

SEBEOK, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Semiosis and Semiotic in Thomas Sebeok's Global Semiotics and Its developments

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1. Sebeok's "global semiotics" beyond anthropocentrism and glottocentrism

Developing and specifying Charles Peirce's idea that the entire universe is perfused by signs, Charles Morris recognized that semiotics could be extended to the organic in its wholeness: for there to be a sign there must be interpretive activity by the living organism (cf. Petrilli 1999). Following Morris (1971), Thomas Sebeok developed this thesis to claim that the entire life sphere is made of signs. This means that even a microorganism, for example a cell, flourishes insofar as it interprets signs. Sebeok extends the boundaries of semiotics to a maximum degree with his "semiotics of life" or "global semiotics" which posits that life and semiosis converge. Anthrosemiosis is only a small part of the overall biosemiotic network. And within the sphere of anthrosemiosis an even smaller part is represented by verbal semiosis. Like all other animals belonging to the sphere of zoosemiosis, from a biosemiotic perspective human beings too communicate mostly through nonverbal signs (see Sebeok 1998, 2001). Moreover, voluntary

communication is wholly subtended by endosemiotic processes such as those relative to the immunitary and neural systems.

With regard to the limitations overcome by global semiotics, with Sebeok's critique of anthropocentrism, the first, anthroposemiotics, is no longer understood to coincide with general semiotics, but rather is considered as one of its parts. General semiotics is far broader than a science that studies signs solely in the sphere of socio-cultural life.

To the nascent discipline of biosemiotics, Sebeok in 1999, then Editor-in-Chief, dedicated a Special Issue of the journal *Semiotica* (127–1/4). This was divided into two parts: Biosemiotica I, edited by himself and Biosemiotica II, guest editors Jesper Hoffmeyer and Claus Emmeche. As he claims in his editor's note, "Towards a prehistory of biosemiotics," a task for the Editor-in-Chief of *Semiotica* is "to encourage the growth of emerging sub-domains of semiotics". During the 1990s biosemiotics had continued to solidify, such that he believed the time was ripe to update *Semiotica* readers on the "composite conspectus of the rapidly converging happenings at interfaces of the life science and the sign science". Sebeok was interested in outlining the "multiple paths" leading to what biosemiotics had become, identifying three main pillars upon which contemporary biosemiotics diversely rests in Jakob von Uexküll and his *Umweltlehre*, Heini Hediger and his animal psychology, and Giorgio Prodi with his independently conceived "nature semiotics," "each of these animating enterprises enveloped and leavened in the catalyzing yeast of Western medical tradition and logic launched by Hippocrates then codified by Galen (Sebeok 1966a)...". Sebeok then continues:

But the prehistory of biosemiotics is still richer than that. It demands deeper archeological excavations. To this end, namely, to stimulate diggings of this description, I have asked an array of colleagues to probe the works of Peirce, Lady Welby, Charles Morris, Jakobson, and Yuri Lotman for harbingers of biosemiotics discernments, judgments, prognostications, or at the very least congeniality. These five articles constitute Part I of the

following special issue. Frankly, I was myself astonished at the richness of the harvest these astute scholars were able to garner. ...

In addition to Lucia Santaella Braga on “Peirce and biology” (pp. 5-22), Laura Shintani on “Roman Jakobson and biology: ‘A system of systems’,” Kalevi Kull on “Towards biosemiotics with Yuri Lotman,” chapters by S. Petrilli were included on “The biological basis of Victoria Welby’s signification,” followed by “Charles Morris’s biosemiotics”. In honour of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1921-1985) whom we have also celebrated this year on the centenary of his birth our research around both of these authors can be reconducted to him precisely, but this is another story.



Lugano 2001

Among its objects of investigation, semiotics studies the signs of unintentional communication (semiology of signification). However, before evidencing non-volitional, unintentional signs, semiotics was limited by an exclusive preference for the signs of intentional communication, Saussure’s *sémiologie* (semiology of communication). By contrast, semiotics following Sebeok and his “global semiotics” studies communication not only in culture, but far more extensively in the universe of life generally, across the biosphere precisely.

With regard to the second limitation traditionally associated with sign studies, that of glottocentrism, with Sebeok's global semiotics it is clear that the critique of glottocentrism in anthroposemiotics is to be extended to all those trends in semiotics which refer to linguistics for their sign model.

Anthroposemiotics insists on the autonomy of non-verbal sign systems from the verbal and also studies human sign systems that depend on the verbal only in part, despite the prejudicial claim that verbal language predominates in the sphere of anthroposemiosis. To get free from the anthropocentric and glottocentric perspective as it has characterized semiotics generally implies to take other sign systems into account beyond those specific to mankind.

In his article "The evolution of semiosis" (in Posner, Robering, and Sebeok 1997-2004, vol. I), Sebeok explains the correspondences connecting the branches of semiotics with the different types of semiosis, from the world of micro-organisms to the superkingdoms and the human world. Specifically human semiosis, anthroposemiosis, is represented as semiotics thanks to a species-specific "modelling device" called "language". This observation is based on the fact that it is virtually certain that *Homo habilis* was originally endowed with language, but not speech. Sebeok's distinction between *language* and *speech* corresponds, even if roughly, to the distinction between *Kognition* and *Sprache* drawn by Müller in his 1987 book, *Evolution, Kognition und Sprache* (see Sebeok in Posner, Robering, and Sebeok 1997–2004, I: 443).

