Summary of Course C.3.2. Introduction to the Theory of Interpretation (1981–1982)

General:

This course examines how human beings know reality, confer meaning on it, and communicate through signs, symbols, and models. Originally developed as an auxiliary hermeneutical discipline for interpreting religious and legal texts, the theory of interpretation was expanded by thinkers such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Peirce into a broad epistemology and the core method of the humanities.

Starting from the intentional structure of consciousness (Subject – Sign – Object), the course analyses how perception and concept formation come together in interpretation, how signs function at the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels, and how scientific models structure reality through isomorphism. The text also explores ambiguity—the possibility that a single material object may be interpreted from various formal perspectives—as well as the causes that make a given phenomenon uninterpretable (such as physical uncertainty or psychological repression) and the criteria by which human beings achieve clarification and epistemic certainty.

Summary:

1: Historical development and basic structure of interpretation

The Dutch word *duiden* has Germanic origins (*dieden* or *duden*, derived from *theudho*, meaning "people") and originally referred to "making things understandable to the people". The concept of hermeneutics derives from the Greek *hermeneutikè technè* and initially referred to the art of interpreting, explaining, and expressing thoughts. Whereas hermeneutics had traditionally served as an auxiliary discipline for theologians and lawyers interpreting biblical and legal texts, F. D. Schleiermacher transformed it into a fully fledged epistemology, or theory of knowledge, in which knowing is essentially understood as empathy and interpretation. W. Dilthey later elevated hermeneutics to the specific method of the humanities, while C. S. Peirce described human beings as "interpretants", or interpreters.

The epistemological basic structure of interpretation rests on the conception of consciousness developed by Husserl, Brentano, and Bolzano, according to which human consciousness is characterised by *intentio*, or directedness. In the process of interpretation, a conscious subject encounters an object through a sign associated with it: Subject – Sign – Object.

This sign may be mental (a concept or representation), linguistic (spoken or written language), or symbolic in nature.

In epistemology, the course distinguishes three fundamental ways of approaching reality:

- *Perceptionism:* claims that consciousness comes into direct contact with reality through immediate observation or intuition.
- *Conceptionism:* argues that our awareness of reality is indirect and is subjectively constructed by our own conceptual faculty.
- *Interpretationism:* holds that consciousness oscillates between perception and conception; interpretation encompasses both the perception of the perceived (mental) sign and its conception.

2: Sign theory, typology, and philosophy of language

Two major traditions are central to sign theory: F. de Saussure's semiology and C. S. Peirce's semiotics. Saussure views language as a social system of signs and makes a strict distinction between *langue* (the social language system) and *parole* (individual speech). Peirce, by contrast, approaches the sign philosophically and realistically: the sign is the means of knowing through which the knowable content of things emerges in perception.

C. W. Morris divides sign theory into three fundamental dimensions:

1- Syntactic dimension: examines the relationships among signs within a formal sign system or code.

2- Semantic dimension: studies the relationship between the sign (*signifiant*) and its meaning (*signifié*). A distinction is made here between *sense* (intensional cognitive content) and *reference* (extensional reference to objects). Semasiological classification shows how words acquire literal, transferred, metaphorical, or metonymic meanings through analogy.

3- Pragmatic dimension: focuses on the actual effects and use of signs by people in communication, rhetoric, speech acts (*performative utterances*), and social influence.

Regarding sign typology, Peirce distinguishes three types of signs:

- *Iconic signs:* are based on an objective, factual resemblance (such as a map or image).
- *Indicative signs:* rely on a physical or causal connection (such as a signpost or fever as a symptom).
- *Symbolic signs:* indicate something on the basis of a conventional agreement among interpreters (such as words or numbers).

Symbol theory makes a crucial distinction between conventional scientific-logistic symbols and extra-logistic or religious-mythical symbols. The latter refer to a transempirical, mysterious reality and possess a deeper, "instaurative" meaning that is not arbitrary.

In the philosophy of language, the course explores the relationship between language and thought. The medieval theory of *suppositio* shows how a linguistic sign can function materially (as a sound) or formally (by referring to a concept or an objective reality).

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis states that culturally shaped language determines our thinking; N. Chomsky qualifies this view by pointing to universal, creative structures of thought.

Finally, mentalism (thinking as an immaterial inner process) is contrasted with linguisticism (thinking as identical to the use of a language system).

3: Model theory and information theory

A model is a conceptual, concrete, or formal representation of an object, process, or system that serves as a means of interpretation. The usefulness of a model rests on the set-theoretical concepts of isomorphism (a point-by-point or one-to-one correspondence between elements and structures) and homomorphism (a one-to-many or many-to-one structural correspondence).

The course distinguishes three main types of models:

- *Empirical (concrete) models:* concrete, physical, or social representations (such as scale models or mock-ups).
- *Conceptual models:* first-degree abstractions that represent substantive insights or patterns (such as a profile sketch or a theoretical atomic model).
- *Formal models:* second-degree abstractions that operate purely formally and symbolically, as a calculus or system of calculation.

A further distinction is made between *regulative* (normative/universal) models (such as mathematical formulae in physics) and *applicative* (concrete/case-based) models. As Kant observed, regulative models without applicative applications are empty, whereas applicative models without regulative rules are blind.

Within information theory and communication theory, a model is understood as information. In the technical communication circuit, a sender

transmits a message through an encoded channel to a receiver, who decodes or interprets it.

N. Wiener emphasizes that information is an independent category: it is neither matter nor energy, but the structural content being exchanged. If we adopt the epistemological and ontological conceptual realism of Peirce and Willmann, reality is constitutively "intelligible" and possesses an ideal, knowable structure of its own, enabling human models genuinely to explain reality.

4: Ambiguity, uninterpretableness, and the method of clarification

Ambiguity (or multiple interpretability) occurs when a single material object (*obiectum materiale*) gives rise to multiple formal objects (*obiecta formalia*) or interpretations. Thus, one physical tree may acquire an entirely different meaning and interpretation from a biological, commercial, aesthetic, legal, or scientific perspective. In psychodiagnostics, ambiguity manifests itself in projection: when interpreting a stimulus, the subject externalises inner motives. Ambiguity also plays a central role in the Bible and theology, for example in parables or divine judgement, where a situation diagnostically reveals a person's moral disposition.

The course then addresses uninterpretableness and its causes:

- *Physical:* microphysics involves fundamental indeterminism; according to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the process of observation changes the state of a particle, making statistical calculations the only possibility.
- *Biological:* the outward phenotype does not necessarily coincide with the underlying genotype.
- *Human/Psychological***:** uninterpretableness arises either consciously (deception, strategy, rhetoric) or unconsciously. S. Freud demonstrated how the human psyche and dreams obscure texts through the mechanisms of *omission/condensation*, *displacement*, and *reversal*.

To overcome uninterpretableness, philosophy develops a method of clarification and criteria for truth. While the phenomenological sceptic strictly confines themselves to the immediately observable "phenomenon", other approaches move beyond this by applying specific criteria of certainty:

-*Empirical criteria:* direct sensory observation and indirect testimony or experiments.
- *Logical criteria:* conceptual intuition, reasoning, and formal-systematic consistency.

Transempirical criteria: direct mystical/sensitive experiences and indirect religious revelations.

The debate between phenomenology (which intuitively contemplates the essences of phenomena) and structuralism (which searches for unconscious, deep-seated logical-mathematical structures beneath the surface) underscores that clarifying reality requires a layered, interdisciplinary approach.