of pending *narrative* was developed by Törrönen (2000, 2003, 2021) to analyse persuasive discourse. It draws inspiration from the canonical narrative schema (Greimas 1966). Törrönen defined pending narratives as follows:

when the motivation for the action has been created, i.e. when the qualifying test has been fulfilled, the story is interrupted. The other two tests, the decisive test and the sanctifying test, never occur. Their accomplishment is transferred to the responsibility of the audience. (2000: 83)

Smith & Kabele (2021) sought to extend the validity of the concept beyond narrative forms to grasp the pragmatic sense of promotional discourse. In line with Landowski's (2005) claim that the regime of manipulation is not the sole regime of interaction to which actors orientate in their sensemaking, they argue against an all-encompassing view of narrative, and specifically that the past and the future, states of affairs and future courses of action, can be linked by invoking *either* storylines *or* non-narrative scripts (roughly equivalent to Landowski's regime of programmation). Pending *accounts* were thus defined as:

the use of junctures together with empathetic or cognitive interpellations to create rhetorical force. Junctures have a temporal and a spatial dimension: an *interruption* of the account as soon as participants' motivation and identities have been established; and a *displacement* of action from the storyworld or text-world to the lifeworld or site of telling. Rhetorically, the inducement to action is reinforced by *interpellations* offering subject positions based on empathetic identification or cognitive understanding. (Smith & Kabele 2021)

This paper modifies the concept slightly by counterposing routine scripts not to narrative storylines but to passional states and trajectories, and uses it to study conversations around moments of organizational change, following the adoption of change-constituting texts like agreements, treaties and other strategies. It combines two theoretical perspectives. Continuing to employ Greimasian semiotics, but drawing on his semiotics of passion (Greimas 1983: 225-246; Greimas & Fontanille 1991) in addition to the narrative schema, I propose that some pending accounts place the interruption not after the qualifying test, but after the sanctioning test, motivating the audience to assume the role of protagonist in a next action cycle by making present passions or scripts as authorizing voices. They exploit a recursive relationship between the sanctioning test and the commissioning of new quests (Smith 2017). I also offer a conceptualization of pending accounts anchored in Peirce's semiotic model

of general inquiry. Participants mark a moment of organizational change by expressing feelings that stimulate effort oriented to habit-change or -confirmation. Peircean and Greimasian semioses suggest two ways in which emotion is coupled to other registers of interpretive sensemaking in order to set up an inducement to action and each provides part of an explanation for how authority is claimed in the construction of pending accounts.

The conversation-analytical literature on interaction provided the spark for this synthesis. This literature has highlighted ‘ambiguities in action recognition’ (Stevanovic & Peräkylä 2014) as resources for interactional accomplishments and sources of interactional trouble (Nguyen & Janssens 2019). Participants do not always interpret one another’s utterances congruently because of misalignments between three basic orders – epistemic, deontic and emotional – to which they orient in the sequential organization of joint action. An equivalent phenomenon is well-known to speech act theory, where assertives (equivalent to the epistemic order), directives and commissives (the deontic order) and expressives (the emotional order) can be mistaken or mis-heard in interactions (Searle 2011, Cooren 2000). The institutional context for strategizing often naturalizes these kinds of ambiguities: if a strategy text is intended as a guide for organizational action, then simple assertives act like ‘grammatical metaphors’ (Halliday 1994): they turn into directives when its intended interpreters take into account the purpose of the text. An epistemic claim has a deontic effect. While such effects can be ‘resisted by alternative interpretations’ (Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli 2010: 697), acceptable alternative interpretations need to be available and made present to displace the ‘obvious’ translation. An equivalent ambiguity can occur between deontic and emotional orders, but this ambiguity the focus of this paper – has been less commonly studied (Stevanovic & Peräkylä 2014).

In both cases the communicative effect depends on interlocutors’ complicity in translating (misrecognizing) the speaker’s first-glance orientation to the epistemic or emotional order into a deontic claim. Bourdieu made misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) essential to ‘le langage d’autorité [qui] ne gouverne jamais qu’avec la collaboration de ceux qu’il gouverne, c’est à dire grâce à l’assistance des mécanismes sociaux capables de produire cette complicité, fondée sur la méconnaissance, qui est au principe de toute autorité.’ (2001: 167) One of the effects of institutional discourse, he argued, was to ‘signifier à quelqu’un ce qu’il est et lui signifier qu’il a à se conduire en conséquence. L’indicatif en ce cas est un impératif.’ (2001: 179) But at moments of profound organizational change, when institutional arrangements are placed under cross-examination, such ambiguities can become a source of trouble. A once naturalized misrecognition no longer passes – it is recognized and resisted, questioned or tactically ignored. A hearer does not infer the expected behavioural consequences when told ‘who they are’. This can prompt efforts to disambiguate communication using a ‘third’ accounting sequence in which a first speaker clarifies their stance to make explicit the deontic implications (or lack of them) of an earlier utterance. Such an accounting sequence is a *metatext* that ‘refers, reflexively, to a tacit component of the speech situation of the first [text] – that is, A’s intention in uttering the text, not just the text itself’ (Robichaud, Giroux & Taylor 2004: 622).

Metatext not only comes third in the sequential organization of interaction; it also often appeals to ‘thirdness’ in Peirce’s sense of a law, rule, script or other source of extra-local authority that can arbitrate disputed ordering when made present and pertinent (Taylor & Van Every 2014). Thirdness is a mediating term that says: doing (saying) A *counts as* B. It provides an *interpretant* of the transaction.

For example, if I pass an object to you, I might be implying a deontic claim that you should take it as a gift. If you ignore my implication by failing to take it, I may say ‘it’s a gift’, making explicit the script according to which the physical movement of the object should be governed by a transfer of property rights. A disambiguating metatext embeds the interaction in one of the *metaconversations* of the relevant community of practice, which I objectify, confirm and update each time I ‘quote’ it. Metaconversations make available a series of previous conversations pertaining to a certain discursive domain such as an organization (Taylor & Van Every 2014: 27). In the case of gifts, relevant scripts could include specific traditions of gift-giving within a family or friendship group, culturally conventional understandings of gifts and the accepted meaning of the English word gift. Alongside scripts, metaconversations make available *passions*, which get fixed and stereotyped through usage and thus enter a sociolectal taxonomy. ‘Une fois stéréotypés, [ces dispositifs] sont renvoyés au niveau sémi-narratif et sont alors convocables tels quels’ (Greimas & Fontanille 1991: 82), capable of reappearing, at the level of discourse, as potentialities to act (ibid.: 77).

