

Semiotics Will be Hybrid or Will Not be

Introduction

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Abstract: In recent years, semiotics has significantly developed its interdisciplinarity and demonstrated its natural capacity to hybridise with other fields. Whether it is a matter of breaking out of the cultural framework that saw its birth and theorisation, of associating itself with the life sciences or the information sciences, or of providing concrete tools or new theoretical models, the discipline has increasingly demonstrated its full potential. To introduce this special issue devoted to the new avenues explored by the discipline, I will return in this article to what makes it so rich: the grey areas, the blurred boundaries, the complex subjects, the necessarily hybrid objects.

Keywords: Biosemiotics, interdisciplinarity, hybridity, innovation

1. SEMIOTICS AND ITS UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS

Semiotics is a very old discipline that has seen many recent developments. While branches interacting with fields such as medicine, cultural studies, and the history of languages have well-established academic traditions, other fields are emerging: biosemiotics, zoosemiotics, ecosemiotics, protosemiotics, and so on.

However, these younger branches also share the common trait of taking root in other, far more distant and diverse disciplines: biology, ethology, environmental sciences, biochemistry, etc.

Far from being a digression or a scattering of focus, we wish to propose in this special issue a confident stance: these recent movements are in fact perfectly consistent with the very nature of semiotics itself, its particular role as a discipline of bridges, boundaries, and hybrids.

1.1. Building bridges and exploring borders

In this volume, the authors strive to build these bridges, each from their own perspective.

Lobaccaro focuses on the connections forming between the various branches of semiotics and neuroscience, particularly with regard to the theory of consciousness.

Contrary to what might be expected from a discipline so long associated with the linguistic sciences, Hernández explores the value of silence and how it manages to be a void that carries meaning.

A perfect illustration of the discipline's constant shifts, Zengiaro tackles the delicate question of machine translation of animals, and the interactions between human, non-human animal, and artificial intelligences.

On this last point, precisely because issues related to AI are emerging and ubiquitous, they are addressed in this volume from multiple perspectives: Baktygul Abdymkhanova, Lyazat Meirambekova, Aliya Zhumagulova, Gulnur Saganayeva, and Assem Kassymova raises the question of AI's growing presence and unpredictable role on social media, while Lai, Zheng, and Chen examine existing applications, particularly in translation—the discipline of connections and bridges par excellence.

Onsgstad crosses the border between theoretical and applied sciences, by putting semiotics, and more specifically biosemiotics, at the crosspath.

Eventually, circling back to linguistics, Dančova studies how semiosis can be used to understand what happens when language fails.

1.2. Through time and space

It will, of course, not be possible to cover the full range of the semiotics developing branches in this single issue. They now extend far across space and time.

Regarding space, we can note the development in recent years of rich regional semiotics and numerous publications in languages other than English that have a very concrete impact on the available corpora; but also theoretical works pushing the boundaries of semiotics very far, such as those on the concept of “lyfe,” life as we do not know it, in exoplanetology and astrobiology.

As for time, studies in proto-semiotics intersect with those on abiogenesis and explore the emergence of semiosis and its concomitance (or lack thereof?) with that of life; while the numerous works on AI project onto what it may or may not accomplish, and on how to recognize the emergence of its semiosis if it ever occurs.

It seems that there is no realm of the living—from what once became living to what may one day become so—that semiotics does not reach, or at least attempt to touch upon.

1.3. The Mad Semiotician and his Tool Box

The reason behind this rather unusual behaviour (and a relatively rare one within academic disciplines) may lie in the dual nature of semiotics: it is both a discipline (with its schools of thought, theories and concepts) and a method (capable of engaging with and serving any discipline that requires a method for studying signs, and it is possible that this applies to all of them).

Semiotics is not merely a hybrid because the discipline is vast; it is so because it can be regarded as a formidable toolbox, with which it is possible to dissect, study, and organise virtually any subject that might catch the eye of a semiotician.

The recent massive diversification of subjects, fields and objects of study should therefore be viewed less as an evolution of the discipline than as a broadening of the research interests of those who practise it. With the proliferation of crises and emergencies, the acceleration of technological progress and ethical challenges, semioticians are spreading across all academic disciplines, taking their methods with them and disseminating their tools and concepts wherever they go. This is less a transformation of the discipline than an evolution within the academic world.

