

## Editorial

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# Vistas for organized global semiotics

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The question of how best to organize semiotics is not susceptible of one short answer. However, in what follows, we will attempt to give a very brief overview of some of the issues that confront us. Hopefully, we will be able to indicate that there are ways of successfully addressing these issues.

First of all, we need to be clear – although not necessarily definite in a way which is restrictive – regarding what semiotics is. Semiotics is defined in numerous ways and is also subject to various narratives, particularly from the vantage point of different disciplinary perspectives. Definitions of semiotics cast it as, among other things,

- the theory of the sign
- the theory of semiosis
- a “sign science” that encompasses all modes of signification
- a concern with codes and decoding
- a branch of, or supplement to, linguistics
- one of the three ingredients of cognitive semiotics
- synonymous with “semiology”
- the study of human signification
- the study of comparative Umwelten, comprising the signification of all living things

Narratives of semiotics depict it as

- founded by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)
- founded by Saussure and the American polymath, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914)
- established by Saussure, Peirce, and the Hungarian-American polymath, Thomas A. Sebeok (1920–2001)
- inaugurated as an enduring pre-Socratic practice by Hippocrates of Cos (460–377 BCE) and Galen of Pergamon (129-c.200), developed by St. Augustine (354–430) and John Locke (1632–1704)

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- the means to perceive the gap between illusion and reality
- akin to and fashionable during the period of structuralism and post-structuralism
- largely dead because textual analysis has been superseded by the study of audiences meanings
- very much alive because analysis of “codes” and invariants will always be needed and semiotics does take account of the audience in any case
- synonymous with communication theory
- synonymous with literary theory
- synonymous with linguistics (that is cognizant of multimodality)
- synonymous with certain branches of marketing and branding theory
- synonymous with other fields in the humanities, too

In addition to this last point, we should also note that practitioners and theorists in semiotics of different fields – language, texts, cognition, cultural studies, architecture, and so forth – often assume that what they do in their study of signs makes up the whole of semiotics. Moreover, we must acknowledge that semiotics has undergone periods in its history when it has enjoyed centrality and marginality, and this may be no less true in the future.

Some brief answers can be offered to shed light on this seemingly over-determined situation. Initially semiotics gained recognition as a defined methodology under the label “semiology.” It inspired structuralism and other major currents of thought through the twentieth century. The success of this line of thought also provoked a debate and the strengthening of alternative approaches. The history of contemporary semiotics is the history of this reaction in which semiotics expands on the study of *all* signs, not just the linguistic ones that dominate the “semiology” projected by Saussure and, later, Barthes. According to many authors, the term “semiotics” is derived from a Greek root, *seme*, and was taken up by Charles Sanders Peirce, who sought to classify all types of signs in the universe. From this perspective, semiotics constitutes the major tradition of sign study ultimately derived from the ancient semioticians (see Sebeok 2001). In the Anglophone world the name “semiotics” was current even while semiology was dominant, largely because the anthropocentric endeavors of semiologists were brought together with those of semioticians for the formation of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in 1969.

In the Soviet Union a semi-autonomous development of semiotics emerged in the early sixties – the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school – where, on the basis of semiology, structuralism and formalism were established as new methods of the study of secondary modelling systems. This approach has further extended

the range of semiotic inquiry and, with the later introduction of the theoretical model of the Semiosphere by Lotman, the school became a lesser known exemplar of post-structuralism.

Semiology became semiotics also in relation to the structuralist tradition. According to the founder of the Paris School of Semiotics, A. J. Greimas, “it was not until the 1970s that the methodological content of semiology and of semiotics was progressively differentiated, making the distinction between the two designations significant” (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 282). He explains:

The semiological project was quickly reduced to almost nothing since it was developed within the limited framework of Saussure’s definition (and outside of any contact with the epistemology of the human sciences of the period). The concept of “system,” in this project, excludes semiotic process and, at the same time, the most diverse signifying practices. (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 282)

This huge theoretical endeavor put the process of signification at its center and thus reduced the dependency of semiotic enquiry on the linguistic sign, the latter being one of the many possible manifestations of the generative trajectory of meaning on the surface of communicative phenomena. As a result semiotic theory gained a rigorous analytic method and thus made a big step towards its academic establishment.