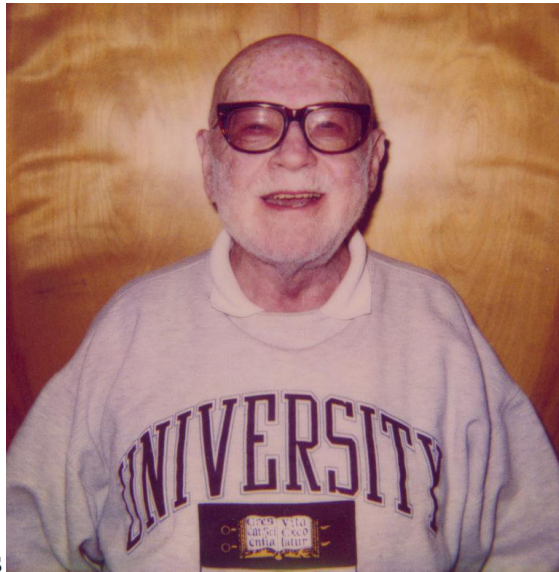
2. Sebeok's semiotics and his jokes

We all know that Sebeok liked to tell jokes, he liked a good story and enjoyed recounting anecdotes. But he was particularly fond of hybrid jokes, an interest connected with his conception of semiotics and his critic of glottocentrism. In fact jokes, as a rule, are considered as a "form of narration," a type of verbal art, though normally accompanied by various gestural elements as accessories (manual and facial expressions, postures, and the like) which reinforce the

facetiousness, the tongue-in-cheek jest conveyed by the verbal expression. Sebeok was particularly interested in hybrid jokes that could be narrated verbally only up to a point: the climax and sometimes several internal punch lines can only be delivered through non-verbal gestures. This led him to take a “professional” interest in this subgenre of jokes.

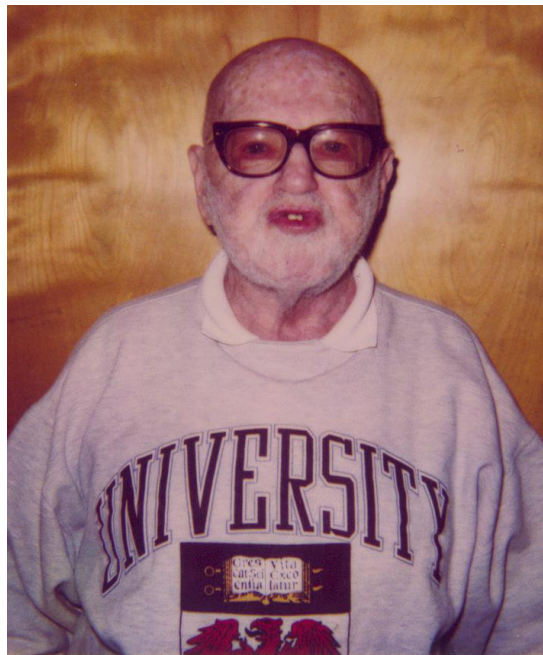
Chapter 9 in Sebeok’s book of 2001 *Global Semiotic* (pp. 115-119) is entitled “Intersemiotic Transmutations. A Genre of Hybrid Jokes”. Precisely because they are “hybrid,” it is impossible to express this type of joke only through verbal language, here through writing: images are necessary, whether drawings or photographs. In fact, the chapter title is followed by “Drawings by Luciano Ponzio”. But to illustrate these hybrid jokes, Luciano in turn needed images. This chapter was originally published as an article in the first of three collective volumes, edited by Susan Petrilli, of the series “Athantor, Semiotica, filosofia, arte, letteratura” (Roma: Meltemi), dedicated to the question of translation addressed in a global semiotic framework: *La traduzione* (1999), *Tra segni* (2000), *Lo stesso altro* (2001). Sebeok’s article was translated into Italian by Susan as “Trasmutazioni intersemiotiche. Un genere ibrido” and included in the first of the Athantor series, *La traduzione* (pp. 153-166). Given the geographical distance between Sebeok the narrator of hybrid jokes and Luciano the illustrator, photographs also came into the picture. In a footnote to the English version of this text published in *Global Semiotics* (2001), after publication of the original 1999 Italian edition, Sebeok explains that “it was in part inspired by a set of photographs in which Jean Umiker-Sebeok, Erica L. Sebeok, and I [Thomas A. Sebeok] modelled the gestures”. In fact, Sebeok’s examples of hybrid jokes are all translated into drawings by Luciano from the fun photographs sent to us by Sebeok, accompanied by the following captions: “The Danish Photographer”, “Les Baguettes”, “Jesus Christ on the Cross”, “The Dead Cat”, “Short Necks”.

In “The Danish Photographer,” comicality arises from the fact that instead of asking the person photographed to say *cheese*,

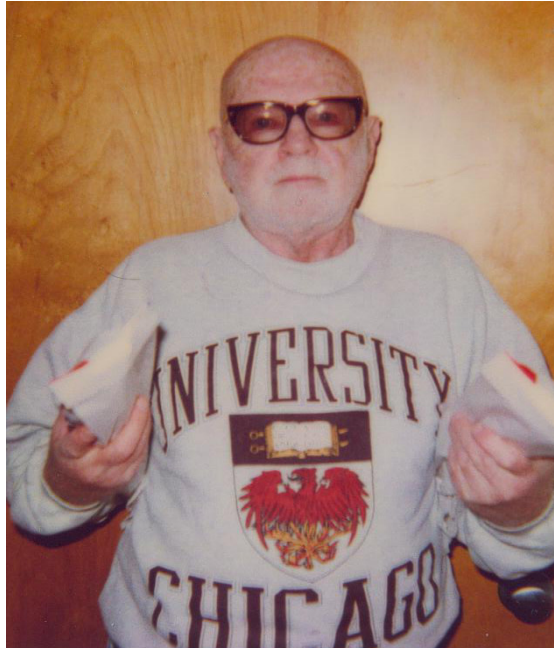


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the Danish photographer indicates to say *oost* (corresponding to *ost*).



