

New Semiotics. Between Tradition and Innovation.

**New Bulgarian University Sofia,
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of Semiotics**



Southeast European Center for Semiotic Studies. Sofia 2014, 16–20 September,
New Bulgarian University, Montevideo 21, Sofia 1618, Bulgaria
<http://semio2014.org/en/home>; <http://semio2014.org/en/sebeok-as-a-semiotician>

Thursday, 16 September 2014, 14:00–19:00 h

Sebeok as a semiotician

Semiotics and its Masters (past and present) session

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Thomas A. Sebeok (Budapest 9 November 1920 – Bloomington 21 December 2001)

There should be a discussion on the major topic and results of Sebeok’s semiotic activity. He started as a Finno-Ugrist linguist, and then moved to general linguistics and communication theory and non-verbal communication. Then he became an outliner and historiographer of semiotics, the founding father of “zoosemiotics”, and of a classical style “biosemiotics”. He did more than anybody else for international congresses, teaching and publication of worldwide semiotics. He was a central knot of the “semiotic web”. There are still many persons who have known and remember him.

Abstracts:

1) EERO TARASTI, University of Helsinki, President of the IASS/AIS
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The Sebeokian Vision of Semiotics. From Finno-Ugrian Studies via Zoosemiotics to Bio- and Global Semiotics

2) Hongbing Yu, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China (njnubrandon@126.com)
The Sebeokian Synthesis of Two Seemingly Contrary Traditions—Viewed from China

The prevailing dominance of Peircean studies of signs in the West, the witness of which is manifestly borne by a 1988 paper entitled “Why we prefer Peirce to Saussure” written by one of the major contemporary scholars on Peirce, T.L. Short, has been well-acknowledged in the domain Chinese semiotics. It is in this very light, however, it may appear a strange phenomenon to the Western semioticians that, also in China, the new Eastern stronghold of Global Semiotics as envisaged by the late Thomas A. Sebeok, both the Peircean tradition and the Saussurean tradition have been standing side by side ever since the early days of their reception. As it has turned out, this situation of Peirce & Saussure being “Hand in Hand” in China is a *de facto* coexistence.

What is more remarkable is that these two traditions have co-existed quite peacefully for most of the time, regardless of the fact that they have been largely thought to compete, or to be at cold war, with each other for more than half a century in the West (Sign in use). For instance, in the case of many American and European semioticians, they just do not quite entertain the idea of these two traditions coexisting at the same level. Insofar as the term *Semiotics* has been used as *the* umbrella term for world-wide inquiries of the sign, it seems very easy nowadays to brush aside the Saussurean model of the sign, which consists of an irreducible dyadic relation of the *signifier* and the *signified*, secure in the knowledge that the Peircean model of the sign offers a higher degree of dynamism and dialogism, thus a more adequate explanatory power, inasmuch as it is composed of an equally irreducible triadic sign relation of the *sign (representamen)*, the *object* and the *interpretant*. Be that as it may, here in the East, the unique Chinese way of treating things not so often in a black-and-white manner has nonetheless swayed the Chinese semioticians’ perception of the relationship between the Peircean and the Saussurean models of the sign. They do have coexisted for a good many years in this rising stronghold of semiotic studies in the East.

In the light of the China-specific interpretations and appropriations of Peirce and Saussure, still contrary to what many Western semioticians are led to believe, a “rediscovered” congenial exemplar *par excellence* of creatively synthesizing the above-mentioned sign models, as much as differentiating them, would be none other than the late Thomas A. Sebeok, who had an obvious yet largely neglected Chinese connection and is strongly believed in Chinese semiotics to have contributed to achieving a synthesis of the two seemingly contrary traditions, especially with his *Model of Models*, viz. the Modeling Systems Theory.

3) Kalevi Kull, University of Tartu (kalevi.kull@ut.ee)
Thomas Sebeok library in Tartu

Making books and editing is a way of meaning making. For more than three decades, Thomas A. Sebeok served as the editor of leading journal and book series in semiotics. He used to work at his home office where he collected a rich semiotic library. Since 2011, Sebeok’s library belongs to the University of Tartu, and is stored as a memorial library in the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics of the University of Tartu. The Sebeok collection includes about 4200 books and 700 volumes of semiotic journals, among these the volumes authored and edited by him, about 1000 volumes related to his biosemiotic interests, and many rare editions. Together with regular acquisitions and earlier belongings of semiotic literature by

Tartu University Library, this makes Tartu a very rich place for semiotic readings, open for students and scholars of the world. In the talk some findings will be shared.

