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On Meaning-Making: Essays in Semiotics  
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## SEMIOTICS FOR BEGINNERS

"Don't you know what semiotics is?!" This is not a question. It is a reproach. The sentence means: everybody else does know. You must be uninformed. Semiotics is something you ought to know. Just pretend you do, and you can at least be like everybody else and hide your lack of education.

The *words* of this sentence mean something quite different. The sentence has the form of a question. A question asks for an answer. If the sentence did not end on an exclamation mark, it could also mean: if you don't, I will be happy to explain it to you. Or: too bad, if you did you could explain it to me, because I don't.

The content of a linguistic expression can be swept aside by a small sign added to the words: an exclamation mark, a specific intonation which expresses just a tiny bit more surprise than would be appropriate. The question is not a question anymore. That surplus of surprise means an appeal to your snobism, even a threat of social exclusion: *intimidation*.

When a geography book contains the following sentence: "It is the task of the glacier to eliminate the accumulated snow that becomes dangerous," the message is more than just information about glaciers. It means, for example, that natural phenomena receive a task from someone. It says that natural disasters are therefore predictable, necessary and good. The child who is required to learn this will repress its feelings of revolt at yesterday's news item: "four tourists killed by sliding glacier." Apparently nature has all in order. So there must be a god who distributes the tasks; the death of the tourists, however regrettable, is a sacrifice for greater safety for all others. Hence, the innocent-looking sentence expresses and conveys, proposes and presents as natural, a particular world-view.

There are differences between this example and the previous one. A first difference is the degree to which the surplus meaning is hidden. The first message comes across inevitably. The person who would begin answering "no, please explain" would be considered a little ridiculous; the one who would say "oh yes, do you want me to tell you?" can count on the contempt of the first speaker. The second message is likely to be only taken in subliminally. The young student will not ask questions but add this message to the many others of the same content s/he receives, until s/he will in turn find the belief in question "normal."

The second difference is one of the kind of effect. Here, there is no intimidation, the meaning does not hold a threat. But there is manipulation, because a message is conveyed without giving the addressee the means to realize it, hence to consciously accept or reject it. But this difference is contingent upon historical and social variables. There have been times that the person who would get the message and question it risked his or her life. Hence, manipulation can easily evolve into intimidation.

When an advertisement consists of a glamorous picture of a shiny new car on top of whose hood an attractive nude woman is smiling at you, the message is, "The buyer of this car will get a free woman" or, to put it less crudely, "A man who possesses a car like this will have no trouble seducing a beautiful woman." An American appearing at a reception in sneakers and shorts is probably a student, and does not attract much attention; a European doing the same thing expresses his contempt for receptions and other formal gatherings, and attracts a lot of attention, perhaps even aggression. A person who wears black is in mourning, who is unmarried at thirty is gay, who has more than three kids is a Catholic, who makes spelling mistakes is a working-class person; that is to say, to those who have formal views about human feelings, prejudices against alternative forms of love, strong feelings about over-population and a simplistic class-consciousness.

The world around us is chaotic. In order to live in that world, we must find ways to grasp it, establish some sort of order in it. We are not alone in that endeavor. Others face the same problem. And we can make contact with those others. That contact helps us talk about the world, order things, bring order into the chaos. We do that by naming things, so that others know what we are talking about. We do that through signs.

The most familiar and complex system of signs is language. Human communities are impossible without some form of language. Language is the most highly developed sign-system, a sign-system which allows the conveyance of the most complex observations, views, thoughts. But there are innumerable ways to convey thought through signs other than linguistic. Sometimes these are signs which accompany the linguistic signs, like the exclamation mark/intonation in the first example. Sometimes these are signs embedded in the linguistic signs, like in the example of the glacier. Sometimes these are non-linguistic signs which operate fully independently, like the shorts on a European at a reception. Raising your shoulders, nodding "yes," making drawings, music, gestures, dressing and cooking in particular ways, paying for a cup of coffee with a hundred dollar-bill, smiling or not smiling when you meet a fellow-student in the morning: all these activities are, among other things, ways of using signs to express something. Humans possess an immense degree of competence in using various phenomena as signs by giving them meaning. The human being is a semiotic being.

The field, discipline and perspective of semiotics study the meaning and implications of that characteristic of the human species. The field of semiotics is characterized by interests in a set of questions like: what sign-systems do we have, what types of signs are operative, how do they function, what is their effect? These common interests do not imply a unified approach to the questions, no more than the field of literary studies implies that there is only one approach to literature. As an academic discipline beginning to establish itself,

semiotics has its own methods and object. The methods are several, and globally speaking, they have their basis in their respective historical backgrounds. But the discipline's object is defined by the questions which unify the field; this is how a field gives rise to a discipline. It is, finally, the semiotic perspective that is most characteristic and unifying for semiotics.