In “Les Baguettes”, an American tourist in Paris asks a Frenchman where the Hotel d’Iéna is. In order to answer the Frenchman asks the tourist to hold the baguettes he was carrying under each arm



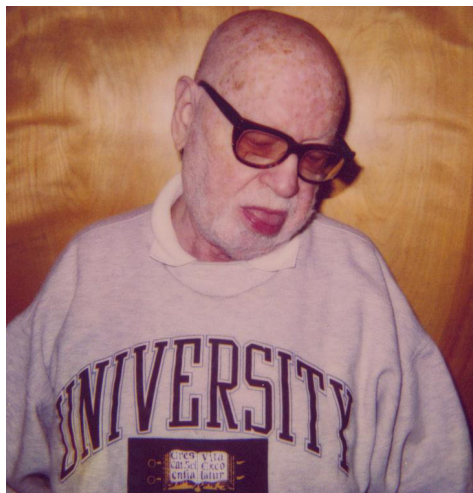
and spreading his arms outwards from his sides, conveys that he has no idea.



In “Jesus Christ so the Cross” Christ is offered the possibility of choosing how to die, whether crucified or buried in the sand up to his armpits, head and arms smeared with honey. Christ chooses the cross which is why Catholics remember him by making the sign of the cross rather than waving their arms wildly about their heads as if to find off biting insects.



In “The Dead Cat” a man driving his car runs over a cat. To the probable cat owner’s question “what did the cat look like?” answers



To this she replies: No, no! I meant: what did the cat look like before you ran over him?

To which the car driver’s answer is:



3. Global Semiotics and translation

The question of translation investigated in the context of global semiotics has led to a new understanding of what is implied in the translation process itself and of the sciences that study translation, beyond anthropocentric, glottocentric and phonocentric limitations. As anticipated, Athanor *La traduzione* (1999) is the first volume of a trilogy, edited by Susan Petrilli, dedicated to translation in a global, biosemiosical framework, the other two are *Tra segni* (2000) and *Lo stesso altro* (2001). A selection of contributions from these three volumes, only those in English from a corpus of several other papers in Italian and French, were subsequently assembled in the book *Translation Translation* (Rodopi), 2004. After more than twenty years *Translation Translation* is at last beginning to receive the attention it deserves as a contribution to current debate on the question of translation in an interdisciplinary and biosemiotic perspective. It presents studies not only by major translation experts, but also by researchers from different areas including, beyond semiotics and linguistics, philosophy, literary criticism, cultural studies, gender studies, biology and the medical sciences. Global semiotics presupposes biosemiotics and favours a better understanding of the intersemiotic and intercultural nature of meaning as expressed through verbal language.

In its most obvious sense translation concerns verbal texts in their relation between different languages. But even if we remain within the sphere of verbal signs, translation does not only concern the relation between one language and another, but also that between the different languages forming the same language since all languages are endowed to a lesser or greater degree with internal plurilingualism. Furthermore, as we have seen above in relation to the expression-translation-communication of Sebeok's hybrid jokes, translation also takes place between verbal languages and nonverbal languages, and vice versa, and among nonverbal languages themselves without immediate explicitation through verbal languages.

Understood in such terms, the study of translation clearly cannot be restricted to linguistics, but necessarily involves semiotics, the general science of signs. But even before being an object of semiotics, translation is a sign operation not only in the obvious sense that translation occurs among verbal sign systems, but also in the sense that it cannot be reduced to the verbal-linguistic. Translation involves the sign sphere in its entirety. Where there are signs, where there are semiotic processes, there is translation.

Proposed in such terms, it becomes a question of verifying whether the signs referred to in this extended sense of translation are only human signs, those belonging to the sphere of anthroposemiosis. Consequently, the first problem concerns whether translation is limited to human signs and, therefore, to general linguistics as intended by Charles Morris. In fact, differently from the linguistics of the linguists, general linguistics does not deal with verbal languages alone, but rather with all human languages, both verbal and nonverbal. Indeed a semiotic approach to the problem of translation – if we must identify fields and boundaries – should not restrict the translational process to verbal language but extend it to all human languages, verbal and nonverbal, to the anthroposemiotic sphere in its entirety.

But, in fact, the sign in general (and not just the human sign) may also be considered in terms of translation in so far as it is a relation between an interpreted sign and an interpretant sign (there is a sign each time there is another sign, the interpretant in C. S. Peirce's terminology). Therefore, if

we exit the boundaries of what Ju. M. Lotman calls the “semiosphere”, that is, the human-cultural sphere, the question of translation extends to the whole organic world, that is, to wherever there are signs and semiosis. In this case, translation ranges across the whole biosphere or, to broaden Lotman’s concept of “semiosphere”, across the entire semiobiosphere, as proposed in biosemiotics.

Another question concerns the fact that translation is not only a semiosic operation traceable wherever there are signs, that is, in all expressions of life (if, as Thomas Sebeok maintains, life = semiosis), but a semiotic operation as well. In the present context this term is used to denote an operation which presupposes conscious awareness, reflection, that is, a mediated use of signs, which necessarily occurs on two levels: 1) the metesign level which assumes as its object 2) another sign level. It would seem that operations of this sort are only possible to the human animal insofar as we are endowed with language (of which the verbal is just one aspect) and which, therefore, is not only a *semiosic animal* like all others but also a *semiotic animal*. This expression may also be understood as contributing to rendering the meaning of the traditional expression “rational animal” more comprehensible, as a further translation thereof.