4) Marcel Danesi, University of Toronto (marcel.danesi@utoronto.ca.)

The concept of model in Thomas A. Sebeok's semiotics

Especially in his later writings, Thomas Sebeok was striving to interconnect semiosis in species in emulation of his great intellectual predecessor, Jakob von Uexküll. In order to liberate semiotics as a discipline from the cultural-ideological orientation it had taken in the decades of the 1960s through to the late 1980s, the era that foregrounded post-structuralism in semiotic analysis, Sebeok brought back the concept of model as conceived by Uexküll and developed by the Tartu School. In my view, his goal was to eliminate jargon and abstruse solipsistic notions from poststructuralist semiotics by expanding the paradigm to focus on the nature of semiosis as a model-based and model-generating faculty of the brain and, as consequence, to differentiate anthroposemiosis from zoosemiosis and phytosemiosis. This paper looks at modeling systems theory in the light of new technologies and the evolution of semiosis in the global village.

5) Augusto Ponzio, University of Bari (augustoponzio@libero.it)

Susan Petrilli, University of Bari (susan.petrilli@gmail.com)

Semiotics after Sebeok

Thomas A. Sebeok was the first to point out that semiotics is "global semiotics", because all life-forms depend upon the action of signs (semiosis). From this perspective, semiotics is the development of the human capacity for becoming aware of semiosis – for metasemiosis. As the only semiotic animal on earth, the human being is responsible for the whole of life: semiotics entails responsibility. The semiotician must become also a "semioethician", as we come to realize that life on our planet is in serious danger before the destructive character of national socio-economic behaviors today. So far as a species we have failed to recognize that the individual and collective identity of all living beings on the planet are bound up in the same communicative destiny which semiosis creates and semiotics studies. This paper argues that the distinction between difference of signs and signs of difference brings needed clarity to the problem.

6) Paul Cobley, Middlesex University, London (p.cobley@mdx.ac.uk)

Survival machines and the aesthetic

This paper will argue that Sebeok's 1979 review of investigations into animals' aesthetic behavior, originally cast as an early chapter of a much larger book, contains the key insight which drives contemporary, 21st century semiotics. Sebeok argues that "aesthetic sensibility plays the part of a delicate sieve" among animals. In so doing, this paper will show how he not only clarifies the modeling process as a whole, across verbal and a verbal modes, but also provides an agenda for re-thinking tertiary modeling, the humanities and global arts policy.

7) Zdzisław Waśik, Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław & Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (zdzis.wasik@gmail.com)

Presenting the *Lectures on the Epistemology of Semiotics* as homage to Professor Thomas A. Sebeok and his Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies in Bloomington, Indiana

My first encounter with Thomas Albert Sebeok was during the time when I received a 10 month Fellowship for Senior Scholars with an appointment as a Fulbright grantee in the State University of New York at Buffalo. I was introduced to him at the *7th Annual Meeting* of the *Semiotic Society of America*, organized at Buffalo, NY, on 21–24 October 1982. Initially, he invited me to his Research for Language and Semiotic at Bloomington, Indiana, for a month. But after negotiations with the Department of State of the United States, I decided to move with my family for the second part of my stipend to Indiana University starting from February 1983. From that time on, I became one of his disciples and followers. Our families were mutually acquainted, including our daughters playing violin. My stay in Bloomington had been supplementary extended, at first for two months and then, due to supportive opinions of Michael Herzfeld, Associate Chair and Thomas A. Sebeok, Chairman of the Center, for additional five months. Having spent 12 months in sum there, I was able to collect complete investigative materials for my future book on the semiotic paradigm of linguistics and several consecutive books and articles devoted to the subject-oriented conceptions of sign and meaning bridging the sciences of biology and anthropology. In subsequent years, we occasionally got together at various semiotic congresses, conferences and symposia in America and Europe. As a frequent participant of Toronto-Imatra Summer Schools of Semiotics, I had an opportunity for meeting him mostly in Finland and hearing his brilliant lectures perfused with traces of his personal and professional life-history. I felt as being extraordinary distinguished to take active part in the festivities of *Hommage à Thomas A. Sebeok, 80 Years – From Fennougrian Studies to Biosemiotics* celebrated during the Nordic-Baltic Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies and 19th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of Finland, at Imatra, June 12–21, 2000. Throughout the last four decades his inspiring spirit permeated not only my activity but also the scientific labor of the centers he had promoted or brought to life in Warsaw, Tartu-Moscow, Helsinki-Imatra or semioticians he had cooperated with, as in Budapest, Vienna, Paris, etc. Thomas A. Sebeok may be thus regarded as an embodied sign of the whole solipsistic conceptual and methodological framework of new semiotics. While contributing to the thematic session “Sebeok as a semiotician”, I will refer mainly to Jakob von Uexküll’s ‘Umwelt-theory’: A link between the semiotics of nature and the semiotics of culture, a topic which has constituted a large part of my vocational training received in the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies of the Indiana University at Bloomington.