As we saw in Malfatti’s speech, when a strategy text is adopted the discourse of celebration accompanying the act of confirmation is apt to translate sanctions into commissions. The test of those commissions’ deontic authority is their reception, when the approved strategy text, whatever its legal backing, encounters stakeholders’ deontic concerns. For ‘[a]uthority is built into the relationships of communication itself. It is something that must be continually reconstructed in the flow of communication: a legitimization of individual and group activities.’ (Taylor & Van Every 2014: 205) This does not mean, however, that it is purely a local accomplishment: ‘If we can say that an agent locally accomplishes his or her authority, we must also acknowledge that he or she does so by mobilizing, through presentification, a plethora of “things” and “beings” that are not physically present to make a difference in the situation in which he or she is involved’ (Benoit-Barné & Cooren 2009: 10). The concept of *presentification* concerns the imbrications between discursive and semio-narrative structures or between the enunciative situation and a textworld. It is used in the CCO literature to stress the dislocal character of any organizational interaction (Cooren & Fairhurst 2009), but it is also used by Greimas & Fontanille to describe the operation of *passional simulacra* – imaginary contracts whose discursive manifestations are typically imbricated sequences where modalized subjects receive transitory identities called *pathemic roles*. In such a configuration ‘la passion presentifie au sein du discours d’accueil un ensemble de données à la fois tensives et figuratives, comme le fait par exemple la nostalgie pour une situation qui a été ou qui aurait pu être’ (1991: 60). This can introduce a dislocation between a subject’s attitude at the site of enunciation and the mood introduced by the ‘presentified’ indications. One important affordance of the dislocating effect of presentification is to disambiguate action recognition, as ‘when a worker says to another, “This is our policy!” to tell or remind her interlocutor that something has to be done.’ (Benoit-Barné & Cooren 2009: 10) The first worker convokes something (a policy) that belongs to the routine world of the organization and attributes to the other a competence limited to a certain *faire* – a *thematic* role or ‘behavioural algorithm’ (Landowski 2005) – and associated with certain *expectations*. This is an example of programmatic presentification¹. Passions belong to the class of actants that can have the same effect due to their *protoactantiality* (Greimas & Fontanille 1991: 65)

¹ A policy belongs to the programmatic type of discourse (Greimas 1983: 157-170; Adam 2001).

– their capacity to occupy a range of semio-narrative roles, including commissioning sender and sanctioning receiver, and presentify contractual expectations associated with *pathemic* roles. There is thus an analogy between thematic roles and pathemic roles in their capacity to tense or slacken our expectations with regard to action by imposing a certain disposition, semiotic style or inclination to act in a certain way (ibid.: 69).

I wish to stress that in Greimas & Fontanille’s formulation it is not the passion that is presentified; the passion is ‘convoked’ and then presentifies certain (tensive and figurative) indications, including *expectations*. Analogously, for programmatic presentification we should speak of the convocation of a script to presentify the (dispassionate) expectations associated with a programmed pattern of action. Separating convocation from presentification allows for degrees of *explicitness* of presentification. A passion or script can be convoked by being named. Saying ‘it’s a gift’ still leaves the connotations of that word tacit. Saying ‘it’s polite to accept gifts in our culture’ would be to show much more of the metaconversational script for the routine of gift-giving. Saying ‘there was disappointment and anger’ leaves the sociolectal (and sociological) connotations of those passions tacit (although it implies that they were performed legibly to the observer), whereas saying ‘people were understandably disappointed and justifiably angry’ implies not only that they were performed legibly but that whatever expectations they presentified were read as legitimate by the observer. Although there are clearly limits on our ability to presentify expectations simply by naming passions and scripts, this is one of the key ways in which deontic concerns get folded into accounts to make them pending.

3. Data and methods

The analytical objects of this paper are texts that interpret an international agreement (taken as an example of a broad class of organizational strategy texts) immediately after strategy approval – four texts published to mark Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union on 31 January 2020. They comprise speeches by representatives of the contracting parties, the UK Prime Minister and the Presidents of the European Union, together with two editorials from newspapers (The Guardian and the Daily Express) positioned on opposite sides of sharply polarized British debates about the desirability of EU membership.

The texts form part of a corpus which served initially as a sandpit for testing the methodological affordances of narrative/routine analysis (Smith & Kabele 2020), a strategy based on perspective interplay in which the analyst foregrounds and backgrounds different types of competence, ‘conformément à un des postulats élémentaires de la sémiotique narrative, que le statut actantiel d’un acteur quelconque, c’est-à-dire le type de compétence qui lui sera reconnu, n’est pas donné sur le plan ontologique mais relève d’une construction effectuée par l’observateur’ (Landowski 2005: 27). This phase of analysis involved looking for the presence of modalizers and other linguistic markers that indicate either narrative or routine constructions, and it revealed the prominence of pending accounts in strategy-interpreting texts. Subsequent readings were informed by the conversation-analytical literature on interaction discussed in the previous section, paying attention to the types of claims – deontic, emotional or epistemic – made (Stevanovic & Peräkylä 2012) and the ways speakers make present matters of concern and matters of authority (Vásquez et al. 2017).

