

WHAT IS SEMIOTICS?

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Simply put, semiotics is the study of signs. What is a sign? According to a somewhat precarious tradition extending back through Morris, Peirce, Saussure, Locke, the Stoic philosophers, and others, a SIGN is something that stands for something else ("aliquid stat pro aliquo" - see Jakobson 1975 and Sebeok 1976 for historiographical remarks). That component of the sign which has a physical or perceptible impact on the interpreter of the sign is the SIGNIFIER (Saussure's signifiant, the Medieval schoolman's signans, the Stoic σημαίνων). That component in the alleged "mind" of the interpreter which is generally known as an idea or concept, and which may eventually prove to be a neurochemical entity, is known to the semiotician as a SIGNIFIED (signifié, signatum, σημαίνόμενον). For example, the English word "tree" is a perceivable signifier linked together with the idea of a "tree" to form a sign of something that exists, may exist, etc. in a world outside of the interpreter. Note that, contrary to common English usage, a sign is understood to be not only a physical signifier, but both a signifier and a conceptual signified which together stand for something else. In an act of SEMIOSIS the two components of the sign, signifier and signified are in some sense activated in the interpreter who accepts them as a substitute for the OBJECT (event). Semiosis thus has two faces: it is both the presence of the sign and the absence of the object.

Some semioticians, such as Peirce and Eco, see the interpreter as himself nothing but a systematic complex of semioses (Eco 1976, 314-317). For example, if someone asks an "ideal" interpreter what a tree is (and there are no trees in the immediate vicinity), he will be obliged to say something like "a tall, green object." But then he may be asked what a tall, green object is, and so on in an unlimited series of semioses until first his entire store of semioses about trees is exhausted, and then eventually his entire store of semioses about himself is exhausted and he has defined himself as an interpreter exclusively by means of all these semioses. This "brain-washing" approach to the interpreter is essentially what lies behind such claims as Buffon's "Le style c'est l'homme même" and Peirce's "My language is the sum total of myself" or "Man is a sign."

In theory, anything in the universe can become semiotized, anything could conceivably stand for something else, anything in the universe has the potential

of being a sign. But there are signs and there are "signs." Biologists, for example, know that the green color of a leaf is a "sign" of chlorophyll in the leaf. Chemists know that the blue color of litmus "signifies" an alkaline solution. Astronomers know that a red shift in the spectrum of light emanating from a star is a "sign" that the star is moving away. But biologists, chemists, astronomers, and other scientists are "semioticians" only in a rather banal sense of the word. The relationships these scientists study can perfectly well exist without them, i.e., without interpreters to semiotize such relationships. Not so with the relationships studied by the professional semiotician. The latter is interested in the functioning of signs in an interpreter (or interpreters) other than himself (unless he is studying himself objectively, as another interpreter). Thus, for example, a semiotician might study how biologists make connections between the colors of leaves and their notions of the chemicals in the leaves. That is, it is possible to do a semiotics of scientific interpretation. More commonly, however, the semiotician studies signs that are imputed in a complex cultural code rather than signs which result from scientific discoveries. Thus, a semiotician might take an interest in how the color green came to be associated with the notion "go" at a traffic intersection. Or he may try to determine how and why green came to represent the psychological state of envy in certain cultures. The essential ingredient in his studies, as opposed to the studies of a biologist, a chemist, etc., is the interpreter. Whereas light of a wavelength perceivable as green is related to chlorophyll whether or not the biologist is present, such light does not signify "go" at a traffic intersection unless there is an interpreter present behind the wheel of an automobile entering the intersection. No semiosis takes place in the absence of an interpreter. The tree falls in the forest whether or not an interpreter is present, but the fall does not signify anything without an interpreter. Semiotics, then, is not merely the study of signs, but is the study of how interpreters actualize the infinite number of potentially semiotic relationships that exist in the universe. Semiotics is a highly pragmatic enterprise. As Peirce insisted, the sign always stands for something to someone (even if that someone is himself a complex of signs). Or, in zoosemiotic and other systems not involving the grammatical category of person, the sign always stands for something to something. Thus a certain sound produced by a Wood Thrush during the breeding season signifies something precisely to individuals of the same species (or, in rare instances, to semioticians studying that species).

Armed with this somewhat overly terse definition of semiotics, the reader will now hopefully turn to a few of the basic treatises on semiotic theory.*

A RUDIMENTARY READING LIST IN GENERAL SEMIOTICS

Baran, Henryk (ed. & introd.). 1976. Semiotics and Structuralism. White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts & Sciences Press.

Eco, Umberto. 1976. A Theory of Semiotics. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.

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Locke, John. 1960 (1694). Essay Concerning Humane Understanding. London: Thomas Basset.

Morris, Charles. 1946. Signs, Language, and Behavior. New York: George Braziller.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1965-1966. Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (8 vols.).

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