

Semiotics

Semiotics, or semiology, is the study of signs, both individually and grouped in sign systems. It includes the study of how meaning is made and understood. Semioticians also sometimes examine how organisms, no matter how big or small, make predictions about and adapt to their semiotic niche in the world (see Semiosis). Semiotics theorises at a general level about signs, while the study of the communication of information in living organisms is covered in biosemiotics. The subject was originally spelled semeiotics to honour John Locke (1632–1704), who, in "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (1690), first coined the term "semeiotike" from the Greek word σημειον or semeion, meaning "mark" or "sign".

Clarification of terms

Semioticians classify signs and sign systems in relation to the way they are transmitted (see modality). This process of carrying meaning depends on the use of codes that may be the individual noises or letters that humans use to form words, the body movements they make to show attitude or emotion, or even something as general as the clothes they wear. To coin a word to refer to a thing (see lexical words), the community must agree on a simple meaning (a denotative meaning) within their language. But that word can transmit that meaning only within the language's grammatical structures and codes (see syntax and semantics). Codes also represent the values of the culture, and are able to add new shades of connotation to every aspect of life.

To explain the relationship between Semiotics and Communication Studies, communication is defined as the process of transferring data from a source to a receiver as efficiently and effectively as possible. Hence, communication theorists construct models based on codes, media, and contexts to explain the biology, psychology, and mechanics involved. Both disciplines also recognise that the technical process cannot be separated from the fact that the receiver must decode the data, i.e. be able to distinguish the data as salient and make meaning out of it. This implies that there is a necessary overlap between semiotics and communication. Indeed, many of the concepts are shared, although in each field the emphasis is different. In *Messages and Meanings: An Introduction to Semiotics*, Marcel Danesi (1994), suggested that semioticians' priorities were to study signification first and communication second. A more extreme view is offered by Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1987; trans. 1990: 16) who, as a musicologist, considered the theoretical study of communication irrelevant to his application of semiotics.

Semiotics should also be distinguished from linguistics. Although both start from the same point, semiotics links linguistic facts to non-linguistic facts to give a broader empirical coverage and to offer conclusions that

seem more plausible because, intuitively, humans understand that one can only interpret language in a social context (sometimes termed the semiosphere). Pure linguistics dismantles language into its components, analysing usage in slow-time, whereas, in the real world of human semiotic interaction there is an often chaotic blur of language and signal exchange which semiotics attempts to analyse and so identify the systemic rules accepted by all the participants.

Perhaps more difficult is the distinction between semiotics and the philosophy of language. In a sense, the difference is a difference of traditions more than a difference of subjects. Different authors have called themselves "philosopher of language" or "semiotician". This difference does not match the separation between analytic and continental philosophy. On a closer look, there may be found some differences regarding subjects. Philosophy of language pays more attention to natural languages or to languages in general, while semiotics is deeply concerned about non-linguistic signification. Philosophy of language also bears a stronger connection to linguistics, while semiotics is closer to some of the humanities (including literary theory and cultural anthropology). Semiosis or semeiosis is the process that forms meaning from any organism's apprehension of the world through signs.

History

The importance of signs and signification has been recognised throughout much of the history of philosophy, and in psychology as well. Plato and Aristotle both explored the relationship between signs and the world, and Augustine considered the nature of the sign within a conventional system. These theories have had a lasting effect in Western philosophy, especially through Scholastic philosophy. More recently, Umberto Eco, in his "Semiotics and philosophy of language" has argued that semiotic theories are implicit in the work of most, perhaps all, major thinkers.

Some important semioticians

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), the founder of the philosophical doctrine known as pragmatism, preferred the term "semeiotic." He defined semiosis as "...action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs." ("Pragmatism", *Essential Peirce* 2: 411; written 1907). His notion of semiosis evolved throughout his career, beginning with the triadic relation just described, and ending with a system consisting of 59,049 possible elements and relations. One reason for this high number is that he allowed each interpretant to act as a sign, thereby creating a new signifying relation. Peirce was also a notable logician, and he considered semiotics

and logic as facets of a wider theory. For a summary of Peirce's contributions to semiotics, see Liszka (1996).

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), the "father" of modern linguistics, proposed a dualistic notion of signs, relating the signifier as the form of the word or phrase uttered, and to the signified as the mental concept. It is important to note that, according to Saussure, the sign is completely arbitrary, i.e. there was no necessary connection between the sign and its meaning. This sets him apart from previous philosophers such as Plato or the Scholastics, who thought that there must be some connection between a signifier and the object it signifies. Saussure's insistence on the arbitrariness of the sign has also greatly influenced later philosophers, especially postmodern theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Jean Baudrillard. Ferdinand de Saussure coined the term *semiologie* while teaching his landmark "Course on General Linguistics" at the University of Geneva from 1906–11. Saussure posited that no word is inherently meaningful. Rather a word is only a "signifier," i.e. the representation of something, and it must be combined in the brain with the "signified," or the thing itself, in order to form a meaning-imbued "sign." Saussure believed that dismantling signs was a real science, for in doing so we come to an empirical understanding of how humans synthesize physical stimuli into words and other abstract concepts.