As a field, semiotics constantly crosses the boundaries of other fields. As a discipline semiotics needs more fluid academic boundaries than those currently in place and reflecting the structure of departments established before semiotics gained credibility. Yet it also necessitates an adaptation to academic-political boundaries. The semiotic perspective implies that phenomena are studied insofar as they are, or can be, taken as signs. It does not study the phenomena for their own sake, as matter, for example. Hence, it interacts with rather than absorbs other fields and disciplines. This perspective limits the field and counters the occasional charge of imperialism. Semiotics is limited not in the number of items it studies, but in the number of questions it is interested in addressing to those items. Semiotics studies culture *as* processes of communication which are possible thanks to the system of signs that underlie them. Thus it studies many of the objects anthropology studies, for example, but in different ways and with different goals.

The examples given so far have shown why it is important to study semiotics. The communication effectuated by signs is the link between humans and the physical and social world around them, and between each individual or group and other individuals and groups; it is what makes life possible. Understanding the ways in which this communication takes place helps make communication more effective, more pleasurable, successful or fulfilling. Communication is also a realm in which problems between people occur. The first example showed the working of intimidation; the second, of manipulation. If individuals know how to interpret subliminal signs, they will be less vulnerable to their effects and will increase what is called their manipulation-resistance.

That adequate interpretation of signs is a vital necessity in modern life is obvious: responding inappropriately to traffic lights may kill you, ignoring social conventions may cost you jobs or friendships, mistaking a novel for a newspaper or vice versa may spoil your pleasure or give you wrong ideas about reality. Peasants need to interpret foreboding signs about the weather in order to protect their harvest from droughts or excessive rain, and sailors know their lives depend on an adequate reading of clouds and winds as well as maps.

The examples cited above showed that the interpretation of signs is not only highly subconscious, but also subject-bound. In those two cases, the semiotic act took place on the side of the sender. It was the sender who added the tone of excessive surprise or the religious implication. In the first case, that act was probably conscious: the sender wanted to convey surprise or even shock, whether or not the intention to intimidate was part of his or her project.

In the second case, the extra message was probably not consciously intended. For the implied message expressed a belief, and beliefs are more often than not held without the possibility of disbelief even occurring to the subject. In other words, the subject who wrote the geography book did not mean to manipulate the young student into his or her belief, but simply held a view of the world in which God "naturally" or "obviously" arranges the course of nature.

In the other examples, it was on the other side of the communication that the semiotic act took place. The student's shorts are only seen as a sign by a person who is not used to seeing people appear in shorts at receptions, which happened to be my case when I first came to North America. He himself was not aware of anything especially significant about his dress. The class-boundness of the interpretation of spelling mistakes as a sign is significant. The person who makes the mistakes is not only not aware of the mistakes, but were s/he to be told, s/he would not in the least see why that would be a sign of alliance to whatever group, but take it as an individual and accidental happening. In both these cases, the semiotic act of interpreting a phenomenon as a sign came from the receiver or addressee who turned a phenomenon into a sign by giving it meaning.

The act of interpretation becomes in itself a new semiotic act, and sender and receiver change places. Again, the question whether the interpreter is aware of his or her semiotic activity is not so much the point as the question of how this interpretation occurs, why, and what it means to interpret in this way. For the interpretation becomes indeed a sign in its turn. We may, for example, take the interpretation of the spelling mistakes as a sign, rather than the mistakes themselves. We may interpret that interpretation as a sign of snobism, of a kind of bourgeois liberalism that takes class difference for granted, and see the person given to that interpretation of spelling errors as an ideological enemy or ally. Our interpretation, in turn, conveys meaning to those others to whom we relate our interpretation, and so forth. In theory, there is no end to this process of semiosis, of semiotic acts that chain up from one to the other.

The meaning of signs is different according to the social groups we belong to. One example that has bothered me for years now is the word "hair-relaxer." For a person with a white skin and curly hair, the word simply refers to a product of hair-cosmetics which allows us to change our hair-style. It may have the same meaning, indeed, is meant to have it, for a person with a black skin, whose chances to have curly hair are substantially greater. But why is the product not called "hair-straightener"? Simply for phonetic pleasantness? Obviously not. The word holds the concept of relaxation, which has a specific meaning in a North American context. For Americans, "to relax" has the positive value of "take it easy." It represents health and wealth. Hence, it is not only related to a concern for the health of the population which we may evaluate positively, but also to a concern for money and class divisions which

we may think of differently. It can be argued, for example, that only wealthy people can relax.

