

Title: Semiotik / Semiotics

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This book is an intellectual celebration of a subject which, when I first encountered it in the sixties, was still searching for an identity. At a 1962 conference on paralinguistics and kinesics, Margaret Mead suggested the term, and gave it the definition 'patterned communications in all modalities'. As the editors wrote at the time, 'this summative word was incorporated, overburdened as it is, and not without remonstrance, into the main title of our work' - the conference proceedings, *Approaches to Semiotics* (Mouton, 1964) - and they added, 'the selection of some single term seemed a persuasive device to advance unified research'.

Thirty-five years on, and how right they were! The volume under review is a remarkable testimony to the progress the subject has made during that time. In the 1962 conference, just five principal disciplines were represented: cultural anthropology, education, linguistics, psychiatry, and psychology. In *Semiotik/Semiotics*, everyone seems to be there. Indeed, it is difficult to see how anyone could be left out, given that semiotics is characterized now not only as an object-science (studying all types of sign processes) but also as a metascience, 'which takes all academic disciplines as its domain, regardless of whether they themselves study sign processes (the humanities, the social sciences, biology, and medicine) or not (physics, chemistry, and astronomy)' (3).

There is no greater intellectual empire than the semiotic one, as can be seen by the way the subject is characterized here. It is the science of signs. It is the study of how the structure of knowledge relates to the structure of the 'knowledge carriers'. It studies the processes of information transmission. It sees sign processes as 'a unitary phenomenon which connects living nature with human culture and distinguishes them both from inanimate nature' (xxvii). It is a way of interrelating human, social, engineering, and natural sciences. It is a unified approach to human behaviour in all cultures and at all times. It transcends disciplinary boundaries.

The subject has evidently come of age, and much of the credit for this must be given to US linguist and semiotician Thomas A Sebeok, who masterminded the 1962 conference, and who has been indefatigably beavered away at semiotics ever since, producing (in the film sense) or directing a series of projects, each of which has been grander in scale than the one before, and doing no small part of the writing himself. The immediate antecedents of the present work were Winfried Nöth's terminologically orientated handbook (*Handbuch der Semiotik*, Stuttgart 1985 - 576 pages in English translation) and the alphabetically organized Sebeok-edited *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* (Berlin, 1986 - 1179 pages). *Semiotik/Semiotics* is in three volumes

(only the first has appeared so far), with some 3000 pages, 178 articles, and 175 authors. You will have noticed the doubling of length with each event. What next after this one, I wonder? Indeed, could there ever be a next?

There are two reasons for the new work. The alphabetical approach of the 1986 synthesis had serious limitations: in order to 'present the systematic coherence, the historical development, and the advantages of the semiotic approach for sign-related disciplines' (xxviii), there has to be a thematic account - and this is what *Semiotik/Semiotics* provides. Also, the subject has grown enormously since the early 1980s; and this book accordingly breaks much new ground - for example, there is some excellent discussion of the evolution (or natural history) of semiosis, and of its applicability to machines.

To cope with such a multi-dimensional venture, the editors were faced with major problems of organization. In the end, they divided the field into six basic Parts: a survey of semiotic thought in major cultures; current trends in semiotics; the semiotic approach to sign-related university disciplines; selected sign problems in contemporary societies; and professional tools (semiotic organizations, periodicals, person and subject indexes). At the same time, they organize the material into 16 Chapters, each consisting of a varying number of articles, grouped thematically in different ways. The structure does not come across very clearly, despite the editors' efforts. The six Parts, for instance, are not mentioned in the Contents, but are introduced only in the Preface and opening Chapter. That is where you will learn that Part B, for example, contains Chapters V-XI and a total of 68 articles. There is no heading Part B in the Contents before Chapter V.

The three volumes of the work do not correspond in any principled way to these divisions. Volume 1 ends with Chapter 61, about half way through Part B. Plainly, the publisher has divided the work for convenience into three volumes roughly equal in size (or possibly weight, for Volume 1 weighs 2.8 kg). The work is being seen as a single entity, which just happens to be in three volumes. The problem is that the books have not been published simultaneously. I have seen only Volume 1. And there are no indexes at the end of Volume 1. For these you have to wait until the whole work is published, sometime in 1999. This is a major irritation for anyone wanting now to use the work as its editors intended, for the index is absolutely essential. And even in the long-term, it will mean you always have to have two (bulky) tomes at your elbow when you are working with Volumes 1 or 2. The solution, of course, would have been to have separate volume indexes, and a cumulative index. Ironic, really, to have made such a wrong decision about the pragmatics of knowledge management in a work about semiotics. Maybe the editors should have included an article on the topic.