Semiotics, then, has harbored an inherent global remit. In a pre-Socratic fashion, it has sought to unify science and philosophy by way of a concern with how the entire cosmos operates – the earth, its inhabitants and the elements – rather than just the interactions that constitute the polis. In addition to Greimas, both Peirce and Sebeok, out of step with the intellectual fashions of their times, shared this outlook. For the later Peirce, especially, the entirety of logic, philosophy and science were only approachable through an expansive sign theory, as Poinot had demonstrated in 1632 (see Poinot 2013). Peirce envisaged a sign theory that would be comprehensive rather than localized, comprising “mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economics, the history of science, whist, men and women, wine, metrology” (Peirce 1966: 408). He wrote to Lady Welby, late in life, revealing that he had recognized ten basic types of signs and 59,049 different classes of signs in all (Peirce 1966: 407).

It was Umberto Eco, awarded the first chair in Semiotics at the Bologna University in the very year when he published his *Theory of Semiotics* (1975) who produced the most significant attempt to synthesize what the various branches of the discipline had achieved so far. The volume represented a landmark after which semiotics, gradually and with its own name, entered many universities

worldwide and a *global community* of researchers identifying themselves as *semioticians* emerged. Eco's work, and *Theory of Semiotics* in particular, evinces eclecticism, interdisciplinarity, a catholic approach to knowledge and a strict avoidance of the perilous lure of over-specialization.

We would argue that the organization of semiotics has to evince a similarly catholic embrace. This is not to say that every semiotician needs to adhere closely to the words of Peirce and Greimas; on the contrary: there is much fruitful work in the history of semiotics beyond both of these figures. Nor do semiotics' practitioners have to swear allegiance to a pre-Socratic, cosmological practice. Rather, it is to say that a semiotic worldview, because it necessitates, at the very least, sympathy for interdisciplinarity, must be organized with reference to a not incautious inclusivity. The International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS) has always operated with this implicit remit and a glance at the pages of its eclectic journal, *Semiotica*, will bear this out; nevertheless, it helps to explicitly reaffirm this remit from time to time. This is not meant to encourage a "pansemiotic" perspective in which *everything* is to be considered a "sign"; nor is it meant to welcome untutored musings about signification, devoid of methodology and dictated by whim. However, it is meant to promote semiotics as *global*.

The challenge that is posed in leading semiotics and ensuring that it remains global is outlined by our immediate predecessor – the IASS President, Eero Tarasti. In his essay, "Can semiotics be organized? Observations over a forty-year period," he suggests (2015: 434) that the two main tasks of the International Association for Semiotic studies have been to organize world congresses and to ensure the continued publication of *Semiotica*, the journal of the Association. At the time that he assumed his presidential position (2004), these probably were the keys to ensuring globality. General use of the internet was only seven or eight years old; Web 2.0 had not even happened. Corporate use of digital media was in its infancy, while the participatory aspects of the World Wide Web were waiting to be delivered by the midwifery of broadband. Social media were a projection, rather than a reality of the vaunted network society. Smartphones were a nascent and limited technology. YouTube's launch was a year away. Even Dropbox (and other cloud computing platforms) would not be available for another three years. The decisive means by which scholars could interact in an international community was through periodic meetings in person. This remains the case; there can be no substitute for it – but the developing digital environment means that we can keep in contact and carry out work in a much more meaningful way in what would previously have amounted to durations of non-communication or communication in a protracted, wearying fashion.

The digital environment entails, of course, the accumulation and interconnectedness of data, as enthusiasts of "Big Data" are quick to remind us.