Brexit debates provide an ideal opportunity to study pending accounting not just as a rhetorical strategy for advancing deontic claims, but as a disputatious process in which multiple interpretive metatexts construct contrary pending accounts. The 2020 Brexit withdrawal agreement was a treaty between the EU and a departing member state whose enactment materially changed their respective legal orders, but in substance it was ‘more an agreement to disagree than the product of a true meeting of minds to give effect to a common objective’ (Bradley 2020: 382). Many aspects of future EU-UK relations were merely sketched in an accompanying non-binding ‘political declaration’, intended to serve as a ‘beacon for navigation’ in the bilateral trade and cooperation talks which commenced in March 2020 (Łazowski 2020: 1108). To paraphrase Bourdieu, the withdrawal agreement told stakeholders something about ‘who they are’ but signified little about ‘how they should behave in consequence’. Far from closing debates its adoption generated dialogical networks (Leudar & Nekvapil 2004) in which matters of concern continued to circulate in competition for the authority to say what is to be done, in whose name it is (to be) done, and what principles, values and attachments should count in its doing. The pragmatic question for stakeholders coincides with the research question of the present paper: *How do actors construct authoritative deontic claims in/by interpreting a newly adopted strategic text?*

4. Activating an authorizing thirdness

Following the adoption of strategy texts, the first interpreters in the political and media fields, beginning with the signatories themselves, engage in metatextual struggles to establish preferred readings. First interpretations matter, since the adoption of a treaty is a ‘metapragmatic moment [...] marked by an increase in the level of reflexivity during which the attention of participants shifts from the task to be performed to the question of how it is appropriate to characterize what is happening’ (Boltanski 2011: 67). Participants in these conversations attempt to give an authoritative answer on behalf of the organization (the distributed stakeholders of any organizing process) to the question ‘what did we mean by that?’ The authority of their interpretation depends partly on deontic status. Leaders like Malfatti, who sign agreements on behalf of organizations, enjoy a mutually constitutive relationship of authority with the agreement: they can rely on a conventional understanding that when signatories speak on such occasions, the agreement always also speaks. But, building on the conversation-analytical literature on interaction, I suggest that the same ambiguity between orders of reasoning that creates pragmatic tension in conversation applies to the communication and interpretation of strategic decisions, effectively preventing closure even at moments ‘confirmed’ as final by metapragmatic discourses of celebration. The ability to interpret authoritatively depends on activating an authorizing thirdness that can make evaluations count as effective deontic stances.

Activating an authorizing thirdness means that, in order to answer the ‘what did we mean’ question, participants interpret the strategic object and compete to place their divergent interpretations in the third sequential position (the accounting or disambiguating position) in distributed conversations around strategy texts. If we understand these conversations as part of the permanent and general inquiry modelled by Peirce, then we must focus on the production of *interpretants* – the ideas to which signs

give rise in the receiver (Peirce 1994: 1.339).² Interpretants are integral to sensemaking because they enable comparisons by generating new signs with their own interpretants in an endless (but ideally integrative or converging) series of semioses. According to Peirce, their generation has a trichotomous dynamic in which emotional interpretants are succeeded by energetic interpretants, which in turn generate logical interpretants. Peirce was concerned with the establishment of habits and the fixing of belief, both individually and collectively. The performativity of discourse is only part of this process, but if Peirce's model is correct it is reasonable to suppose that pending accounting, as a speech genre oriented towards inducing habit-change among receivers, may reflect the same dynamic in the way it represents or semiotises its object.

4.1. Reading interpretive metatexts with Peirce: evoking emotions to capture the mood

4.1.1. Emotional interpretants: the voices that pop up

Peirce theorises *emotional interpretants* as those that first appear to us in response to any experience and claims they play a particularly important role when definitions of the situation are highly uncertain. That is because they enable 'hypothetic inference' based on 'the sensuous element of thought' (Peirce 1994: 2.643).

The first proper significate effect of a sign is a feeling produced by it.³ There is almost always a feeling which we come to interpret as evidence that we comprehend the proper effect of the sign, although the foundation of truth in this is frequently very slight. This "emotional interpretant," as I call it [...] (Peirce 1994: 5.475)

In all four texts feelings are evoked in the opening lines. Whereas the media articles name one specific emotion, the political leaders evoke a range of emotions. The text by the Presidents of the Commission, the Council and the Parliament⁴ begins:

For us, as Presidents of the three main EU institutions, today will inevitably be a day of reflection and mixed emotions – as it will for so many people. [...] These emotions reflect our fondness for the United Kingdom – something which goes far beyond membership of our Union. We have always deeply regretted the UK's decision to leave but we have always fully respected it, too.

Although they name two specific emotions – fondness and regret – the reference to 'mixed emotions' invites readers to reflect on their own feelings. The text marks the occasion as a moment of heightened emotionality. On the same day, Boris Johnson made a speech on British television which

² The standard way of quoting from Peirce's collected works refers to the volume in Arabic numerals, followed by a period, followed by the paragraph in the volume cited.

³ For Peirce, 'every thought is a sign' (1994: 5.470).

⁴ Published on 31 January 2020 in one leading newspaper in each EU member state and the Times in the UK.

also begins by evoking feelings. He positions himself as an observer (and ‘understander’) of *others’* feelings which, again, are mixed:

For many people this is an astonishing moment of hope, a moment they thought would never come. And there are many of course who feel a sense of anxiety and loss. And then of course there is a third group – perhaps the biggest – who had started to worry that the whole political wrangle would never come to an end. I understand all those feelings [...].

Both texts evoke feelings to signify attentiveness: their authors, the co-signatories of the withdrawal agreement, are paying attention to feelings (their own and those of ‘people’ and ‘groups’). Emotion can act as a ‘simplifying hypothesis’ when rational, cognitive sensemaking fails (Baroni 2006: 166). Those evoked by Johnson – hope, anxiety and worry – are future-facing. Anxiety, for example, is aroused ‘in the place of that intellectual hypothetic inference which I seek’ about my future prospects when faced with ‘[t]he indescribable, the ineffable, the incomprehensible’ (Peirce 1994: 5.292). A way of describing this phenomenon narratively is to say that when the *active version of events* – the basic narrative schema according to which ‘*subject acts on object*’ – meets resistance (e.g. when a protagonist or an observer perceives an increased risk of failure in achieving a goal), a *passive mode of experience* in which ‘*object affects subject*’ (of a condition/state) takes over and ‘tout se passe comme si une autre voix s’élevait soudain pour dire sa propre vérité, pour dire les choses autrement’ (Greimas & Fontanille 1991: 18). In fiction it is often this voice that helps progress a storyline, but it also has a place in the pending accounts of strategic discourse, where emotional ‘hypothetizing’ is directed at uncertain future prospects.

