

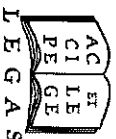
# *Semiotics 2008*

“Specialization, Semiosis, Semiotics”

edited by

John Deely and Leonard G. Shrocchi

Proceedings of the 33rd Annual Meeting  
of the Semiotic Society of America  
16–19 October 2008



2008

New York

Ottawa

Toronto

# THE IMPORTANCE OF SEMIOTICS TO UNIVERSITY: SEMIOSIS MAKES THE WORLD LOCALLY PLURAL

51

Kalevi Kull

Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, Estonia

Living systems function via the knowing process they are composed of. Life has been quite stable in the realm of iconic and indexical knowledge. The appearance of symbolic languages has detached the knower and the known, giving the knowledge a freedom to pose the problems that are independent from its function and thus creating an immense need for superfluous knowledge. However, a balance is sometimes possible also in a human culture. Once dealing with knowing itself, semiotics would naturally have the tools for understanding this. As an aspect of it, awareness on the role of semiotics may be relevant.

Position of semiotics in culture and in academe—and particularly its long-term position—is directly dependent on its position in University. Permanent position of a field in University assumes acknowledging and understanding of the deep content and function of the subject which in case of semiotics would derive from the study of semiosis and the study of its place in the world.

A gradualist view on history would describe the slight quantitative changes the percentage of semiotics in the curricula has undergone. A salationist view, instead, would dramatize the story. Since last two centuries, University has put an emphasis on teaching the expansion of technology, the invasion of the scientific, the artificial and the want-to-be-monistic. If this was the teaching of the Moderns, then the age after the Moderns is what stresses the diversity, meaningfulness (= plurality), and balancehood. This is the age of ecology and semiotics. Semiotics which has been taught for a long time as a supplementary course attached to linguistics, communication, cultural studies, biology, philosophy, or some other program, has developed its first independent full-scale programs in recent decades and demonstrates their stability. This is based on understanding the function of semiotics as the transdisciplinary basis for sciences (particularly for life sciences and humanities) that deal with knowing in a broad sense.

The importance of teaching semiotics has been focused already by Charles Morris (1946). Together with consolidation of semiotic conceptual fields, the role of semiotics in education has received a special attention, for instance in writings by Bense (1977), Sebeck (1979, 1989, 1994), Cunningham (1987a), Pelc (1992), Mosbach (1994), Nöth (2000: 533–536), Copley (2000), Bouissac (2007), etc. There have been published particularly detailed reviews on teaching semiotics in German (Lange-Seidl 1983–1988; Stücker 1990, 1991; Hack

1992, 1993).<sup>1</sup>

## 1. General assumptions

The role of semiotics in education and in the non-physical sciences is largely *independent* on whether semiotics is understood as a doctrine, or a methodology, or a field, or a science. This is because semiotics has widely and efficiently contributed to the modelling as such, as it is used in humanities and life sciences.

There is a certain deep analogy between the place of physics in natural sciences and the place of semiotics in the study of culture and life. The role of both is to provide a general theory, and the general methods of study. Physics and semiotics, being so fundamentally different, can serve as the bases for large domains of knowledge.

Knowledge naturally divides into knowing of *other* (which is physics, physical), and knowing of *self* (i.e., of knowing itself,<sup>2</sup> which is semiotics, semiotical). These are respectively the knowing of (every)thing, and the knowing of knowing.

Biosemiotics means the acceptance of non-propositional knowledge in addition to propositional knowledge, non-linguistic in addition to linguistic, knowing-how in addition to knowing-that, the body intelligence in addition to mental rational. Biosemiotics, in its large part, is a study of non-propositional knowing.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly understanding the position and function of semiotic knowledge—as the knowing of knowing (of all forms of knowing, from the level of a living cell to the level of arts)—it turns out to be possible to envisage the paths to put semiotics to fulfill the role it is meant to have.

This allows also to analyze the question about specialization to semiotics—about the possibility to become a professional semiotician, via studying semiotics from professional semioticians.

Semiotics is inherently transdisciplinary.<sup>4</sup> It is not one specialty, it is many.

<sup>1</sup> See also an analysis of the concept of academic discipline in Posner 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Physics as the theory and study of structure and dynamics, and semiotics as the theory and study of sign relations, are in a large extent complementary approaches, physics building itself on the quantities, and semiotics on the qualities. However, this complementarity is strongly opposing—and overcoming—the cartesian dualism, because the mental can be understood as the conveyance of relations which is itself the life process. On the comparison of these, see Kull 2007.

<sup>3</sup> On the distinction between the non-propositional and propositional knowledge as well as the concept of errors, see, e.g., Almeder 1999.

<sup>4</sup> The approach here is largely in unison with the thoughts from the workshop "Semiotics: a highly needed transdisciplinary post-modern "science" in the knowledge society" held in Copenhagen in April 30, 2008, which included, among others, the papers "Semiotics and Academe: at the heart of the problem of knowledge" (John Deely), "Semiotics as a tool for transdisciplinary thinking uniting science and humanities" (Frederik Stjernfeld), etc.