4. Semioethic implications from Sebeok’s distinction between the semiosic animal and the semiotic animal

That the human being is a “semiotic animal” means that humans are the only animals capable of conscious awareness, thus of responsibility: the human being is responsible for semiosis over the planet, which means to say for life over the terrestrial globe. We have addressed this issue in a series of writings, in particular the co-authored book of 2003, *Semioetica*, by S. Petrilli and A. Ponzio (now in Petrilli 2014), followed by several other publications such as, simply to recall another of our co-authored books in Italian, *Lineamenti di semiotica e di filosofia del linguaggio*, of 2008 (now Petrilli and Ponzio 2016) where the orientation of our studies on signs and language

moves in the direction of semioethics, thus keeping account of the inescapable connections between signs and values in human semiosis. On invitation from Paul Cobley another significant editorial event is publication of the essay “Semioethics,” by Augusto Ponzio and I, in his Routledge *Companion to Semiotics*, 2010.

One of the sources that inspire semioethics is Victoria Lady Welby’s signifiics and her insistence on the relation between language and values, sense, meaning and significance, thus on communication and social responsibility. Sebeok was particularly intested in Victoria Welby’s reasearch and encouraged me to write a monograph on her which he had planned to publish as a Special Issue of *Semiotica*. That monograph became *Signifying and Understanding. Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement*, published in 2009 by Paul Cobley who welcomed it into his Mouton De Gruyter series, “Semiotics, Communication and Cognition,” volume 2. I simply mention this now *en passant* considering that Chapter thirteen in Sebeok’s book *Global Semotics* is dedicated to “Women in Semiotics” with Part I contributed by his “junior” co-author, S. Petrilli. This chapter features Victoria Lady Welby (1837-1912) as, in Sebeok’s own words, the “legendary English foremother and prime mover of ‘signifiics’ and ‘sensifiics,’ species of turn-of-the-century (and subsequent) semiotics”, the “First Lady,” followed in order of presenstation by thre North American Pioneers, Susanne K. Langer (1895-1985), Margaret Mead (1901-78) , Ethel M. Albert (1918-89) and the American Gothic, Irmengard Rauch (b. 1933) (Sebeok 2001: 145-153).

In English another publication with the expression “semioethics” in the title is *Sign Crossroads in Global Perspective. Semioethics and Responsibility*, 2008. This was originally published as the first Sebeok Fellow Special issue of the *American Journal of Semiotics* (Volume 24.4, 2008), and subsequently in book format in 2010 with Transaction Publishers under the same title. In his “Editor’s Introduction” (dated 23 July 2008), titled “The Seventh Sebeok Fellow,” to *The American Journal of Semiotics* edition, repropoed and enriched with a new Preface in the 2010 Transaction edition, John Deely recalls various editorial events connecting our research in Bari with

Tom Sebeok's in Bloomington. Deely cites from Sebeok's Preface (dated 18 May 1988) for S. Petrilli's book, *Significs, semiotica, significazione* (Adriatica, 1988), and recalls the special issue of *Semiotica* 123-1/4 (2001), Guest Edited by S. Petrilli, on the theme of *Signs and Light. Illuminating Paths in the Semiotic Web*. This particular issue of *Semiotica* was conceived and planned with Tom during one of his several visits to Bari and has an Italian counterpart in *Luce*, published in 1997 as a volume in the Athanor series directed by Augusto Ponzio.

In *Semiotics Unbounded* (Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio), we refer to Mikhail M. Bakhtin, another important figure from the twentieth century, not generally taken into consideration in semiotic or philosophical circles, and incorrectly assigned to the sphere of literary criticism. But in all his writings he repeats, "I'm a philosopher", that his reflections belong to the sphere of philosophy of language. Bakhtin also qualifies his thoughts in terms of semiotics and metalinguistics. An important focus in his writings is his critique of the reduction of communicative processes to relations between the sender and receiver and between *langue* and *parole*, as established improperly by Saussure, or rather the Saussureans.

A particularly interesting aspect of Bakhtin's work is his insistence, from his early studies, on the problem of responsibility – he characterizes this interest as "moral philosophy". Bakhtin established a very close relation between sign and otherness: signs flourish in the relation with others, and require a responsible standpoint towards them, without alibis and without evasion. There is a close connection between Sebeok and Bakhtin.

It is not incidental that Bakhtin too has always viewed the biological sciences with great interest (Bakhtin 1926). In his book on Rabelais, he evidences the inseparability, the condition of intercorporeal interconnection, interdependency among all living individuals, including human beings, in organic and nonorganic processes throughout the entire universe.

Semiotics, understood not only as a science but as an orientation perspected by semioethics, arises and develops in the field of anthroposemiosis. Therefore, it is connected with the *Umwelt* and species-specific modelling device (or language) proper to human beings, a primary modelling

device endowing humans (unlike all other animals) with the special capacity to produce a great plurality of different worlds, whether real or imaginary. The implication is that human beings are not condemned to remain imprisoned in the world as it is, to forms of vulgar realism. Semiotics is a fact of the human species. But the possibility of its effective realization is a fact of the historical-social order. Our *Umwelt* is a historical-social product in addition to a biosemiosical endowment, so that any possibility of transformation or alternative hypotheses finds its effective grounding and starting point, its terms of confrontation, the materials necessary for critique and programming in historical-social reality as it gradually evolves and is distinguished from merely biological material.