One reason why the leaders’ speeches make a display of feelings in the opening lines is the construction of the historical moment as a turning point. At such moments, political leaders compete to ‘capture the mood’, to use a term commonly found in media and academic commentaries (e.g. Coleman & Brogden 2020), and their ability to display or invoke the right emotions enables the, to communicate ‘presence’ *as leaders* at moments when expectations of strong leadership are high (Fairhurst & Cooren 2009). Mood is a word that gives emotion a fleeting, transient temporal aspectualisation, in contrast to terms like character and temperament, which connote more permanent dispositions (Greimas & Fontanille 1991: 94-5). If it can be convincingly seized discursively, the mood-capturer can translate emotional authority into plausible deontic claims. The idea that feelings are hypotheses, however, implies that they must be confirmed by further inquiry. According to Peirce, ‘the class of hypothetic inferences which the arising of a sensation resembles, is that of reasoning from definition to definitum, in which the major premise is of an arbitrary nature’ (1994: 5.291). So evoking feelings in discourse with the aim of capturing the public mood can be likened to trying out definitions – ones that conventionally attach to a certain collection of situations – and seeing whether they ‘stick’ to the present situation (the definitum), which then gets tested in action, through the performative sense effects of the act of definition.

4.1.2. Energetic interpretants: forward movement

The second type of interpretant is called *energetic*, bearing in mind that ‘more often than not emotions push us into action’ (Arquembourg 2015: 398). Peirce’s semiotic model makes feelings precede an effortful, reactive phase of sensemaking which *disturbs* the initial feeling:

If a sign produces any further proper significate effect, it will do so through the mediation of the emotional interpretant, and such further effect will always involve an effort. I call it the energetic interpretant. (Peirce 1994: 5.475)

Let’s go back to the opening of Johnson’s speech, continuing where we left off:

[...] I understand all those feelings, and our job as the government – my job – is to bring this country together now and take us forward.

Johnson positions himself not only as a leader who understands people’s ‘feelings’ on Brexit but as an interpreter of emotional interpretants with an obligation (as head of government) to translate them into ‘forward’ movement: into what Peirce calls physical or mental effort. Similarly, effort is modalized in the EU leaders’ speech by a series of commitments directed towards the object *partnership*, which ‘we need to build’, ‘we will do everything *in our power*’ to build and *we are confident that we can build*. Leaders on both sides virtualize an energetic interpretant to competencialize themselves for the legislative or institution-building tasks expected of leaders.

4.1.3. Logical interpretants: project verbs

Logical interpretants are distinguished from the others by their ‘general nature’, extending beyond a single act or thought. Their effects are produced at the level of cognitive associations (‘connections of feelings’ (Peirce 1994: 6.20)), which Peirce links to routine patterns of action or *habits* (‘rule[s] active in us’ (1994: 2.643)) and their iterative adjustment:

the only mental effect that can be so produced and that is not a sign but is of a general application is a *habit-change*; meaning by a habit-change a modification of a person’s tendencies toward action [...] It excludes natural dispositions [...] but it includes beside associations, what may be called “transsociations”, or alterations of association, and even includes dissociation (Peirce 1994: 5.476)

As Eco observes, ‘an energetic response does not need to be interpreted; it rather produces (I guess, by further repetitions) a change of habit. This means that after having received a series of signs and having variously interpreted them, our way of acting within the world is either transitorily or permanently changed. This new attitude, this pragmatic issue, is the final interpretant’ (1976: 1465). Logical interpretants can thus be thought of as the names we have for *rules* that make sense of what is going on by referring to an institutional context or organized ‘game’. They resemble ‘project verbs’, Danto’s (1962) term for a verb that denotes the overall shape, direction or sense of an activity without needing to specify which particular action in the range of actions covered by the project verb actors are

involved in. It folds a recognizable pattern of action into ‘the reiterativity of instituted practices’ based on ‘behavioural algorithms’ (Landowski 2005: 38). It also supposes a type of observational competence founded on a species of meta-knowledge that anticipates a high degree of predictability. Project verbs re-situate action in a programmatic regime of sense where the affordances of interactants are determined by ‘thematic roles’ that stabilize our expectations by means of a double reduction: that of a discursive configuration to a single figurative trajectory realizable in discourse; and that of this trajectory to an actant endowed with a competence limited to a certain *faire* (Greimas 1983: 61-65)⁵. Referring to the object of shared interest using a project verb may lend authority to a claim if it invokes an institutionalized organizational practice as a normative basis of collaboration (Taylor 2012), but more fundamentally it *constructs* deontic authority by alluding to shared assumptions that there exist ‘good reasons’ for a practice being arranged as it is (Landowski 2005: 37). In one section of Johnson’s speech there is a list of project verbs (shown in italics) which refer to the normal ‘way of acting within the world’ of government:

And yes it is partly about *using* these new *powers* – this recaptured sovereignty – to *deliver the changes* people voted for, whether that is by *controlling* immigration or *creating* freeports or *liberating* our fishing industry or *doing* free trade *deals*, or simply *making* our *laws and rules* for the benefit of the people of this country.

His impersonal phrasing (‘it is about’) bolsters the routinizing sense effect of the project verbs. Governmental *habits* (‘using powers’, ‘making laws and rules’, ‘doing deals’) are applied to a process of *habit-change* (‘deliver the changes’) whose direction needs to respect an authoritative act of volition (‘the changes people voted for’). The generation of a logical interpretant is reduced to a scripted process with a relatively predictable and controllable outcome, as long as the government respects its institutionally-defined, electorally-mandated role.

The EU leaders configure a parallel semiosis by mobilising a project verb nominalized as ‘partnership’. Insofar as partnership-building is one of the routine activities of an international organisation, this also normalizes the future course of action and stabilizes the motivational affordances of the strategy text. It delimits the contours of new habits using familiar terminology to make ‘transsociations’ between past and future institutional arrangements. Then, unlike Johnson, the EU leaders invoke the withdrawal agreement to back an epistemic claim about what will happen to citizens’ rights in the future:

The agreement we reached is fair for both sides and ensures that millions of EU and UK citizens will continue to have their rights protected in the place they call home.