2 Semiotics will be Hybrid

The current evolution of the academic world appears to be unfolding in two distinct ways, and apparently incompatible ways.

On the one hand, the expansion of knowledge, the increasing precision of unresolved questions, and the highly technical expertise required to use equipment, software, and methods are leading to the hyper-specialization of researchers. On the other hand, the globalization of exchanges, the scale of the crises to be resolved, and the complexity of research questions necessitate an

increasing emphasis on interdisciplinarity and cooperation among specialists.

It would be tempting to assume that semiotics belongs to the second category. But here, too, it reveals itself to be a science of hybridity: the new fields that are emerging are increasingly specialized and niche, yet also increasingly interdisciplinary and multifaceted.

2.1. Science is Hybrid

This can be explained, first and foremost, by the fact that science is hybrid in essence. This may have seemed obvious in an era when the figure of the scholar was, by its very nature, multifaceted and versatile – a specialist in both mathematics and ancient Greek, a distant observer of the stars and a taxonomist of the humble plants in the garden. This diversity may have seemed obsolete in recent decades, when advances in various fields required researchers to possess highly specialised knowledge, sometimes working “in silos”.

But it is increasingly returning to the forefront: interdisciplinarity is everywhere, more and more disciplines are emerging at the borders that once separated two others, and it is now rare for any major problem to be addressed efficiently by a single discipline.

The articles in this issue reflect, in their own way, this hybrid nature of science, whether in terms of how it operates (Ongstad explores the links between theoretical frameworks and applied science) or the emergence of new disciplinary branches themselves (Lobaccaro describes what, at the crossroads of neuroscience and the semiotic sciences, is becoming neurosemiotics), the way a same subject can be studied by different fields (Dančova shows work navigating between linguistics and neurology, humanities and life sciences)

2.2. Life is Hybrid

Semiotics is the study of signs, of what produces, receives and interprets them; its work is therefore intrinsically linked to the properties of living beings. ‘There is no life without sign’ could we say, pushing a bit further Peirce idea.

Yet life is, at its core, a hybrid phenomenon. I shall explore this specific aspect in the following section, as it is my area of specialisation and, in my view, still has much to teach us and many unexplored avenues to follow.

But it may already be worth noting that this hybridity concerns both the limits of life itself (which is addressed here by Zengiaro, who examines the compatibility between the signs of the living beings and their interpretation by the non-living) and the limits at which life perceives a phenomenon as a sign (which is addressed in this issue by Hernández, through the question of silence in communication and semiosis).

2.3. Signs are Hybrid

Finally, it should be emphasised that the very nature of signs is hybrid. Whilst semiotics has long focused on texts and spoken language, it is clear that the branches that have emerged in recent decades, and particularly

in recent years, study a broader range of phenomena. This is the case with my own branch, zoosemiotics, but also with the branches represented by Baktygul Abdykhanova, Lyazat Meirambekova, Aliya Zhumagulova, Gulnur Saganayeva, and Assem Kassymova, which studies AI-written language-human interactions, or by Lai, Zheng and Chen, on the issue of translation between human languages assisted by machine semiosis.

Semiotics is developing all the more because it is the perfect tool for studying complex, inter- and hybrid frameworks. These are its most fruitful and in-demand developments, and, once this milestone has been reached, there is really no turning back, leading me to the conviction that semiotics will be hybrid or it will not be at all.

3. THREE CASE STUDIES

During the 16th World Congress of the IASS/AIS in 2025, in Warsaw, in the panel questioning the unresolved questions in semiotics, I decided to put the focus on hybridity by introducing three case studies, three composite cases, actually. Composite cases are cases initially used in medicine, which make it possible to study all the forms of a syndrome or pathology. They are artificial assemblies of real cases, the idea being to combine, within a single case, all the different possible manifestations, symptoms or complications, which are often scattered between different real cases described in clinical case studies. Composite cases are particularly handy when we have to deal with rare objects of study, for which it is not very easy to have cases, and which therefore need an object of work to be able to be studied in their entirety.

They are therefore particularly interesting and relevant for semiotic studies, since they make it possible to concentrate signs and therefore to study rare sign systems more comprehensively. They must be handled with care, however, as there is a risk of constructing cases that are too artificial and disconnected from what can actually be found in reality. However, they do have the advantage of being able to provide objects for reflection that are rooted in reality and often reflect the complexity of a system or situation better than simple cases taken separately.