Digitality has also recently enabled the IASS to solve a major problem that Tarasti (2015: 432) observes in his essay: the fact that nobody seemed to know how many members there were in the Association. However, for anyone who entered the academy before the beginning of this century, it is hard to disagree with Tarasti's lament about bean-counting and the general fixation on data. The auditing of universities in the West was simultaneous with the rise of neo-liberalism and the privatization of all manner of institutions that should never be privatized. Inevitable though it seems now, some failed to anticipate that the constant auditing of university functions (ultimately, in the name of cost effectiveness) would lead to target setting plus, of course, more auditing and targets. Tarasti points to the absurdities of the Finnish system, but examples could be found all over the West.

Now, this is not to say that digitality is to blame for the audit and costing mania that has afflicted universities and that is more recently carried out to supposedly satisfy demands for public accountability. Digitality is merely the mode by which counting is carried out and, as in the IASS membership records, it can be locally helpful. Yet, Tarasti does point to a convergence of digitality and auditing that does threaten the global community of scholars and needs to be taken seriously despite its apparently crass instrumentalism. It is the idea that scholarly endeavor – and universities, in particular – will be rendered obsolete by the availability of the internet through devices that access the store of “knowledge” twenty-four hours per day, even when people are mobile. Risible though this idea may seem to anyone who knows that scholars do not trade in the kind of “knowledge” that websites afford, it is nevertheless a recurring trope in the thought of contemporary Western governments, threatens to gain traction sufficiently to influence decision making and is systemically insidious. In respect of this latter, the late semiotician and *spiritus rector* of the global semiotics community, Umberto Eco, issued his own valediction in a recent letter to his grandson.<sup>1</sup> There, he stated his concern that constant use of the internet for looking up facts would lead to the atrophy of the capacity of memory on the part of individuals and ultimately on the part of society and culture. Worse still, without acts of memorizing, the minds of people would become increasingly lacking in experience and feeling.

These are massive issues and they call for even such relatively marginalized entities as scholarly associations to be vigilant and negotiate these issues in the best possible way. Indeed, scholarly associations might even have a more important role in some respects, such as ensuring that the internet is used

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<sup>1</sup> [http://espresso.repubblica.it/visioni/2014/01/03/news/umberto-eco-caro-nipote-studia-a-memoria-1.147715?refresh\\_ce](http://espresso.repubblica.it/visioni/2014/01/03/news/umberto-eco-caro-nipote-studia-a-memoria-1.147715?refresh_ce) (accessed 20 April 2016).

to facilitate meaningful experiences in digitality and in the wider world beyond. For the IASS, the Congress remains important and the last two have been crucial in developing semiotics for the future. The 11th World Congress in Nanjing forged some East-West relationships that would not have happened without it and offered opportunities for collaboration that simply did not exist before. This is extremely important for Western semioticians who will benefit from the good practice in research and teaching that is abundant in China especially. For its part, China has previously harbored the least travelled scholars in the global community (Jump 2015), so we must seize the chance to increase the traffic in wisdom. A similar density of less-travelled scholars occurs in South America where semiotics is very strong. Such strength, again, suggests an abundance of good practice that needs to be known and be available for adoption round the globe.

The 12th World Congress in Sofia also established organized semiotics in the contemporary era. We would hazard that it was the first *digital* IASS Congress, as well as drawing in scholars from East Asia following the success of the Nanjing Congress, along with a large number of academics from Brazil. The recruitment of participants, rather than being based on a one-to-many call, was instead carried out on a networking basis, much of which productively implemented social media. Digital record-keeping ensured a good relationship between New Bulgarian University, the hosts, and the IASS, with the Congress collecting a large number of memberships on behalf of the Association. Communications at the Congress and afterwards were carried out on a new basis, also: Kristian Bankov, the Congress organizer, assembled a crack team of “tech-savvy” designers who not only gave the Congress a memorable and outward-facing identity, but also managed to resolve such decades-old problems as the production of a readable, easily digestible program. That sterling work continues with the publication of the Proceedings on a sustainable basis, controlled by the IASS with the help of the NBU team, allowing publication on our own terms and preventing the Association – not to mention Congress organizers – from being left at the mercy of predatory publishers.