In this context, the use of the concept of relaxation for a word that has already more frequent relevance for black than for white people, may make you suspicious. But if we now return to the positive value of concern for health, we cannot ignore that what the word hair-relaxer implies is, only straight ("relaxed") hair is healthy. In other words, even the concept that is positive as such is used in a way that we may question on ideological grounds. It establishes normality on the basis of innate features of groups; it divides the world into healthy and unhealthy people according to divisions of race.

Going back slightly more than a century, we realize where these connections come from. In the world of slavery, only the white slave owner could relax. Hence, the word hair-relaxer establishes the norm with reference to a social class division whose traces are still not wiped out. Making black people believe that the ideal of beauty has to be derived from a norm alien to them and borrowed from the group that established a division damaging to them is the message implied by the innocent-looking word indicating an innocent-looking product of an industry that looks innocent in itself.

No, I don't think I am exaggerating the importance of a simple word. The word is not just a word; it carries a persuasiveness that is meant to result in the obedience of the people addressed. For only if black people in large numbers act upon the message and buy the product, thus buying into the alien ideology, is the word successful. What the customers are supposed to do is to put a product in their hair that results neither in health nor in relaxation of the hair. The chemicals are not promoting their health in any way and the result is, on the contrary, straight, but not relaxed hair. Like the word, the hair loses its innocence and becomes "tense." Apparently, it is the ideal of straight hair "like the others," not of loose, pleasant, supple hair that was at stake. There is a direct continuity between the word and the social process it is involved in.

I can accumulate many other examples, whose importance for social life is variable. But the point I am trying to make is almost too obvious: that signs are socially active forces, and so is interpretation. Therefore, the study of signs and the semiotic perspective on social communication is a relevant activity. But it can only be so if the factors so far encountered are taken into account. Signs are not things, but the result of acts carried out by individuals belonging to social groups. They do not emerge in isolation, but in relation to other signs, previously produced. They are based on grounds and result in effects that deserve to be studied as part of a larger endeavor whose goals stretch beyond purely academic understanding.

Thus conceived, semiotics is a much needed theory. It pursues various goals at the same time, in an attempt to be helpful for various purposes. It is meant to provide tools helpful for the interpretation of cultural products like texts, literary or not, films, paintings, music, gestures. It is also meant to

provide insights that help us not only understand, but also counter, eventually undermine, social practices that are felt to be damaging to certain groups of people. It can be of use to students in disciplines like English; various literatures and comparative literature, art history, musicology, film studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and the study of religion, and in group-related fields like African American studies or women's studies. It can be used for the analysis of cultural products and for the understanding of their ideological basis; in other words, it can be used with or without explicit political purpose.

The most common answer to the question "What is a sign?" is: a sign is something that stands for something else. A flag stands for a nation, a set of letters for a word, the word for a concept; a drawing of Clinton, whether a caricature or not, stands for the president of the United States; an I.D. card stands for the bearer; a trumpet call in a military camp stands for the order to wake up; a kiss for affection and an anxious, tense face for the anxiety the person feels. What are the implications of the idea of "standing for"?

Whenever there is a sign, there are two elements: the thing that is the sign and the thing that the sign replaces. The thing for which the sign stands is absent; that is why the sign needs to stand in for it. If the absent item shows up, we don't need the sign anymore.

The question "What is a sign?" is an obvious one, but it is not well put. It falsely suggests that signs are things. When you see a green traffic light, you are facing a sign that means that you can safely cross the street: the sign "green light" means "safe, cross." There is no misunderstanding possible, once you have learned the rules of traffic. Yet such a light is not always present. After a number of seconds, it disappears. You cannot take it home. And although it is contained in a physical object, the glass construction with an electric bulb in it, it is not *as* object that it stands for safe crossing. It does not stand for safe crossing when it is off. When its superior neighbor is on, then the whole object changes meaning: "red" means "danger, don't cross." The green light stands for safe crossing precisely to the extent that it is opposed to the red light. Similarly, the word "men" stands for a group of people because it does not stand for another group of people, indicated by the word "women." A tree full of green leaves stands for the summer only if somebody pays attention to its difference from a tree in winter, without leaves. The sign is a sign not only because it stands for something, but also because it does not stand for something else. It is the difference between red and green that makes each of these two signs function. This difference is the basis of semantics.

The difference between green and red is not enough to make the light stand for safe crossing. It also needs to be placed at a street corner, on top of a recognizable pillar. The tree needs to stand in a place where the climate is strongly differentiated, not in a country where trees have always leaves. It is the relation between the sign and its environment that makes it a sign. This is the syntactical relation.