The agreement – also a nominalized project verb (the outcome of ‘agreeing’) – is an *approved text* whose agency institutionally ‘ensures’ the protection of all citizens’ rights. The Presidents, in fact, all but cite the withdrawal agreement, whose preamble contains the clause: ‘RECOGNISING that it is necessary

⁵ In a programmatic regime it is the programme that is competent, allowing us to *operate* on an actant’s thematic role (*faire être*) rather than having to *manipulate* the actant (*faire faire*) (Landowski 2005: 16-20).

to provide reciprocal protection for Union citizens and for United Kingdom nationals [...] and to ensure that their rights under this Agreement are enforceable ...' (Official Journal of the European Union 2019: 1). The use of polyphonic authority⁶ ('it is necessary to'), combined with the generic properties of a legal text (where the preamble presents the signatories' common values), makes this proposition self-authorizing, while the verb 'continue', in the EU Presidents' text, serializes *successive* situations or practices routinely, based on a presupposition that rights *were* protected within the EU (exhibiting the 'reiterativity of instituted practices'). Approved texts – once made present and pertinent – act in conjunction with project verbs as predictive and performative logical interpretants supporting either habit-change or, as here, habit-reproduction.

4.1.4. What Peirce teaches us

The analysis so far can be schematized as a model which adapts Peirce's 'dynamic of the interpretants' to show one facet of the rhetorical work done by interpretive metatexts as pending accounts. It places the interpretants in a series, so that the logical interpretant is the effect of the energetic interpretant, itself the effect of the emotional interpretant. Figure 1 shows this serialized arrangement. The first conversion (indicated by an arrow) translates a feeling-as-hypothesis into an inducement to action (a virtualized effort): feelings (evoked) *imply* action. The second conversion translates action into belief about the sense of our organizational lives: project verbs (representing habitual action) *verbalize* action. But Peirce envisaged inquiry as a process in which 'the real and living logical conclusion *is* that habit; the verbal formulation [e.g. 'a concept, proposition, or argument'] merely expresses it' (1994: 5.491). There is therefore an arrow going back from the logical to the energetic interpretant, since the (project) verbalization of an action will always leave a remainder of doubt, stimulating further cognitive action. Peirce expressed the same idea in terms of the fixing of belief – 'Thought in action has for its only possible motive the attainment of thought at rest' (1994: 5.396) – and insisted that the cycle never stops: 'thought relaxes, and comes to rest for a moment when belief is reached. But, since belief is a rule for action, the application of which involves further doubt and further thought, at the same time that it is a stopping-place, it is also a new starting-place for thought.' (1994: 5.397)

⁶ 'Le locuteur [...] peut poser le contenu manifesté par q (*il paraît que q*) alors qu'en même temps il n'en prend pas la responsabilité mais la rejette sur un tiers.' (Carel & Ducrot 2009: 39)

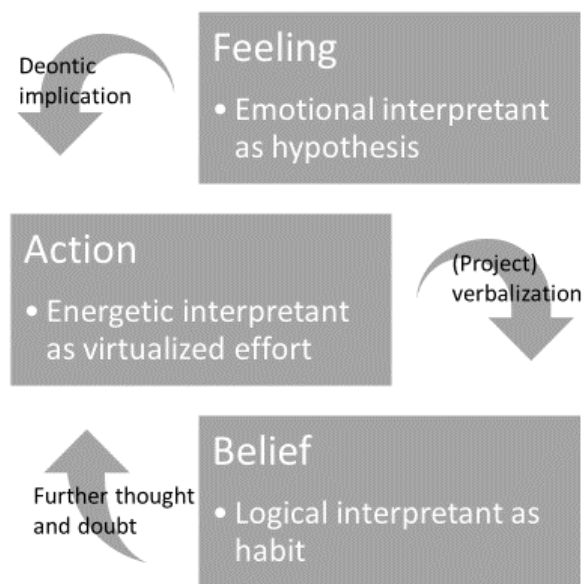


Figure 1: The configuration of pending accounts as a dynamic of interpretants.

4.2. Reading interpretive metatexts with Greimas: convoking passions to presentify expectations

4.2.1. Disappointment in the Guardian

A Guardian editorial published the day after the signing of the agreement constructs a pending account which I will first analyse with Peirce (to reveal a limit of feelings as hypotheses) and then with Greimas (to show how activating an authorizing thirdness involves passionate and programmatic presentification). The editorial opens by expressing feeling ('Brexit has happened. It is a defeat to be mourned'). It is a more specific than either of the leaders' speeches: there is no doubt that author and imagined audience feel sad about the situation. Consistent with the paper's pro-European position, the thrust of the subsequent argument is to destabilize the Brexit 'trajectory' and make future courses of action seem open to civic and political intervention (potentially even reversible). Its main motif, addressed both inwards, to the defeated camp, and outwards, to the victorious Brexiters including the Conservative government, is the following claim (advanced in the second of 13 paragraphs):

It will take action as well as words to close the wound, and there has not been enough action.

Calls for action as well as, or instead of, words⁷ are a common way to appeal to public authorities or denounce their failures. They position something as a widely-shared concern (hence the surfeit of words) towards which not enough *effort* has yet been directed. So having primed its predominantly 'remainder' audience to feel disappointment, the Guardian *disturbs* this feeling by producing a second

⁷ Interdiscursively, they refer to the proverb 'actions speak louder than words', meaning 'that people's actions show their real attitudes, rather than what they say. This expression is sometimes used to advise a person to do something positive.' (Collins English dictionary) In other words, the proverb is often used as an inducement.

interpretant: an inducement to action, represented linguistically by a succession of ‘must’-s, ‘have to’-s. The ‘action not words’ motif returns in paragraph 10 with a concrete specification:

Brexit is a process of rule-making, not just a slogan.