3.1. Missy and She – The shared physiology and the semiotics of deception

Missy is a young woman in her twenties. She is not hostile or panicky about the idea of having a child, and she is one of those cases due to which it is now considered more accurate to use 'cryptic pregnancy' rather than 'pregnancy denial'. Unbeknownst to her, an entire part of her Umwelt has 'disappeared' and is hidden from her by her own body: she still has her period, has no particular hormonal symptoms, and, although she has put on a little weight in recent months, she does not have a particularly large belly. Nevertheless, she is 7 months pregnant with a female foetus, She. She will never have her own Umwelt independent of her mother: She suffers from a heart defect that appeared during embryogenesis,

which was not treated because it was not discovered in time, and She will die in utero 2 months before term. For reasons that remain poorly understood to this day, their shared physiology generates a semiotic of deception: Missy lives with contradictory signs within her body, She "forbids" herself to move and kick like a normal foetus. All the time She has lived, she has been part of another Umwelt, and yet this Umwelt has never given the slightest sign of her existence. Missy, on the other hand, carried a foetus for 7 months that was hidden from her by her own body, and only became aware of its presence when She died.

The case of Missy and She raises questions about the very concept of the individual: when physiology is so closely shared, where do we draw the line between individuality and, therefore, each person's unique Umwelt? While I mentioned the difficulty of thinking about individuals that are 'intertwined' within the living world due to the hybrid nature of many species, the question is even more difficult when it comes to two individuals of the same species. Can we still talk about a difference in scale, or should we consider them as being on the same level? Shared physiology here highlights a semiotics of deception: She 'pretended' (through a mechanism that is still unclear) not to exist during her entire brief existence, while Missy (or perhaps more precisely, Missy's body) 'pretended' not to be pregnant during her entire pregnancy. All possible signs were suppressed, hence the more appropriate term 'cryptic pregnancy,' whose signs are hidden.

This case also allows us to reflect on other borderline cases concerning the concepts of individuals and shared physiology. In an experiment on memory, planarians were taught to avoid a particular stimulus. The worm was then cut in two, and two separate individuals regenerated, each with their own will but sharing the same memory¹. What should zoosemiotics make of these subjects: are they individuals? Do they have a single shared Umwelt, two separate ones, or should we start thinking about hybrid forms of Umwelt, which could have a kind of common trunk and separate branches, like an evolutionary tree, and which would itself be an evolving form?

3.2. Lancelot and Perceval – The shared perception and the semiotics of the "better reality"

Lancelot is a young man in his late twenties. Since adolescence, he has suffered from schizophrenia, which causes him to have invasive visual hallucinations that can cause him great distress. Thanks to early intervention, Lancelot has received appropriate care and is taking antipsychotic medication with mixed results: he still has hallucinations, albeit fewer, but he is aware of their nature and his condition. However, as the hallucinations are not always easy to manage or distinguish from reality, he has an assistance dog. This is Perceval, a 4-year-old

1 Deochand N, Costello MS, Deochand ME. Behavioral Research with Planaria. *Perspect Behav Sci.* 2018 Nov 9;41(2):447-464. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40614-018-00176-w>

caramel-coloured Labrador, specifically trained to provide emotional support to his guardian, but also to welcome visitors, point out passing animals, alert Lancelot in the event of a water leak or a fire, in short, to confirm the presence or absence of someone or something, in order to help Lancelot sort out what he sees.

As a result, the two live in a shared perception: Lancelot perceives the world knowing that part of his perception is deceiving him, Perceval is used to Lancelot asking him to interact with things he cannot perceive, and in return Lancelot accepts the idea that what Perceval perceives is more reliable, more 'real', and therefore perceives the world through Perceval's perception rather than his own. Together, they form what is known as an interspecies alliance.

The case of Lancelot and Perceval raises the question of reality: when perception is unreliable but also shared, how can we understand 'reality'? The case of hybridity in perception highlights the ability, and sometimes the necessity, of perceiving our world through someone else's eyes (or other senses). It questions our relationship to signs, the idea that some signs are hidden from us but not from others, or that our world experience may differ from reality. However, if the Umwelt is defined as an individual's mental world, and as the world as perceived and interpreted by that individual, what happens to this concept when an individual interprets the world based mainly or solely on the perception of another? Shared perception highlights the semiotics of the 'best reality': Lancelot is aware that the world as he perceives it does not conform to a 'real' world, an idealised notion of reality to which he has no access, but he knows that Perceval perceives a 'better' reality, while Perceval knows that Lancelot sometimes interacts with elements that do not exist within this 'better reality', and that he must therefore inform him when this happens.