The green light only stands for safe crossing for the persons who happen to be at the crossroad when the light is green. If there is no one at the crossroads, there may be a green light, which automatically turns red from time to time, but nobody recognizes it as standing for "safe crossing." It has been designed as a sign; hence, it has potentially the meaning the engineer wanted it to have, but it can only have that meaning, it can only function as a sign, if somebody sees and understands it as such. This is the pragmatic relation.

This becomes more convincing when we think of signs that nobody has designed as signs. When we look out of the window in the morning and the sun is bright, we take that as a sign: "good weather." We do not yet experience the good weather; we do not yet feel the actual warmth, but we know we can expect it and dress accordingly for the day. The sun is not in itself a sign. It becomes one for the person looking out of the window, seeing it and drawing conclusions from it. Similarly, the traffic light, the letters on the page, the advertisements, need to be perceived and interpreted in order to function as signs.

If we take all these requirements together, we can say that a sign is not a thing but a function, an event. A sign does not exist but *occurs*. A sign occurs, then, when something is perceived, for certain reasons or on certain grounds, as standing for something else to someone. It needs interpretation. Most work in the humanities consists of acts of interpretation. How do we do this?

There was a man, let us call him Robinson, who lived for twenty years on an uninhabited island. One day he saw a footprint in the sand. He rejoiced: "This is the end of my loneliness." He followed the traces and found a man who had lived for twenty years on the other side of the island. They made love and were happy together for another twenty years.

Let us take these events, not as a set of words of verbal signs, but as real events: as a sign-event. At the very moment when our Robinson discovered a human footprint in the sand of his island, the inhuman, because asocial, situation of his life came to an end. The footprint itself did not bring about such a revolutionary change. If Robinson had just missed seeing it, or if he had not understood that it was a human trace, his life would not have changed. It was the perception, and, next, the recognition, which made it possible for Robinson to interpret the print, and it was in turn the interpretation which established the relation between Robinson and that other human being, as yet unknown to him.

The entire process of what Robinson was doing when he saw the print is semiosis. It is the process of using signs. The story of Robinson clarifies the important place of interpretation in a society whose culture is based on semiosis. In the example we saw three distinguishable steps. The sign-event took place when something visible presented itself. The print that made the event possible was a perceptible thing: a form in the sand. That thing was seen. Next, the sign-user, in this case the receiver or addressee, recognized the form

as a sign. That is, the specific form suggested to him a relation to something else. A form brings forth a sign when the sign-user sees that it stands for something else, something absent. The sign is useful precisely because of that absence: had the other person been there, his footprints would not have had any meaning for Robinson.

Signs allow us to communicate about something which is absent. As soon as a sign-event occurs, the question of that absent item arises: what is it that the sign stands for? What does it mean? For Robinson the footprint meant that there was a human being on the island. Let us say that this is the first meaning. Few people will want to deny that meaning. Yet this agreement does not imply that the first meaning is fixed. For those who have never seen a footprint before, or who know nothing about scouting, even this interpretation will not present itself. Such a person will perhaps only think, "What a strange form," or, "This is an irregularity in the sand." In other words: even this first interpretation is "only" an interpretation, not an objective fact. It occurs only in the mind of the interpreter, and of all those who share his knowledge and assumptions, his habits of looking.

Robinson pursues his quest for meaning further than this. He derives from the trace a second meaning: this is the end of my loneliness. How does this second meaning come about, and what is its relation to the first? The sign (footprint) and the first meaning (human being around) together bring forth a new meaning. Sign and first meaning become a new sign. The new sign can be described as, "footprint as trace of nearby person." For Robinson, this sign means: no more loneliness. This second meaning is not some vague secondary meaning. Nor is it arbitrary or less important than the first. On the contrary, in this case the second meaning is more important for Robinson than the first. It is the second which will change his life. Only because he is capable of seeing in the trace a sign of the end of his loneliness is the sign, the print and hence, the proximity of the other person, a crucial event in his life. If the idea of "second meaning" does not imply vagueness, arbitrariness or lesser importance, what does it imply? The word "second" refers to a temporal succession and a logical implication. In the order of succession, the first sign necessarily precedes the second: without interpreting the first sign, the receiver cannot reach the second interpretation. Logically, the first sign implies the second: the second sign consists of the first sign *and* its interpretation.

It is precisely because second (and further) meanings are developed out of first, previous meanings, that they are neither vague nor arbitrary. They are not vague but, on the contrary, more specific than the first meanings. Of all possible second meanings he could have attached to the interpreted sign "footprint as trace of nearby human being," Robinson chose one, specific second meaning. His choice was determined by his own situation, loneliness, and his interest, to end that loneliness. His ability to steer the interpretation in the direction of his interest allows Robinson to promote the quality of his life.