A global and detotalizing approach to semiotics demands openness to the other, the extreme capacity for listening to the other (see Petrilli 2013, 2019; Ponzio 2009). Therefore, it presupposes the capacity for dialogic interconnection with the other. Accordingly, we propose an approach to semiotics that privileges the tendency towards detotalization rather than totalization. Otherness opens the totality to infinity or to “infinite semiosis,” leading beyond the cognitive order or the symbolic order into the ethical order, understood as implying infinite involvement with the other, therefore responsibility towards the other.

5. Semioethics and the symptomatology of globalization. Global communication from the perspective of global semiotics

With Sebeok the science that studies the *semiotic animal*, expression used as the title of a book co-authored by John Deely, Augusto Ponzio and I (2005) proposes a critique of *anthropocentrism* and *glottocentrism*, as described above. The expression “semiotic animal” alludes to the human being as the only animal capable not only of using signs (*semiosis*), but also of reflecting on signs through signs (*metasemiosis*). With John Deely we believe that the formula “semiotic animal” effectively displaces the modern formula “res cogitans,” shifting the focus from

the “rational animal” to the “reasonable animal,” that is, to reason based on alterity and responsibility. From the back cover:

From opposite shores of the Atlantic, the three authors of the present volume, commonly involved with the ubiquitous work constellating around this notion of human beings as “semiotic animals,” and converging as well towards inaugurating a new phase in the international development of semiotics, namely, an understanding of the unique responsibilities for the surrounding world which prove inescapable for human society. What is this responsibility, what is its basis, how does it develop, and how far does it extend?

The aim of the present work is to demonstrate the centrality of the doctrine of signs for the development of a culture that may call itself effectively and integrally “human” in a global context, and to demonstrate at the same time the singular value and co-implication of the expressions “semiotica animal” and “semioethics” within that cultural development essential to our long-term survival as a species.

What follows is from a section in a book co-authored with John Deely, *The semiotic Animal*, Legas, Ottawa, 2005.



We believe that the formula "semiotic animal" effectively displaces for contemporary understanding the modern formula "res cogitans" for developing awareness both of what is unique about the human being (capacity to reflect with signs on signs in discriminating objects and things) and also of our place in nature and alongside the other lifeforms.

From opposite shores of the Atlantic, the three authors of the present volume, commonly involved with the ubiquitous work of the 20th century "Sign-Maestro" Thomas Sebeok, found their independent work constellating around this notion of human beings as "semiotic animals", and converging as well towards inaugurating a new phase in the international development of semiotics, namely, an understanding of the unique responsibilities for the surrounding world which prove inescapable for human society. What is this responsibility, what is its basis, how does it develop, and how far does it extend?

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John Deely is a Professor of Philosophy and Semiotics at the University of St Thomas, Houston, and Executive Director of the Semiotic Society of America. His major works undoubtedly are the 1985 critical bilingual edition of John Poinsett's 1632 *Tractatus de Signis* and *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001).

Susan Petrilli is Associate Professor of Semiotics at the Department of Linguistic Practices and Text Analysis, University of Bari, Italy. Her major monographs are *Su Victoria Welby. Significes e filosofia del linguaggio* (1998), *Teoria dei segni e del linguaggio* (2001), *Percorsi della semiotica* (2005) and, with A. Ponzio *Semiotics Unbound* (2005).

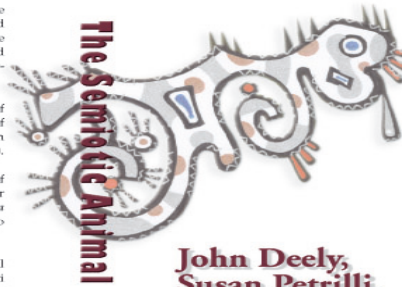
Augusto Ponzio is Full Professor of Philosophy of Language and General Linguistics at the Department of Linguistic Practices and Text Analysis at Bari University, Italy. In addition to translating and editing many important works by such figures as Petrus Hispanus, Marx, Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Schaff, Levinas, he has authored countless essays, articles and books.

Cover: Luciano Ponzio, *A-Sincronie. Insiemeistica Concentrica* (siglaturo), 24,5 x 10,5 cm, inks, pigments and watercolours on paper, 2005.



J. Deely, S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio

The Semiotic Animal



John Deely,
Susan Petrilli,
Augusto Ponzio



We propose the term 'semioethics' (Ponzio and Petrilli 2003) to name an approach or attitude we believe necessary today more than ever before in the context of globalization, for a better understanding of semiosis today – its implications, perspectives, the risks involved and responsibilities. By 'semioethics' we understand the propensity in semiotics to recover its ancient vocation as 'semeiotics' (or symptomatology), which focuses on symptoms. A major issue for Southern Semiotic Review 16 2022 ii

semioethics is ‘care for life’ in a global perspective according to which semiosis and life coincide. Semioethics is a point of encounter between the life sciences and the signs sciences, more specifically between biology and axiology, biosemiotics and ethics. Biosemiotics with Sebeok posits interconnectness with the other, intercorporeality as the condition for life to survive and flourish. Ethics with Levinas posits that the intrigue with the other, entanglement with the other is inescapable, thus the inevitability of the question of responsibility as developed by Bakhtin, as prefigured by Welby. petpon

Thanks to global semiotics and to research in the domain of biosemiotics, with Sebeok we posit that life and semiosis converge, that semiosis coincides with life – indeed may even extend beyond, a hypothesis for the future to explore. Global semiotics has taught us that semiosis is a phenomenon that extends over the entire planet and that human semiosis is part of this global context. For an adequate understanding of human semiosis we must at last take the globality of context into account, with an attitude that is critical, creative and propositive. We need to focus our attention on the life of reflection as much as on the life of action and values, with a view to the human propensity for responsibility, social planning and programs. From the perspective of human semiosis signs, actions and values are inextricably interconnected. Only in this global context can human semiosis be understood in a critical key, similarly to the special semioses produced in the sphere of anthroposemiosis, or more specifically anthroposociosemiosis.

