



# Guinea Pig's Destinies

Alain Perusset

University of Warwick<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Stating that the guinea pig is a furry rodent from the Andes is not of much interest to semiotics, which is primarily concerned with how we make sense of the world. On the other hand, wondering about how humans view this little being turns to be a lot more relevant for the discipline. In this case, the semiotician who would be interested in the study of this animal would begin by putting everything straight, considering only one thing sure : that the guinea pig, before being an animal, is first and foremost an “actant”<sup>2</sup>.

The word “actant” is used to describe anything that has a body and can therefore have an influence on the course of an event. Above all, this notion makes it possible not to prejudge the value, the nature or the size of the reality considered. This means that an actant can be an organism, an object, a piece of clothing, a building, a geological formation, or a celestial body. Furthermore, through its action on to the world, the actant is always characterised by a function (a purpose) that can vary according to the circumstances and the points of view.

In short, with this key concept, semiotics argues that meaning is neither to be discovered nor to be deciphered, but that it is constructed *within* the relationship *between* the world (in this case the guinea pig) and the person who experiences

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2 For a general presentation of Greimas's narrative and actantial semiotics, see A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1982.

it. Therefore, to examine the guinea pig semiotically, one must question for whom or what this actant has a meaning. The very regimes of its meaning vary according to these relationships and the corresponding forms of interaction.

### Meanings at a Distance

For the biologist, who studies the interactions of organisms in their environment, there is no doubt that the purpose-meaning of the guinea pig, in the wild, is to maintain the balance of its ecosystem by participating in the food chain, that is, by serving as a meal for birds of prey and foxes, so that they can in turn fulfill their functions in the biosphere. From this point of view, we can fully recognize that these small rodents, in the countryside, are indirectly and involuntarily doing us a favor ; they contribute, at their humble level, by their sacrifice, to regulating the biodiversity from which we all benefit. In this respect, they act like discrete service providers, or more accurately like *agents* (namely, autonomous actants).

On the contrary, when we no longer let nature do its work, when we take responsibility for the destiny of guinea pigs, as with their domestication, they come to play another role, that of a *device*. Guinea pigs commonly conceived as pets are indeed reified actors that society leads us to consider from a unique perspective, within the framework of a codified use that we have internalized. In this context, when parents acquire these little rodents to ensure that their children do not get too bored at home, they conceive them as devices : programmed solutions for cultural problems.

### Meanings on Contact

It goes without saying that our relationship with guinea pigs goes beyond cultural denotation, because meaning is first of all a process that is created and renewed through close contacts, within tangible experiences. Thus, for a child, this little animal can be much more than an institutionalised hobby. Through the intimacy of their relationship at home, through the *adjustment* of each of them to the movements and reactions of the other, infinite meanings can emerge. In such circumstances, the guinea pig can become the equal of a *partner*, that inspires by its softness and consequently can succeed in consoling childish sorrows, as well as arouse veterinary vocations.

Finally, far from this relationship of reciprocal accomplishment, based on sensitivity and discovery, the interaction with the guinea pig can also be a power struggle, aiming to achieve specific ends. This is the case when we wake it up from its sleep to play ; or when we wring its neck to stun it, as it is still often done in the Andes to prepare it for cooking.

