

Establishing Semiotics As a Science

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At this point in time, semiotics has not yet acquired a definitive status among the various branches of the sciences. While the subject matter of other sciences is well-established and strictly defined, the scope and nature of semiotics is defined in a variety of diverse ways. Semioticians have variously described it as a “science”, a “mode of thinking” and an “interdisciplinary approach” (or method). The range of approaches to semiotics is clearly discernable in different meetings on semiotic matters, where most of the presentations have nothing in common with one another, not in terms of their topics, the terminology they use, or their conceptual underpinnings. Each presentation makes use of a different conceptual framework that bears no resemblance to those employed in the neighboring rooms. Very often, you simply will not understand what is being discussed in a session. The very fact that we semioticians do not understand one another is the clearest indication that semiotics is not yet a mature science. No established science, however wide its scope might be, can abide such a lack of standards. One result of this situation is that the general public is not familiar with our activities or simply is not aware that our field exists.

Some semioticians accept this state of affairs and even declare that “semiotics is whatever any scientist dealing with it calls *semiotics*.”¹ Such a nihilistic viewpoint cannot be welcome, because it will prevent our field of study from ever becoming a rigorous, recognized science that stands on its own feet.

In my opinion, semiotics has developed in this way because the science of signs developed independently in various other, unrelated branches of science. Each time it was developed, it acquired its specific approach and terminological attire from its mother science. Thus, medicine created its own semiotics and imbued it with its own particular nature; mathematics gave rise to its own distinct brand of semiotics; etc. Naturally, they had very little in common.

Until now, we have accepted all the various forms of semiotics as they are, doing very little to formulate a foundation for all of them with a single common basis. To my mind, this approach is misguided. To explain why I disapprove of it, I will use the concept of *structure* as a broad construct embracing all types of structures, including those of *semiotic systems*. To grasp my approach, you must bear in mind that by *semiotics* I mean a *science of signs, sign-systems and semiotic reality*. From this series of concepts, let us focus on that of a *sign-system*. A sign-system is a kind of structure, but it is a purely semiotic structure, and we have to study it within the framework of our science.

On the other hand, a text, which is composed of signs, may also be viewed as a structure, but of a different sort. This sort of structure should be studied as part of the discipline that produced it, using the tools of that field.

¹ In: http://www.netslova.ru/gorny/selected/semiotics_r.html [Accessed: 28/01/2009]

To better understand this distinction, let us consider some examples. The letters of an alphabet are signs, and they comprise their particular alphabet, which is also a sign-system. In this context, we can analyze the letters and the alphabet as semiotic entities. On the other hand, we can also analyze them as linguistic entities, because they are parts of the corresponding language. In this case, we will use the methods of study and modes of analysis that were developed for linguistic analysis. But, when we examine a literary text that is composed of these very letters, we come to yet another structure – one that is very different from the two we already mentioned. We must scrutinize the text from the viewpoint of literary theory. This latter approach is very different from the other two, utilizing distinct methods of examination and analysis. In sum, the analysis of the letters and the alphabet as semiotic entities belongs to the field of semiotics. The other analyses belong to other fields – linguistics and literary theory.

The same is true of other types of texts. Consider, for example, a musical text – the notes of a piece of music. Notes are signs, and they compose musical notations, which are their corresponding sign-systems. These are semiotic entities and we must study them as such. But, a piece of music that is built in the form of a special composition is quite another type of structure. The study of the piece of music is not part of semiotics; it should be undertaken as part of a field that deals with music, using its theory of music, and applying its notions, concepts and terminology.

The same types of structures can be discerned in any branch of science and even in any sort of practical activity. We, as semioticians, cannot undertake the analysis of the aspects of structures that naturally belong to other fields. Each is best appreciated by its mother science, which is its natural and only frame of reference. For our part, we must provide purely semiotic analyses of signs and their systems, regardless of the field that produced them.

In order for this to be possible, we must formulate a broad foundation for the field of semiotics. I call this foundation *General Semiotics*. Furthermore, it is my belief that invitations to our conferences must be advanced only for presentations that are directly related to General Semiotics – presentations that deal with the semiotic analysis of various signs and sign-systems.

On a practical level, I would like to suggest that we undertake the following steps in order to begin constructing the field of semiotic studies:

1. Organize a committee for formulating the grounding principles of *General Semiotics*. The principles that were constructed more than a hundred years ago seem inadequate at this stage.
2. Organize a terminology committee to develop our own terminology for *General Semiotics*.
3. Make the rules for inviting presentations to our meetings and conferences stricter, limiting presentations to those that will not only include topics relevant to other sciences, but also semiotic perspectives.
4. Promote constant and strong ties with branch semiotics in different sciences (like cart semiotics, semiotics in pedagogy, and others) in order to coordinate these separate currents under the auspices of General Semiotics into a single informational and conceptual field of knowledge.