The expression “global or globalized communication” has different meanings. In the present context it refers to a characteristic socio-semiotic phenomenon of our time: communication developed by technology, supported by the market and market logic, and extended over the entire globe. Our focus is on communication as it characterizes society today in social, cultural, economic and political terms. All this is directly connected with the development of capitalism through to today’s extreme post-capitalist phase as it finds expression in global communication-production society.

Globalization may be understood in socio-economic terms as well as in the semiotic. The socio-economic perspective of globalization is limited and short-sighted given that it is functional to sectorial and egotistical interests, paradoxical as this may seem. Instead, the semiotic perspective evidences the condition of reciprocal involvement and interrelatedness of all life forms over the planet. And the condition of interrelatedness implies that indifference toward the other, the tendency to oppress the other in the long run can only backfire on the oppressor.

Global semiotics provides us with the conceptual instruments that are necessary for a better understanding of the global phenomenon that is communication today. However, with the expression “better understanding” we intend to indicate not only understanding in theoretical terms but also involvement of moral conscience. The human being is part of the great biosemiosphere and as such is a semiotic animal like all other animals. However, the human being is also part of the anthroposociosemiosphere and in addition to being a semiotic animal is also a semiotic animal. In other words, differently from all other life forms, the human being is capable not only of semiosis but also of metasemiosis, of suspending the immediate flow of semiosis and deliberating. Thanks to a primary modeling device endowed with syntax, also called language, the semiotic animal has a capacity for criticism and creativity.

Consequently, the human being is also a *semioethic animal* and as such is capable of taking responsibility. Responsibility is understood here as responsibility for the other as opposed to responsibility connected with the egotistical interests of identities in the context of socio-economical globalization. Human beings are endowed with a capacity for responsibility understood as responsiveness and answerability toward the other – the other that in social, biological, ontological, and phenomenological terms may be more or less close, more or less distant. Semioethics indicates an attitude that is characteristic of human beings, that pertains to human beings. The semioethic animal is capable of a global perspective on semiosis and as such is responsible for the health of semiosis in its plurality and diversity over the entire globe. For all

these reasons semioethics may also be read as an indication to the semiotician of the need to care for semiosis.

The semiotician today must be ready to interpret the symptoms of semiosis and its malfunctioning as produced by globalization in today's global communication-production society. The destructive character of globalization is evident in the presentday world and is the direct result of how the capitalist social reproduction system has developed so far. Destruction today finds a dramatic expression, for example, in war. We shall briefly examine this aspect as well.

As global semiotics, general semiotics is called to carry out a detotalizing function, that is, a critique of all (claims to the status of) totalities, including the totality global communication. If general semiotics is not critique and does not adopt a detotalizing method it will appear as no more than a syncretic result of the special semiotics, a transversal language of the encyclopaedia of the unified sciences, assertion of philosophy suffering from the will to omniscience with respect to the plurality of different disciplines and specialized fields of knowledge.

What we propose to call "semioethics" proceeds from the current phase in historico-social development, its starting point, to go on and analyze society rigorously and critically, therefore communication-production relations and social structures forming the contemporary world.

And given that the social forms of production in the current communication-production system have been mostly homologated, semioethics is at an advantage. We could go so far as to claim that the whole planet is regulated by a single type of market, by a single form of production, by a single form of consumption, so that not only behaviour, habits, fashions (including 'dress fashion'), but the imaginary, our capacity for the play of musement have all been levelled. In today's dominant communication-production system difference understood in terms of otherness is substituted ever more by difference understood in terms of alternatives.

The "advantage" of this situation as we are describing it is that it presents us with only one type of reality, a single monolithic block; therefore, the analyst's energies will not be dispersed in the effort to deal with a great multiplicity of different phenomena. Obviously, the term "advantage"

is ironical for the advantage of a monolithic block is the advantage of monologism. In other words, by contrast with polylogism monologism has the disadvantage of not being able to articulate critical discourse. In such a situation the critical task of semioethics is rendered extremely difficult, almost impossible. The conceptual instruments necessary for the work of critique are not readily available. Semioethics needs categories that are not those of dominant ideology. The working hypotheses of semioethics do not derive from common sense or common knowledge and consequently cannot be taken for granted.

Before being a phenomenon connected with technological progress and the market, global communication is a fact of life and therefore of global interconnectivity understood as a biosemiotic phenomenon. And given that communication in the human world is connected with a human species-specific primary modeling device, also called language, communication in the human world, as we have already repeated, is not only semiotic but also metasemiotic activity.

If the anthropological implications are translated into “semioethical” terms, what emerges is that the biosemiotic and specifically anthroposemiotic capacity for metasemiotic activity, that is, sign consciousness, lays the condition for freedom and responsibility which in fact ensue from the human capacity for creativity connected with the human primary modeling device. The problem of responsibility should also be analyzed in a more strictly philosophical key in relation to the concepts of otherness, intersubjectivity and dialogical interconnection. We must also consider the consequences of choosing (at varying degrees of conscious awareness) between the logic of otherness and the logic of identity for communication in the world, and not least significantly with reference to the political sphere, and therefore with considerations on the communication of war and peace in today’s globalized world.