There is another semiotic issue missing, and that is bilingualism. You will have noticed the bilingual title, and the German emphasis in the history of the subject. For reasons which are unclear to me, *Semiotik/Semiotics* is a bilingual edition - but not in the sense that everything is in two languages (only the blurb, the title, the Preface and the Contents are). The authors were evidently allowed to write their article in the language of their choice - as long as the end-result would be German or English. The result is a random distribution of language in relation to subject-matter. Does this make semiotic sense? For example, in Chapter 2 we have a series of articles on semiotic channels, beginning with 'optische', 'akustische', and 'taktile', then 'chemical' and 'electric/magnetic', then 'thermische'. Altogether 74 articles are in English and 104 in German - or, turning this into pages (for Volume 1), approximately 497 are in English and 690 in German.

What seems to have happened is that German, Austrian and Swiss-German contributors, with just three exceptions, have chosen to write in German. Contributors from other countries - Italy, Australia, Denmark, Poland, Finland, Israel, Greece, Belgium, UK, USA, and Ireland - have, with just two exceptions, their material in English. (Some articles were evidently originally written in a third language, then translated - presumably into English - but the editors do not say which.) The question, of course, is who loses by this manoeuvre? Given the role of English as an international language of scholarship, the German scholars do not. Only those who cannot read German who will feel short-changed, for they will have available only two-fifths of an account of semiotics for their money.

Ah but - the argument might go - then they should know German. And now we could embark on a different kind of discussion, about the desirability or otherwise of English as a world language of scholarship, and what we should be doing about it. One view is that if people want to learn about semiotics, given the German academic tradition in this subject, then they had jolly well better learn German - a nice reversal of the arguments usually voiced in favour of learning English. This might make political sense, in a linguistically egalitarian world (and as a linguist I admire the daring that *Semiotik/Semiotics* represents). It might even make commercial sense - at least within German-speaking nations. But does it make semiotic sense? It is bad enough searching for terminological and conceptual consistency and coherence for this subject within one language; adding a second language introduces factors which make it virtually impossible to see connections clearly. The implications for semiotic statement of introducing a cross-linguistic dimension need further thought. So should the issues surrounding the semiotics of global discourse. But there is no discussion at all of these matters in the book. It is not even mentioned as a possible problem.

For we must not underestimate the conceptual difficulties which semiotics presents. Operating at such levels of generality, the terms can become - as the editors acknowledge - 'semiotically opaque' (xxvii). Even *semiotics* itself yields several meanings (four alone are distinguished in Chapter 30), and the authors illustrate many individual interpretations of the notion of *semiosis*. I have long lost count of the number of articles on semiotics I have given up reading because I have got bogged down in a mass of vague terms, poorly defined concepts, unclear metaphors, and general - well, waffle. One author in the present collection is so worried about the difficulties of being clear that he introduces his article with an apologia for his use of inverted commas to identify anthropomorphic terms of uncertain status (Chapter 20). Cultural differences abound also, with some academic traditions accepting certain ways of expression more readily than others, and misunderstanding each other with different orders of magnitude. To my British mind, German accounts are more accessible, on the whole, than French. (The French are conspicuous by their absence in Volume 1.) But even in English, semiotic waffle has not been unknown.

The editors have done their best to minimise these problems. They sent out drafts of core material to the contributors, and encouraged contributors to show material to each other. The results were not as neat as they would have liked. 'Residual differences of opinion were not smoothed out, but rather retained in recognizable form even in the selection of terms.' (xxxi). So, anything can happen. The editors 'learned how to urge semioticians of the various schools to phrase their ideas in a way intelligible and transparent even to uninitiated readers' (xxxiii). The careful phrasing is noted. They may have urged - but the results are mixed. The uninitiated reader could cope with some of the articles - I found most accessible those on the channels of communication (sound, taste and smell, etc) and some of the historical ones - but several demand massive levels of prior awareness, such as the sophisticated formalisms used in the opening chapters on 'Syntactics' and 'Semantics'

Semiotik/Semiotics is an ambitious project, and one has to admire the industry of the editors, two of whom - working in Berlin at the turn of the decade - were having to cope with a period of unpredictable upheaval. *Vorsprung durch Semiotik*, indeed. But my final impression is that they have been so bound up with building their vehicle, finding the right parts, and ensuring that these fit together well, that they have not paid enough attention to where they want to drive to, or whether this is the right kind of vehicle to be driving in at all, these days, given the availability of electronic media (an option summarily dismissed in their preface). There really ought to be an article in here on the semiotic basis of semiotic publications. We need a meta-meta-semiotics. Perhaps that is what could be a next.