This claim repeats the original accusation of inaction – sloganeering in order to distract or delay. But crucially, it frames the transition from EU membership routinely. If governments habitually assess states of affairs in order to produce rules, the newspaper finds the Johnson government guilty of ignoring the deontic implications of its position. ‘Rule-making’ - a project verb – nonetheless assures other participants that there are reliable meta-routines (routines for changing routines) to fall back on. The reasoning is inductive (X is a case of Y) and the ‘transsociation’ channels effort (the energetic interpretant) into a scripted routine (a logical interpretant) to stabilize the motivational affordances of the withdrawal agreement as a strategic object. Given that common variants of the same proverb include ‘Don’t *trust* their words, trust their actions’ and ‘I *believe* actions, not words’, the dynamic of interpretants discursively produced in the Guardian points in the direction of what Peirce calls the fixing of belief.

But this Peircean reading gives an incomplete account of both the persuasive force of the text and its conditions of felicity. Another way of reading disappointment is as a *sanctioning* emotion. If we respect its place in the pathemic sequence of anger described by Greimas, disappointment marks both the non-attribution of an expected object of value and a sense of deception with respect to a fiduciary relationship with another subject, viewed by the disappointed subject as obligated or committed (if a promise was made, or perceived to have been made) to act to deliver the expected object of value. The emotion sanctions (negatively) the imaginary contract and it can, under certain conditions, commission a new narrative programme (Greimas 1983: 234). The first subject develops a competence for anger or vengeance, producing ‘l’irruption de la polémique dans un univers contractuel’ (Greimas & Fontanille 1991: 50). But, Greimas insists, the passage from disappointment to vengeance is not automatic: disappointment can lead to resignation (1983: 240).

So the ‘action not words’ motif refers not only to *expressive* words (the sense in which words disable action by increasing the likelihood of dispute if co-participants *express their feelings* and the contingent argument that action has to be *dispassionate*). It also alludes to *commissive* words: promises in danger of not being kept. Semiotically, this makes it a specific sort of pending account that Greimas calls challenge (*défi*) and describes as a form of persuasive speech combining ‘[les] deux interventions fondamentales du destinataire, le mandement et la sanction cognitive’ but in which the sanction is inverted and premature (it is a negative sanction delivered prior to any performance) (1983: 216). Although Greimas models the challenge using the narrative schema, the contract is an illusion since the challenge is a polemical clash felt as an insult. In challenges, there is effectively a doubling of narrative programmes because the ability of one subject to manipulate another depends on the latter constructing an independent programme with a distinct object of value – their honour. Nevertheless, challenges are only effective if both parties’ narrative programmes meet at a higher level where they recognize an authority whose sanction is meaningful based on a shared code of honour. In the Guardian editorial this higher value is named in paragraph 2, right before the initial ‘action not words’ challenge:

All sides, though, should have enough humility to recognise that Britain leaves with an open national wound.

The challenged subject thus has to recognize *humility* as the honourable or fitting sentiment to display. So the condition of felicity that needs satisfying before this preemptive *sanction* can be successfully translated into a *commission* and the disappointed subject's potentiality realized is recognition of humility as a pertinent value in the enunciative situation.

4.2.2. Joy in the Daily Express

Sanctioning emotions pose still greater problems for Peirce's dynamic of interpretants when they sanction not preemptively but 'finally'. Emotions of this kind feature prominently in Patrick O'Flynn's commentary, *Rejoice – finally we have our freedom*, printed across pages 2 and 3 of a special supplement of the Daily Express on 31 January 2020.⁸ It begins:

WELL, The Beatles would probably have called it a long and winding road, but finally – almost a decade after we set out on our political odyssey with establishment derision ringing in our ears – the Daily Express campaign to get Britain out of the European Union has led to a door marked “freedom”.

O'Flynn's text tells the story of the Daily Express campaign – a story of establishment duplicity, betrayal of promises and popular awakening – before concluding with a single-sentence paragraph which names the passion he wants to convoke using an intertextual reference to Margaret Thatcher's comment to a journalist on the day of a British military victory in the 1982 Falklands conflict:

As yet another Tory prime minister might have put it: “Just rejoice at that news”.

The quotation is the only imperative in the article, yet if it is an inducement, it is an inducement to *non-action* and a cancellation of someone else's action programme. Thatcher made the remark to *avoid* answering the journalist's question ‘What happens next?’, and O'Flynn's point is a rhetorical move of the same type, implying that what happens next is, for the time being, of little importance. It resists any deontic implications of the withdrawal agreement, orienting unambiguously to the emotional order and the sanctioning test that an act of confirmation implies. To be more precise, it resists an *expectation* of deontic implications, the word ‘just’ configuring an emotional-deontic *disjunction*: there is nothing else present, *just* the sanction (of the happy ending and the newspaper's own heroism). Even if there is to be a frustrating delay – ‘stuck in a “transition phase”’ – before ‘finally we have our freedom’, no action is needed to make this happen; no commission transferred to the reader. Sanctioning emotions deliver verdicts that are far from hypothetical, reinforcing belief based on the intensity of the emotion itself. A sort of antidote to a pending account, O'Flynn's text attempts to ‘bring thought to rest’ by producing an

⁸ The Daily Express was the only major newspaper which opposed Britain's entry to the European Economic Community in the early 1970s and the initiator of a campaign for an in/out referendum during the 2010s.

emotional interpretant (joy) which is stronger still than a habit – strong enough to resist the irritation of doubt.

4.2.3. Backward- and forward-facing expectations

Disappointment and joy, experienced at moments of loss or triumph, have a similar temporal aspectualization: they mark discontinuities with a *lull* or a *pause* when we let our thoughts come to rest and contemplate the episode whose conclusion the emotion consecrates or commemorates. They are passions that presuppose a preceding passional state, as Spinoza realized (Greimas & Fontanille 1991: 107-8) – a prior state of hope or expectation (*attente*). The addressees of O’Flynn’s text are invited to rejoice because they had certain hopes (with regard to the desirability) and expectations (with regard to the likelihood) of Brexit happening, and joy is all the greater since their hopes were fulfilled but their expectations confounded in a positive sense (they hoped it would happen, but their expectations were low because the odds were stacked against the campaign, at least in O’Flynn’s story). In the Guardian, disappointment is linked to hopes and expectations that were *not* realised (for the part of the British public that wished to remain in the EU). This backward-facing, evaluative use of passions in discourse is difficult to reconcile with Peirce’s dynamic of the interpretants. In the case of disappointment, the subject’s verdict on a situation appears much stronger than a hypothesis, and Peirce does not mention it as such. He does cite joy as an example of hypothetic inference: joy arises, he writes, ‘in the case of certain indescribable and peculiarly complex sensations’ (1994: 5.292). But while this may be the case when joy is part of an aesthetic experience (a response to hearing beautiful music, to use one of Peirce’s examples), it scarcely covers the certifying sense effect produced by O’Flynn’s text.