6. Global semiotics and its socio-semiotic implications for semioethics

Global semiotics begins with the hypothesis that semiosis and life converge and focuses on the interconnection among signs. Its gaze moves from the protosemiosis of energy-information to the overall processes of the complexification of semiosis in the evolution of life over the planet: from procariots to monocellular living beings to the eucariotic aggregates which form multicellular organisms in the superkingdoms. These coexist and interact with the microcosm and together form the great semiobiosphere. All this results in indissoluble interconnectivity in the sign network extending from the Lilliputian world of molecular genetics and virology, to Gulliver's man-size world and finally the Brobdingnag gigantic biogeochemical ecosystem known as Gaia. Though at first sight this system may seem populated by numerous separate living species, in fact each one of its parts is interdependent with every other, humans included. Viewed in its wholeness, we have only one ecosystem (though it too relatively), thus one health.

In light of this global approach to semiotics (semiotics of life), when a question of socio-semiosis contextualization is not only phenomenological and ontological, but must also keep account of the socio-economic context if problems are to be addressed adequately, today global communication-production. Moreover, these contexts involve the ethical dimension of sign life. In fact, from a semioethic viewpoint global semiotics as we understand it today is faced with an enormous responsibility which is to evidence the limits of global communication, thus of communication-production society. Semiotics has the responsibility of denouncing threats to life over the planet in the global system with the same energy, instruments and social possibilities produced by the global communication-production system itself.

The notion of global in the expression "global communication" relatively to the current social reproduction system alludes both to the planetary extension of communication and to the fact that communication accommodates the world realistically. In globalisation communication pervades production to characterizes the entire reproduction cycle: communication pervades the market, at

the level of exchange, as in earlier socio-economic phases of development, but it also pervades production and consumption. Global communication converges with the communication-production system and as such interferes with life over the whole planet, human and nonhuman.

To understand the worldwide global communication-production system requires a perspective that is just as global, this is “global semiotics” as it is taking shape today thanks particularly to Sebeok. Global semiotics provides a perspective that special sciences taken separately cannot. The general topic of the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America (16-19 October 2008) was *Specialization, Semiosis, Semiotics*, and on that occasion (when S. Petrilli was named 7th Sebeok Fellow), we addressed the issue with a lecture titled “Semioethics and Responsibility. *Beyond Specialisms, Universalisms and Humanisms*”. In that presentation we discuss semiotics as witnessed in its contemporary developments in the 20th and 21st century, a widespread intellectual movement, a phenomenon “of our time” more than of any time past in spite of its long history and in particular the *ethical dimension* implicit in human semiosis. This is a dimension that we in fact evidenced with the term “etosemiotica” in our Italian publications of the 1980s and marked again with the term “semioetica,” only subsequently as in the title of our 2003 monograph, *Semioetica*.

A full understanding of global communication today implies a full understanding of the risks involved by global communication, including the risk that *communication itself may come to an end*. Allusion here is not to the subjective-individualistic phenomenon of “incommunicability,” theorized and represented in film and literature, but far more radically to the risk that life itself may come to an end if we agree that life and semiosis, therefore life and communication converge. Considering our enormous potential for destruction by contrast to earlier phases in the development of social systems, the risk of us humans provoking the end of life on the planet is real and not to be undervalued.

The expression *global communication-production* not only refers to the worldwide expansion of the communication network and corresponding market, but to the fact that all of life is incorporated into the communication-production system: whether a question of development,

well-being and consumerism or of underdevelopment, poverty and impossible survival; health or sickness; normality or deviation; integration or emargination; employment or unemployment; emigration functional to the work-force or migration as the request of hospitality, most often denied. In today's communication-production system, the process of incorporation involves (even puts at risk) all of life over the planet and not only the human, of course. A global semiotic approach to semiosis is in a position to transcend specialized internal perspectives functional to the system itself. Its gaze is not limited to psychological subjects, reduced and measured in terms of statistics as occurs in the social and cognitive sciences. A methodologico-theoretical perspective as global as the phenomenon under observation is required, one that favors understanding the logic of global communication-production, therefore critique of social systems constructed on such logic.

John Deely welcomed "semioethics" enthusiastically, looking forward to its future developments across the 21st century. In his Preface to the 2010 edition of *Sign Crossroads in Global Perspective*, he underlines the centrality for semioethics of the theme of "human responsibility for the effects of anthroposemiosis upon the biosphere as a living whole," with the further comment that "semiotic analysis of the consequences of human action addresses their resounding impact not only upon our conspecifics (as in traditional ethical considerations), but upon the whole network of earthly life apart from which the human species could not exist to act at all" (Deely in Petrilli 2010: vii-ix).

7. Some other publications by, on and with Tom Sebeok and his global semiotics from Bari

With John Deely we have worked together on several occasions in relation to the global semiotics of Thomas A. Sebeok as his friends and collaborators over the years up to the time of his death in 2001 and beyond. In the 7th SSA Sebeok Fellow issue of *The American Journal of Semiotics*, given the occasion it was appropriate to remember the special issue of *Semiotica* 97-3/4

(1993), co-edited by Deely and Petrilli, the result of an international seminar organized in Urbino with Sebeok himself, dedicated to his monograph *Semiotics in the United States*. Among the several editorial events organized around Tom Sebeok thanks to initiative promoted by John Deely, let us recall the book *Semiotic Prologues*, of 2012, edited by John with Marcel Danesi and published with Leonard Sbrocchi, Legas. Part I reproduces more than 30 prefaces and introductions, etc. that Sebeok wrote for books authored or edited by others. Part II reproduces more than 20 similar writings undertaken by others for books of Sebeok's own. As states on the back cover this volume "adds finishing details to the portrait of Thomas A. Sebeok in his central role in the establishment of semiotics as a global phenomenon, occupying the very center of a postmodern intellectual culture positively understood as providing a way at last to transcend the specialized boundaries that the development of modern science required".