8) John Deely, University of St. Thomas, Houston, Texas (jndeely@stthom.edu)

THE HIDDEN THIRD: Thomas A. Sebeok’s role is the passage from semiology to semiotics

The 20th century development of interest in signs made of the subject a major theme for intellectual culture. It was overall a new development, and began mainly as a consequence of the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), thanks to the publication of notes from his lectures at the University of Geneva published as a volume in 1916 by Charles Bally and

Albert Sechehaye. Slightly earlier, but more generally unnoticed, Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914) in America began his own investigation signs, but on a deeper historical basis (Peirce acquainted himself with the Latin Age development as well as with John Locke’s (1632–1704), suggestion of 1690 that the “new science of signs” be called semiotics), and with a more careful analysis of the signifier/signified relation which revealed that every sign, in order successfully to present a signified to another, required an interpretant.

Just after the mid-20th century, Thomas A. Sebeok stepped onto the stage of sign discussions, first to bring to center-stage the realization that all animals, and not just human animals within their species-specific sphere of culture as dependent upon linguistic communication, make use of signs. And second to bring to center-stage Peirce’s notion of successful sign-action as irreducibly triadic by reason of the interpretant hidden, as it were, in the background of a signifier/signified connection (as, for example, the successful use of a dictionary in conveying the meaning of a word presupposes as interpretant the linguistic habit of the language of the dictionary in the one looking up the word).

As the followers of Saussure, with the Estonian exception of Juri Lotman (1922–1993), gathered around the term “semiology”, the Peirceans gathered around some variant of the term “semiotics”, and the second half of the 20th century came to be seen as if it were a “contest” between Peirceans and Saussureans as to which conception of sign, the Saussurean dyadic notion or the Peircean triadic notion, were “correct”. However, this “contest” is more of a “kabuki show” than the reality of the development of what since Augustine’s day (354–430) through the entire Latin Age and after in Locke, Peirce, and Sebeok had been called “the doctrine of signs” (where the Latin *doctrina* carried the Latin notion not of “dogma” but of what we would call today “cenoscopic” in contrast to “ideoscopic” science). For Sebeok over the body of his work from 1963 until his death in 2001 effectively demonstrated that semiology as based on Saussure’s model was but a part of a much larger whole which, by way of Peirce’s demonstration that an interpretant is not only necessary to successful sign-action but need not be mental, extended the scope of sign activity to a perfusion of the universe as a whole (including of course human culture but only as a species-specifically human part of that larger “semiosic whole”).

Thus Sebeok was to the 20th century development of semiotics what the interpretant proves to be for semiosis itself: the “hidden third” without which the present development of semiotics as a global development cannot be properly understood sociologically and historically.

Thomas A. Sebeok, in short, was the *éminence grise* more responsible (through the constant and extensive exercise of his extraordinary editorial, writing, and organizational skills) than any single figure both for the emergence of Peirce’s work to the center-stage of semiotic development and for the sociological and organizational development of “semiotic societies” and congresses around the globe. The achievement of Sebeok, awesome in its scope, was best summarized perhaps in his work along with Marcel Danesi (born 1946) in developing the notion of “primary modeling system” in such a way as to demonstrate that what the semiologists (Lotman in particular) had called “primary and secondary modeling systems” were in fact “secondary and tertiary” within semiotics. This “background centrality” of Thomas A. Sebeok’s life and work is the subject of my presentation within the “Sebeok as a semiotician” Round Table.