This case also allows us to reflect on other borderline cases in nature concerning the concept of reality and shared perception. The best-known are cases of inter-species alliances between prey that share the same predator but do not have the same sensory abilities or physical skills, which learn to understand and interpret each other's warning signals and, in some cases, even directly warn the other species that has not been able to perceive the danger as they have. There are many such cases, often involving a species of monkey and a species of bird. Zoosemiotics may then ask the question of each species' perception: should the other species be considered an extension of the first species' perception?

3.3. Paul and Joanne – The shared meaning-making and the semiotics of bicephality

Paul is a man in his early forties with a physical disability, the result of a motorcycle accident that left him paralysed from the waist down. He is married to Joanne, a woman in her late thirties, who is his daily carer. Since her late teenage years, Joanne has suffered from a significant personality disorder associated with dysthymia. This mental condition affects her social relationships

and her ability to manage her stress and emotions in her personal life, areas in which Paul becomes her carer. This is referred to as a transable couple.

When faced with a physical situation, Joanne tends to interpret the world through Paul's body, regularly saying, 'No, we will never be able to get through that door, we will have to take the other one,' when only Paul's wheelchair would not be able to pass. When faced with a social or emotional situation, Paul tends to interpret the world through Joanne's mind, labelling events as 'violent' or 'stressful' because they would be for Joanne, even though he himself copes with them very well. Through a kind of feedback loop, Joanne then began to interpret these stressful or violent events for herself through Paul's mind, bypassing her own interpretation to 'hear' Paul's voice and reaction in her head, which were reassuring and soothing.

The case of Paul and Joanne raises the question of interpretation and meaning-making: what does it mean to have 'one's own' interpretation? Here, we can consider that hybridity consists of using another individual's interpretation to construct one's own interpretation or, sometimes, in place of one's own interpretation. However, if we refer once again to the concept of Umwelt and consider that it is indeed the world as perceived and interpreted by an individual, what happens to this concept when the interpretation phase occurs mainly within another individual?

The creation of shared meaning highlights a semiotics that is difficult to define but which, in the case used as an example (and probably in most of the other similar cases), could be called a two-headed semiotics. Paul spends his time making sense of events as if he were inside Joanne's head, while Joanne makes sense of the world as if she were inside Paul's body, but also as if he were inside her own head. As time passes, it becomes increasingly complex to know who is interpreting what and how.

This case also allows us to reflect on other borderline cases in nature, which occur whenever two individuals, sometimes of different species, share a strong bond. The most studied cases are found in domestic animals, which are perfectly capable of interpreting an action by an unknown third party as aggression or a word as a threat, even though the former may resemble play and they do not understand the latter, simply because the human they are with interprets it as such. What may be perfectly harmless or incomprehensible to them is interpreted through the human's interpretation and immediately considered to be something that must be dealt with accordingly. A man may calmly and quietly threaten a woman and be immediately attacked by her dog, which only needed to sense its owner's fear to consider him a danger.

4. MY NAME IS LEGION; FOR WE ARE MANY

It is difficult to talk about semiotics, and even more so to talk about its future. Not because it is uncertain or

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unclear, but because, in reality, we should always be talking about 'semiotics' in the plural, as is the distinction made in French ("des sémiotiques" versus "de la sémiotique"), rather than 'semiotics' in the singular.

The discipline is rich in unresolved questions, new challenges and emerging branches precisely because it is, in fact, plural, multifaceted and ever-changing. Just like life, of which it studies one of the fundamental properties, semiotics evolves, changes and renews itself ceaselessly. If there are so many new questions and fresh avenues of inquiry, this is not a sign of confusion, but rather the mark of a fertile and vibrant discipline, which finds new ground to explore and new disciplines with which to collaborate every day.

There will be unresolved questions in semiotics as long as there are boundaries to cross and bridges to build. The discipline will remain flourishing as long as it strives to engage with other fields, to understand their challenges and to integrate their tools. Semiotics will be hybrid, or it will not be (though it is far more likely that, to our delight, it will be).