During this term, the IASS remains committed to a number of priorities that are aimed to negotiate the new realities of academic endeavor and to utilize digitality to its best possible advantage for members. These priorities are as follows:

- Raising funds for the IASS, through expanded membership and increased activity. The Congress is obviously crucial to this process; but, so too is membership in non-Congress years. We have streamlined the membership options to encourage membership and we have also secured a deal with de Gruyter to offer access for members to a significant amount of content in the publisher’s catalogue. Raising funds in this way is crucial if we are to be

able to finance some of the necessary initiatives we discuss below, as well as generally remaining viable as an association.

- Transparency: making the major decisions of the IASS (for example, on future Congresses) as transparent as possible. To continue to maintain the confidence of our membership, including those who attend our Congresses, we have to ensure that each member has a stake and can contribute to the decisions and future of the Association.
- Making the voting processes in the IASS clearer for members; this may seem like a minor issue that arises only at every other Congress. However, it is a major issue in assuring that members have a stake and know what they are voting for. We have thus streamlined the voting system and also made it transparent by devising a process for inviting candidacies and making it clear how officers will be elected to serve on the Bureau and the Executive Committee, not to mention how they will serve members. Members need to have a clear chain of representation in scholarly societies.
- Ensuring that members receive regular active communications (e.g., emails, alerts, newsletters) from the organization, rather than passive communications (website postings); banal though it might seem, all of the above commitments rest upon the simple act of communication. As part of the dedication to communication, we have used the ongoing internationalization of the Bureau of the IASS as a means, also, to provide communication in a number of languages, hopefully reaching more members, more quickly, as well as non-members.
- Raising the profile of the IASS and semiotics, as well as encouraging collaboration, through a heightened presence on social media; this is ongoing and will continue as long as there is an IASS. Arguably, we are in an era of self-promotion and it is tempting to refuse to engage with that. Personally, the two of us writing here are certainly social media “refuseniks” in many areas of our personal and professional life. Furthermore, there are scholarly organizations that pursue their aims and fulfil their intellectual remit without resorting to any self-promotion tactics using social media. The International Society for Biosemiotics Studies, an affiliate of the IASS for which Paul Cobley is secretary, is one of those organizations that maintains its focus partly because it does not carry out promotional activities. However, for the IASS, with its much larger membership and remit, there does seem to be a need for networked promotion and information sharing. The way that the membership participated in the organization of the Sofia Congress suggests this; their responses in subsequent surveys also underlines it. As younger researchers enter the scholarly world, there will be a majority of digital natives among our membership. Some of the

commitments we outline below, particularly the advancement and protection of early career researchers, are predicated on an organization with a high profile.

- Using communication networks to enhance connections and knowledge about ongoing research and to promote, in particular
  - empirical research in semiotics
  - impact of semiotic research

The IASS is a knowledge network. Our members have strongly indicated that they want to find out as much as is possible with existing technology about what is going on in the field of semiotic research. We have a general commitment to make available details of existing research which will then spawn further research. We would never block the path of inquiry and part of this certainly must involve encouragement of the path of inquiry by whatever means is available to us.

- setting up an archive devoted to the IASS and an Open Access repository for members' publications; as part of the process of making knowledge available as widely as possible to our members and networking it, these are crucial commitments that we are currently working to set up.
- Encouraging collaborations between geographical regions where there are strengths in semiotics and other regions (for example, East Asia, South America, Africa); the benefits of this are palpable. Some have been discussed, above.

In addition to the above, there are some more long-range commitments that we feel the need to try to meet in the new academic environment.