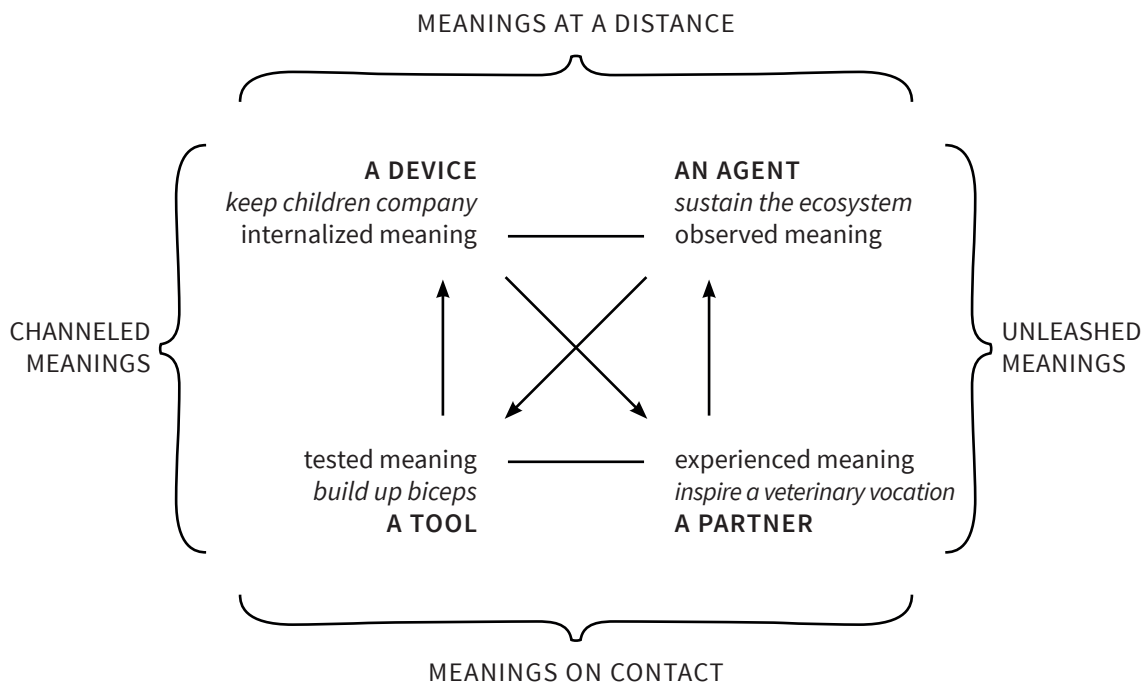
Under this regime of *manipulation*, in contrast to the previous one, we see that meaning no longer occurs by itself, but that it is tested, directed, precisely manipulated... Consequently, the guinea pig, in spite of himself, cannot do

anything but assume the unenviable role of a *tool* or a product, like a toy or food<sup>3</sup>.

### Meanings in the System

We have superficially evoked some meanings of the guinea pig. We could also have focused on its use in laboratories (as a “guinea pig” !). But, in the end, the important thing is to keep in mind that the guinea pig, like any other actant, can reveal an infinity of meanings, within the limits of what its material and dynamic properties allow. Thus, we might consider — but not advise — using a guinea pig to build up biceps (because it has the same weight as a small dumbbell and can therefore be held in the hand), but we can forget the idea of using it as a coffee table (because a guinea pig — alive —is neither flat nor stationary).

Lastly, to sort out all these propositions, we can rely on *ad hoc* models. In this case, the semiotic square demonstrates that all the possible and imaginable meanings that can be attached to the guinea pig could be related to one of the four general categories we have identified in this short paper. That is, according to the structural logic of semiotics, the guinea pig would always have the value of either an *agent*, a *device*, a *partner*, or a *tool*.



The semiotic square of “guinea pig” values

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to the “interaction regimes” here evoked (adjustment, manipulation, programming...), see Eric Landowski, *Les interactions risquées*, Limoges, PULIM, 2005. In English, *id.*, “Structural, yet Existential”, in Eero Tarasti (ed.), *Transcending Signs*, Berlin, Mouton-de Gruyter (forthcoming), or *id.* and Jean-Paul Petitimberty, “Risky Heuristics”, in Paul Copley (ed.), *Semiotics and its Masters*, Berlin, Mouton-de Gruyter (forthcoming).

**References**

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- Landowski, Eric, *Les interactions risquées*, Limoges, PULIM, 2005.
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**Résumé :** Dans ce court article nous examinons, avec légèreté et d'un point de vue sémiotique, les différentes significations que l'on peut attribuer au cobaye.

**Resumo :** Neste breve artigo examinamos, com leveza e do ponto de vista semiótico, os diferentes significados que podem ser atribuídos à cobaia.

**Abstract :** In this short paper we examine, with lightness and from a semiotic point of view, the different meanings that can be attributed to the guinea pig.

**Mots clefs :** actant, interaction (regimes of —), meaning (regimes of —)

**Auteurs cités :** Algirdas J. Greimas, Eric Landowski

**Plan :**

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