Greimas, on the other hand, links passions like joy and disappointment to expectation, taken as a simulacrum referring to one subject’s confidence in another subject of action for the realization of their hopes or rights. Joy and disappointment presuppose expectations held in the past (there was a promise which is now the object of accounting) and they can construct expectations regarding the future. Here the two texts represent contrasting syntactic configurations since one makes present, or intensifies, future-facing expectations and the other makes them absent or at least slackens them. O’Flynn’s text strips the passion of any further expectation with regard to what happens next (including what we could/should feel next). Far from hypothesizing about ‘indescribable and peculiarly complex sensations’, the author of ‘just rejoice’ knows exactly what to feel and, due to the strength and certainty of the feeling, expresses a marked disinterest in what happens next. Joy is *realized* discursively as a reward for the political work that *actualized* Brexit, and decoupled from the *virtualities* of any future quests. In Peircean terms, we could describe the transformation as a fixing of doubt, thought brought to rest, but this would be to credit emotions with powers he reserves for *logical* interpretants⁹.

9 There is disagreement about how to treat Peirce’s subdivision of interpretants, as his thinking on the subject evolved. Alongside the distinction between emotional, energetic and logical interpretants there exists another trichotomy called immediate, dynamic and final. Some regard the two classifications as synonymous, some see the emotional-energetic-logical distinction as a subdivision of *dynamic* interpretants, while some claim Peirce wanted to subdivide *each* of the immediate, dynamic and final interpretants into emotional, energetic and logical components (Liszka 1990: 20). My criticism of the place of emotion in his semiotics is partly allayed if we accept the latter interpretation, but only partly, since emotion still opens (not closes) each ‘phase’ of inquiry.

The Guardian editorial, by contrast, configures a transformation whose syntax recouples initial disappointment to hope. This *almost* conforms to the semiosis of anger (Greimas 1983: 225-246) as a sequence of frustration (passional state), discontent (passional pivot) and aggressivity (passional realization), except that the author convokes humility in place of aggressivity, and this convocation (preemptively in the form of a challenge) is the vehicle for presentifying new expectations. How is it possible to override the natural outlet for disappointed expectations as vengeance – the channelling of emotion into a narrative programme to restore the loss and make the antagonist suffer? Greimas considers one such possibility – the *dispassionization* (*dépassionnement*) of vengeance by socialization of the passional state, that is by ‘cré[ant] une distance entre les instances du sujet et du destinataire-judicateur’ (1983: 244). In that case we delegate the semiosis of disappointment to social institutions of justice: a thematic role replaces a pathemic role in a change of interactive regime from manipulation to programming (Landowski 2005). The Guardian effects a similar regime-shift by imbricating the rule-making script, enlisting its help as a competence relevant to the long-term quest of keeping Britain European. Passion continues to play an important authorizing role, however, since humility has to be convoked to override the anger impulse. The emotions *potentialize* the imagination, while the competences associated with a routine pattern of action *virtualize* a more desirable future partnership. In Peircean terms, we could describe the effect as the provocation of doubt (about the finality of the ‘defeat’ that Brexit meant to most of its readers) to generate a new starting-place for thought. But Peirce seems to regard this recursivity as self-generating – ‘I have permitted myself to call it thought at rest, although thought is essentially an action [...] belief is only a stadium of mental action, an effect upon our nature due to thought, which will influence future thinking.’ (1994: 5.397). Reading the Guardian’s text with Greimas and comparing it with O’Flynn’s reveals the agency of discursive imbrication and passional presentification in authorizing the onset and timing of these stops and starts.

4.2.4 What Greimas teaches us

I schematize the sense of the pending accounts constructed by partisan media in Figure 2. Passions and scripts, with their repertoire of pathemic and thematic roles are located at a *metaconversational* level, the site of an imbricating communication contract one step removed from the *metatexts* that generate or cancel deontic claims. They in turn presentify or absentify expectations about future courses of action by convoking specific passions and scripts. At the level of action, strategy is virtually performed by the rival interpretations these metatexts give it as they (de)commission further action. Pragmatically speaking, they say: *What we meant by strategy X was (let’s) do Y because we’re/you’re inclined to act like Z*. This is a more explicit claim than those which, in Bourdieu’s words, ‘signify to someone who they are and signify how they should behave in consequence.’ Institutional discourse does not need to tell us how we are inclined to act because the metaconversation tacitly permeates our dispositions. When passions and scripts have to be actively convoked, it signifies organizational trouble – misrecognitions that no longer pass unnoticed. The preemptive sanction of a challenge anticipates resistance to the deontic implications of an equivalent proposition framed indicatively; making explicit the finality of the sanction to forestall questions about what happens next legitimizes those very questions.

Figure 2 abandons Peirce’s essentially syntagmatic understanding of interpretive context: ‘in the Peircean view, every sign, hence every linguistic utterance, is necessarily contextualized, because it always comes after, during, and before other utterances [and] *it largely takes its meaning after its place in the chronology*’ (Réthoré 1993: 395, emphasis added). Greimas’s understanding of context was both syntagmatic and paradigmatic, in the sense that we interpret the ‘action’ through its imbrication in a pre-existing contract of communication, usually given by the organizational context: ‘Greimas saw the action portrayed in a narrative as framed (“encadré”) by a contract, but, unlike Peirce [...] he perceived it to be established from the outset between a source of authority and an agent. The source (the “Sender”), or the organization, enshrines a set of values: a thirdness. It furnishes the guiding star for its members.’ (Taylor & Van Every 2014: 14) With Greimas, semiosis does not consist only of chains of interpretants, each the effect of a previous one, but also results from the imbrication of different levels of signification. Actions themselves are sequenced in imbricated arrangements when one micro-sequence serves the purpose of generating the competences or enlisting the helpers necessary for the accomplishment of an embedding macro-sequence. When sanctioning and commissioning are articulated in the manner proposed by the Guardian, the action being evaluated becomes a qualifying test in a larger quest. When a narrative programme is decommissioned in the manner proposed by O’Flynn, cancelling the deontic implications that usually ensue from an evaluation of action, the culminating event is, on the contrary, marked as a glorifying test.