- Setting up an IASS postgraduate network in semiotics, to share practice and support among early career researchers in the field and to monitor job prospects for young scholars; as mentioned above, a strong Association with high and credible profile is important for protecting and advancing the careers of researchers in our field. Realistically, the pledging or even inclination of those researchers to semiotics is no light undertaking because semiotics is not globally institutionalized like many established disciplines and, in terms of careers, still lives life on the margins. We need to take measures now to ensure that, to the best of our abilities, we prevent our colleagues who are emerging and those who are more established from becoming part of the global Higher Education precariat.
- Forging partnerships with cognate traditional academic organizations and commercial organizations/potential funders; at first sight, this seems to be a symptom of the privatization of academic life. No doubt that is true.



However, in lieu of reversing the tide of privatization, there is the possibility of seizing an opportunity. This concerns the creation of new knowledge economies in which semiotics becomes a player in preserving and advancing a more enlightened semiosis in both civil society and the polis.

At the same time as we pursue some long-term goals for semiotics, there are also some short-term commitments that we have in relation to publishing, making knowledge available to members and ensuring the credibility and status of that knowledge in the ever-changing academic environment. So, we are committed to

- gaining price concessions on semiotic publications for IASS members; as mentioned above, the new membership structure gives members access to a good number of de Gruyter publications.
- gaining an impact factor for *Semiotica*; as a leading journal of some considerable international standing, there is also some demand from members for the journal to have an impact factor. We are in discussion about this process of application to Thomson Reuters.
- SSCI listings for other major semiotics journals; this is extremely important, sometimes for reasons that are difficult to fathom, in certain areas of the globe, especially in China. If we are to promote contributions from those regions, the journals need to be attractive to our members and fellow semioticians in the area.

So, these are just some of the procedural challenges, beyond running a World Congress and maintaining a journal, which are posed to the organization of semiotics by a profoundly changed global academy and a rapidly changing technological environment that seems to make every succeeding decade almost unrecognizable from the last.

There are, of course, many “purely intellectual” or “methodological” issues that, for semiotics, are imbricated in these changes. Paul Copley spoke of one of them at the International Symposium on Cultural and Communication Semiotics at Sichuan University last year (Copley 2015). That was the fate of the notion of “code” in semiotics. Since semiotics has become increasingly bound up with processes of interpretation and has largely dispensed with the “fixed-code fallacy,” it is left with some serious challenges. These exist in respect of instruction (what do we offer students if we are not teaching them how to decipher?); in respect of research method (what can we say we are discovering if the results are fundamentally open to interpretation and how can we convince potential funders who want solid answers?); and in respect of collaboration (how can we translate our findings to reach common

ground with research in different cultures and regions?). Despite these difficult questions, we still adhere to possibilities of an optimistic prognosis. In the field of instruction, semioticians can continue to teach close reading in a frame of “interpretation semiotics” that ranges across nature; in research, we can develop our own existing interpretative methodologies to produce more reliable results and to convince potential funders. Modelling Systems Theory (Sebeok and Danesi 2000) is one example of a semiotic method whose framework contains as much persuasive systematics as, say, linguistic Critical Discourse Analysis does or the formal socio-semiotic methods of analysis of society of structuralist descent, or empirically-oriented cognitive semiotic research; and in the sphere of collaboration there is an opportunity for scholars to meet on a more interpretative middle ground where new commonalities can be worked out to transcend, for example, the separation of East and West that has occurred in, say, communication study (see Kim 2002).

Especially today, challenges are present in all areas of the organization of academic endeavor. However, in the brief considerations offered here, it has been demonstrated that there are specific obstacles for semiotics to negotiate, often in realization of the fact that they can never be fully overcome while the global academy remains organized as it presently is. One important fact to remember is that there are advantages, as well as difficulties, arising from the key point noted at the outset: that semiotics is defined in numerous ways and is also subject to various narratives. This means it remains open. We can thus work to ensure that semiotics is flexible and adapts to change in the most apt way possible.

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