Louis Trolle Hjelmslev (1899–1965) developed a structuralist approach to Saussure's theories. His best known work is *Prolegomena: A Theory of Language*, which was expanded in *Resumée of the Theory of Language*, a formal development of *glossematics*, his scientific calculus of language.

Charles W. Morris (1901–1979). In his 1938 *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, he defined semiotics as grouping the triad syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Syntax studies the interrelation of the signs, without regard to meaning. Semantics studies the relation between the signs and the objects to which they apply. Pragmatics studies the relation between the sign system and its human (or animal) user. Unlike his mentor George Herbert Mead, Morris was a behaviorist and sympathetic to the Vienna Circle positivism of his colleague Rudolf Carnap. Morris has been accused of misreading Peirce.

Umberto Eco made a wider audience aware of semiotics by various publications, most notably *A Theory of Semiotics* and his novel *The Name of the Rose* which includes semiotic elements. His most important contributions to the field bear on interpretation, encyclopedia, and model reader.

Algirdas Julius Greimas developed a structural version of semiotics named generative semiotics, trying to shift the focus of discipline from

signs to systems of signification. His theories develop the ideas of Saussure, Hjelmslev, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Thomas A. Sebeok, a student of Charles W. Morris, was a prolific and wide-ranging American semiotician. Though he insisted that animals are not capable of language, he expanded the purview of semiotics to include non-human signaling and communication systems, thus raising some of the issues addressed by philosophy of mind and coining the term zoosemiotics. Sebeok insisted that all communication was made possible by the relationship between an organism and the environment it lives in. He also posed the equation between semiosis (the activity of interpreting signs) and life - the view that has further developed by Copenhagen-Tartu biosemiotic school.

Juri Lotman 1922–1993 was the founding member of the Tartu (or Tartu-Moscow) Semiotic School. He developed a semiotic approach to the study of culture and established a communication model for the study of text semiotics. He also introduced the concept of the semiosphere. Among his Moscow colleagues were Vladimir Toporov, Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov, and Boris Uspensky.

Current applications

Applications of semiotics include:

It represents a methodology for the analysis of texts regardless of modality. For these purposes, "text" is any message preserved in a form whose existence is independent of both sender and receiver;

Its concepts and methods are highly portable, and have enriched our understanding of many disciplines, e.g., biology, anthropology, computing, engineering, linguistics, mathematics, philosophy, and psychology;

It can improve ergonomic design in situations where it is important to ensure that human beings can interact more effectively with their environments, whether it be on a large scale, as in architecture, or on a small scale, such as the configuration of instrumentation for human use.

Semiotics is only slowly establishing itself as a discipline to be respected. In some countries, its role is limited to literary criticism and an appreciation of audio and visual media, but this narrow focus can inhibit a more general study of the social and political forces shaping how different media are used and their dynamic status within modern culture. Issues of technological determinism in the choice of media and the design of

communication strategies assume new importance in this age of mass media. The use of semiotic methods to reveal different levels of meaning and, sometimes, hidden motivations has led some to demonise elements of the subject as Marxist, nihilist, etc. (e.g. critical discourse analysis in Postmodernism and deconstruction in Post-structuralism).

Publication of research is both in dedicated journals such as *Sign Systems Studies*, established by Juri Lotman and published by Tartu University Press; *Semiotica*, founded by Sebeok, *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*; *European Journal of Semiotics*; *Versus* (founded and directed by Eco), et al.; and as articles accepted in periodicals of other disciplines, especially journals oriented toward philosophy and cultural criticism.

Branches

Semiotics has sprouted a number of subfields, including but not limited to the following:

Biosemiotics is the study of semiotic processes at all levels of biology, or a semiotic study of living systems.

Computational semiotics attempts to engineer the process of semiosis, say in the study of and design for Human-Computer Interaction or to mimic aspects of human cognition through artificial intelligence and knowledge representation.

Cultural and literary semiotics examines the literary world, the visual media, the mass media, and advertising in the work of writers such as Roland Barthes, Marcel Danesi, and Juri Lotman.

Music semiology "There are strong arguments that music inhabits a semiological realm which, on both ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels, has developmental priority over verbal language." (Middleton 1990, p.172) See Nattiez (1976, 1987, 1989), Stefani (1973, 1986), Baroni (1983), and *Semiotica* (66: 1–3 (1987)).

Structuralism and post-structuralism in the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Louis Hjelmslev, Roman Jakobson, Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, etc.

Urban Semiotics

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