Finally, whereas Peirce was primarily interested in how inquiry produces a ‘final’ interpretant that fixes belief (if only temporarily), Greimas was interested in situations where there are conflicts about what the law (or contract) says. The term metaconversation captures this polyphonic, polemical quality of thirdness, where conflicting parties can oppose thirds to *contrary* thirds, invoke ‘anti-senders’ and produce metatexts that cite, clarify and contest previous conversations in a dialogue of continual reinterpretation.

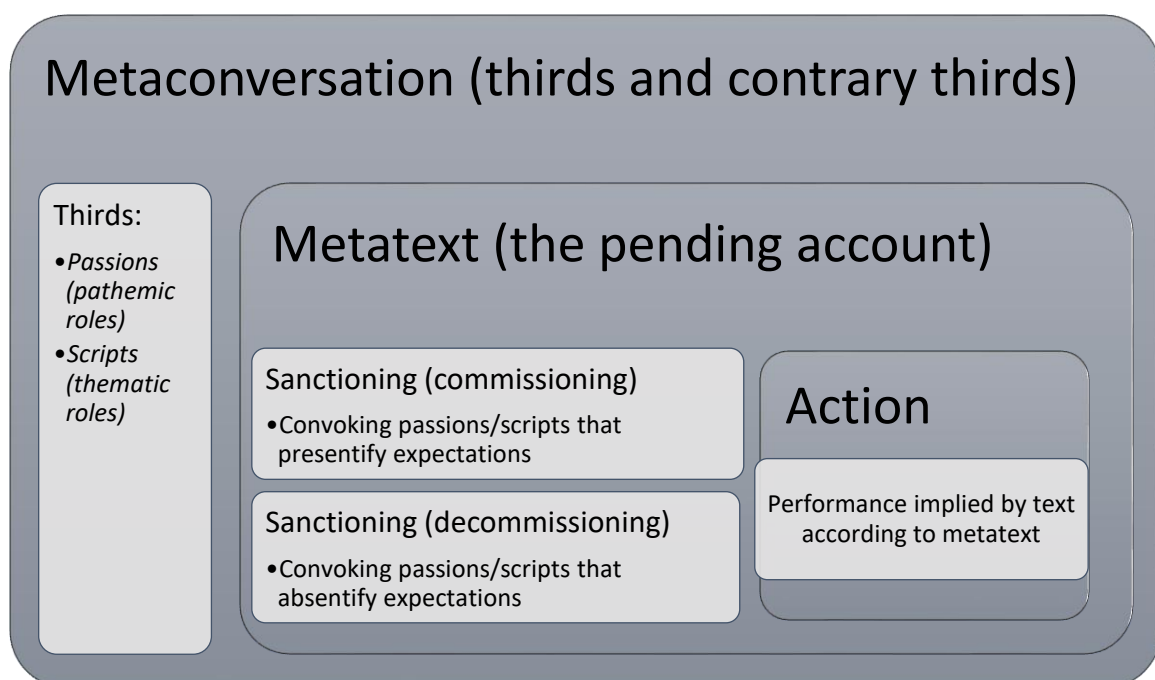


Figure 2: The configuration of pending accounts through text-conversation imbrication.

5. Concluding remarks

Lodged not in individuals or groups but in the thirdness of their associations, authority risks becoming obsolete when there is a change in the object of value at the centre of a relationship. In the case of Brexit, significant shifts in the value of objects like membership, sovereignty and self-government were at the heart of the process. This made participants ‘construct accounts that will justify *their* interpretation of the relationship’ (Taylor & Van Every 2014: 21). Participants put themselves forward as spokespeople for strategy texts in competition to say ‘*what we meant by that was...*’. This is what Robichaud et al. (2004) showed in their analysis of the construction of authority in public debate. My first, modest contribution is the observation that these sensemaking efforts often entail new inducements to action: ‘what we meant by that was *let’s do this*’. They construct pending accounts.

I then set out to show how the pending account is integral to the discursive configuration of moments of organizational change and what has to be done to make them authoritative. The term ‘pending’ connotes *unfinished* and *due to be finished* (i.e. urgent). The term ‘account’ signifies both *account of* (e.g. ‘can you give an account of what happened?’) and *account for* (e.g. ‘can you account for these actions?’). To give an ‘account of’ demands an *observational* competence exemplified by the use of project verbs in sensemaking. To ‘account for’ demands either a *quasi-scientific* competence (justification by proving, in keeping with Peirce’s hypothesis-testing sensemaking) or a *quasi-legal* competence (justification as reckoning, in keeping with the sanctioning dimension of Greimas’s narrative sensemaking). At moments of organizational change a speaker therefore has to induce subjectivation by competentializing the audience as (co-)observer, (co-)investigator and (co-)sanctioner with respect to the proposed future course of action. In the here-and-now of an enunciative situation, however, audiences can more easily resist interpellations whose authority rests not on inferences but on references – not on complicity in institutional discourse’s ambiguities of action recognition, but on cooperation with more explicit articulations between emotional and deontic claims. The audiences for interpretive metatexts deploying emotion are not simply being nudged by an emotional interpretant (an inference): once a speaker tries to capture the public mood and verbalize a proposed habit-change the inquiry is fixing belief and the pragmatic question concerns adherence or attachment. Similarly, speakers who refer to a named script or passion will successfully translate a motivational affordance only if this presentifies expectations that make a difference to the situation from the point of view of those asked to assume thematic or pathemic roles.

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