With Paul Cobley, Kalevi Kull and I, John Deely had already promoted publication of another volume, *Semiotics Continues to Astonish*, published in 2011 in the Cobley-Kull series "Semiotics, Communication and Cognition," vol. 7 (Mouton De Gryter). This volume is noteworthy for materials made available, essays, vignettes, stories, letters, testimonies of key witnesses and participants in the semiotic project as spawned by Sebeok and his global semiotics with its focus on the dialogue between science and humanities, nature and culture.

Thanks to Paul Cobley's editorial foresight, and to Tom's delight, he knew about the project, Augusto Ponzio and I published a first booklet on him in the Postmodern Encounters series produced by Icon Books (UK). Typically, Paul organized with the publisher and edited our booklet with generosity, without claims to recognition for his editorial work and dedication. The booklet is titled *Thomas Sebeok and the Signs of Life*, published in 2001 and again in 2002 in Slav translation.

In 2001 we published another book, it too in Italian, not on Tom Sebeok but co-authored with Tom Sebeok, *La semiotica dell'io* (Meltemi), which he mentions in the introduction to his *Global Semiotics* as one of his recent books. Starting from Charles Peirce, each of the three parts constituting *La semiotica dell'io* contributes to developing a semiotic approach to the self, viewed

in terms of the dialectics between dialogism and alterity, rather than of monological identity. Sebeok's analysis in "L'io semiotico" is not limited to the human self, but rather it opens to a biosemiotics perspective, while the other two parts, "Basi per una semiotica dell'io" by S. Petrilli and "Il segno 'io'," by A. Ponzio, focalize more specifically on the human self on the background of a global semiotics of life, analyzing the relationship between body and sign, language and thought, singularity and community, knowability and incommunicability, sign and material, memory, interpretation and construction.

Our second monograph on Tom, by S. Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, followed, this too in Italian, which, however, as several other projects *in fieri* reductible to Tom, he did not live to see: *I segni e la vita. La semiotica globale di Thomas A. Sebeok* (Spirali), 2002.

Again in Italian there appeared *Semiotica globale. Il corpo nel segno*, co-authors Augusto Ponzio, Susan Petrilli with Marcel Danesi (Graphis), 2004. This offers yet another introduction to Tom Sebeok's global semiotics considering its implications for the various disciplines that it touches on, whether directly or indirectly. Special attention in this particular booklet is on the contribution that can come from Sebeok's global semiotics for education, that is, for the processes of knowledge acquisition, in learning and teaching. And from our own point of view, certainly Augusto Ponzio's and mine, this topic is inextricably interconnected with the problem of the development of critical conscious awareness and responsibility in our contemporary world toward all of life over the planet.

In the way of translation, in this case interlingual translation, all this was proceeded by our translation of several of Tom Sebeok's books from English into Italian, thereby contributing to the diffusion of his ideas in Italy: from *The Sign & Its Masters* (1979) to *Il segno e i suoi maestri* (Adriatica), 1985; from *I Think I Am a Verb* (1986) to *Penso di essere un verbo* (Sellerio), 1990; from *Semiotics in the USA. A View from the Centre* (1992) to *Sguardo sulla semiotica americana* (Bompiani), 1992; a collection of essays with no corresponding English volume, *Come comunicano gli animali che non parlano* (How Animals that don't speak communicate, Edizioni dal Sud), 1998;

from *A Sign is Just a Sign* to *A sign is just a sign. La semiotica globale* (Spirali), 1998; and lastly from *Signs. An Introduction to Semiotics* (1994, 2001²) to *Segni. Una introduzione alla semiotica* (Carocci), 2003.

8. Without concluding: about Tom

We want to say a few words about Tom and mention his great humanity, his taste for humour, his sense of irony.

Augusto graduated in philosophy with Giuseppe Semerari in Bari. He wanted to devote his thesis to the interpersonal relationship. Professor Semerari told Augusto to read *Totalité et Infini* by Emmanuel Levinas. So Levinas was Augusto's starting point. Levinas has a very important role in Augusto's intellectual formation (the title of his most recent book on Levinas does not recite "On Emmanuel Levinas", but *With Emmanuel Levinas. Identity and Otherness*, 2019).

Sebeok didn't sympathize with French philosophy, nor with French psychoanalysis (Lacan). He was not interested in existentialism, Sartre... And in particular he couldn't bare Levinas.

So this was Augusto's situation: between Levinas... whom Sebeok did not appreciate... and the great Thomas Sebeok. That was Augusto's difficulty.

And what di Sebeok say about Levinas? – "In vino Levinas!". In other words, for Tom Levinas was tipsy, if not quite drunk...!

So Augusto is proud that he succeeded in connecting Emmanuel Levinas and Thomas Sebeok.

Levinas uses the term *ethics* to indicate the intrigue that bonds the I to the Other, that bonds the I to rest of the world... He calls this "intrigue," this "entanglement," *ethique, ethics*.

In truth, from this point of view we believe that Tom Sebeok's vision of global semiotics is not much different, for he too underlines the condition of inevitable entanglement, intrigue, interrelatedness with the other. We are interconnected inextricably with the rest of the world, not only human life, but all of life.

From a semioethical point of view, this condition of interrelationship, intrigue, entanglement involves responsibility for the Other, human and non-human. So in the term *semioethics* as we have conceived it, we propose the possibility of connecting Thomas Sebeok's *global semiotics* and ethics as understood by Levinas.

This move confirms Tom Sebeok's expression "in vino Levinas" which of course associates Levinas to *veritas*. Augusto believes that Levinas and Sebeok can be associated. And he also believes that if Tom were listening he would agree with him, with Augusto.

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