Nevertheless, it is also semiotics. Thus it includes a deep contradiction, a challenge for all other specialties—because none of them can do without semiotics—and even a greater challenge to itself as how to be one if you are many.

## 2. Experience in teaching semiotics

"The university is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs.—Peirce on communication."  
Thomas Albert Sebeok 1991.<sup>5</sup>

History of teaching semiotics can certainly be described in many different ways, particularly due to the ambivalence of identification of a course as a semiotic (particularly if it does not use that name, and in some cases also despite the name 'semiotic').

As a recent characterization of the situation, let me quote Marcel Darnesi who speaks about teaching semiotics in North America (Darnesi 1991):<sup>5</sup>

Even as we approach the end of the twentieth century, it seems that the mindset of North American university education has not as yet embraced the field of semiotics as part of the standard fare of course and program offerings. There are still very few universities on this continent which offer courses in semiotics, let alone specialization in the field. Graduate programs are virtually non-existent. A large part of this predicament has been due, no doubt, to the fact that the North American educational landscape has always been partitioned into clearcut disciplinary domains. As an interdisciplinary form of inquiry, semiotics has imply, never found a niche in this sectorialized territory.

One may get a slightly more optimistic impression from the article by Doris Mosbach (1994), who gives descriptions of semiotics programs in 19 places: Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna and San Marino, Brussels, Imatra and Helsinki, Ljubljana, Lund and Stockholm, Lyon, Odense, Perpignan, New Delhi, Sao Paulo, Sofia, Sydney, Tartu, Thessaloniki, Tokyo, Toronto, Warsaw. Besides the 12 European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, San Marino, Spain), these include Australia, Brazil, Canada, India, and Japan. Mosbach adds (1994: 147):

Die meisten der vorgestellten Programme haben sich für ein gehobenes Einstiegsniveau der Studierenden entschieden. So wird Semiotik nach den hier vorliegenden Informationen nirgends propädeutisch oder im Grundstudium zum Schwerpunkt gemacht. Einzig in Tartu wird das Semiotikstudium als ein vollständiges Angebot, aber auch dort werden Vorkenntnisse und erste Erfahrungen im wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten vorausgesetzt.<sup>6</sup>

The list given by Mosbach (1994) was probably not complete, and the situation has also changed for now, with some new centers added.

<sup>5</sup> In that article, Darnesi (1991) reviews two books (Deely 1990, and Nöth 1990) as good sources for semiotics teaching.

## 2.1. The semiotics courses

Teaching of semiotics has a longer history. T. Sebeok (1991: 95) has stated his belief that "the very first sequence of courses in semiotics, so labeled, in any curriculum anywhere was offered by Charles Morris, beginning in the late 1930s, at the University of Chicago". Besides Sebeok himself, the other participants in the course, whom Sebeok could remember, were Walter Pitts (who became a collaborator of Warren S. McCulloch), science author Martin Gardner, and musicologist Leonard Meyer.)

Single courses on semiotics are taught nowadays in many universities of the world. These are often attached to communication and cultural studies programs, but sometimes also to the curricula of linguistics, biology, philosophy, marketing, etc.

After a peak popularity of semiotics in 1970s, followed by a decline in 1990s, notable signs of a new growth can be observed nowadays.

For instance, in Italy, by an initiative of the semiotics group in Bologna University, the proposal was made to introduce semiotics courses in seven other universities. This initiative, surprisingly, had unexpected results — a course of semiotics has been introduced into 90 universities of the country,<sup>6</sup> One had to worry whether there can be found that many teachers.

However, in the Feltrinelli bookstore in the downtown of Bologna, one can see a whole shelf of books with the label "Semiotics (and linguistics)". Among these, there are simultaneously at least 6 different original introductory textbooks in semiotics, all in Italian, to my knowledge not translated into English.

In addition to the introductory courses and textbooks,<sup>7</sup> there exist also some documentary films on semiotics that can be used in introductory courses. These include, for instance, (a) Roger Parent's video ("Cultures in conflict" 2004) of several series on the creativity of culture, based in large extent on Lotman's approach; (b) a new 60-min documentary "Lotman's world" (with A. Piatigorski, V. V. Ivanov, U. Eco, P. Torop and M. Lotman interviewed), (c) Elliot Gaines' documentary "Charles Sanders Peirce: Semiotics and the Logic of Pragmatism" from 2000; etc.

## 2.2. Semiotics as a source of ideas for education itself

Acquiring knowledge belongs most naturally into the subject field of semiotics (as, e.g., knowing of knowing),<sup>8</sup> Donald J. Cunningham has guest edited a special issue "Semiotics and Education" of the *American Journal of Semiotics* 5(2), 1987. Cunningham (1987b: 214) writes:

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication from Umberto Eco, August 2008.

<sup>7</sup> On the introductory texts to semiotics, see also Kull, Salupere, and Torop 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, the very first article published in Tartu journal, *Sign Systems Studies* (*Teadus po znakovym sistemam*), dealt with semiotics of learning (I. Kull 1965; the first volume of *Sign Systems Studies* included a complete monograph by Juri Lotman).