Robinson is the model of the semiotic human being, the species which is able, thanks to its semiotic competence, to build up a society and to develop it to an extremely high level.

The second interpretation is not arbitrary either. Had Robinson attached that second meaning to the interpreted sign without any ground, then the interpretation would have been arbitrary. Too bad for him, then; he would not have made any progress: no end to his loneliness. Such a sorry mistake could have happened in both phases of the interpretation, and even before. He could have mistaken the footprint of a monkey for a human one. That would have been a mistake of perception. Then, he could have interpreted the human trace as, "This is the print of a human foot" without attaching to it the interpretation, "Hence, there is a human being nearby." That would have been a mistake of first interpretation. What he would have missed, then, would be the ground on which the sign-event occurred: the rule which establishes that something can stand for something in its proximity. Thirdly, he could have ignored the second meaning, or he could have made a different second interpretation. For example, he could have interpreted "Trace of nearby human being means danger" and have killed his future friend. In all these cases the relation between signs and interpretation would have been more arbitrary than in the case of our story.

Does this mean that Robinson did it "right"? He did, but only in his case. Interpretation is a subject-bound activity. Even the first interpretation needs the specific person Robinson, or another member of the same group—people who know about traces—to occur. The first meaning is not more "right" than the second, nor more exhaustive, more certain or more "objective." It is, however, more *general*. That is to say that it holds for more people than the second, in more situations, in more cases.

The Robinson story confirms what we knew already: that signs-events occur only when signs are interpreted and that interpretation occurs in an interaction between sign and sign-user. It teaches us a little more about the process of semiosis and especially of the activity of the receiver or addressee in it, about interpretation that is. It teaches us in the first place that semiosis is a process, which involves agents, events, things and time. Specifically, we have seen that meaning, the result of interpretation, is no more than the sign itself, not a fixed, objectified thing, but a complex process.

The following features of this process can be retained:

- a second interpretation is the interpretation of a combination of sign and interpretation;
- second interpretations are more specific than the first; first are more general;
- second interpretations represent a further stage in the development of the sign-event;
- second interpretations are not vague, not arbitrary and not less important than first interpretations;

- no interpretation can be "right," "exhaustive," "certain" or "objective";
- but interpretations can be "wrong," that is, inadequate, when the relation which the sign-user establishes between sign and interpretation does not exist, is different, or insufficiently grounded;
- mistaken interpretations will show by the lack of follow-up; they stop the interpretation, remain isolated, or bring no new insights;
- first interpretations are sometimes called denotations; second and further interpretations, connotations.

Allow me to review now a few cases of problematic interpretations, of messages which are in one way or another "hidden": difficult to get, contradictory, subliminal. In the footsteps of Robinson, I will make a case for the importance of maximal interpretation for social life.

Our first example is a set of traffic signs, slightly more complex than the green light. In the city of Rochester, New York, everyone who drives out of campus to the nearby airport meets with the following, confusing signpost at a crucial intersection in the road [figure 1]. If you are going to the airport, it is important to interpret the signs adequately, and if you want to avoid a car-crash, you had better do it quickly. From top to bottom, you see 1. an image of a plane, pointing to the right, 2. an arrow pointing to the left, and 3. a word, and 4. a number. For simplicity's sake we will ignore the second arrow, which compounds yet another message. You can immediately construct the following message: 1. the way to the airport 2. is to the left 3. via route number 22 south.

That is, you can construct that message on the condition that you are trained to pick up automatically a number of aspects of the sign. First of all, you are only capable of doing this interpretation if you are trained in American traffic signs with their combination of images and conventional signs. For one thing, as a European I was myself just well enough trained to get the message, because much of European and American cultures overlap; but not entirely so; but it took me a little while to decide that the direction the image 1 was pointing in was *not* a sign, while its object, a plane, was. The image 1 and arrow 2 are equally clear, but not on the same grounds. You have to *recognize* the plane as referring to the real planes one of which you wish to catch, and to *connect* arrow 2 to the direction it points in and, in fact, is already itself part of. Less crucial is the interpretation of the word and the route number, signs 3 and 4, but it could be crucial in case, for example, you knew that one route to the airport is blocked and route 22 is a detour you must follow. You then have to *know* that numbers stand for certain roads.

What could make this compound sign confusing, is the variety of grounds on which the interpretation of each element is based: recognition, connection and previous knowledge, all three embedded in the more general previous knowledge about American traffic signs. You have to know, first, that images of this kind can represent the things you are looking for, and are not ad-

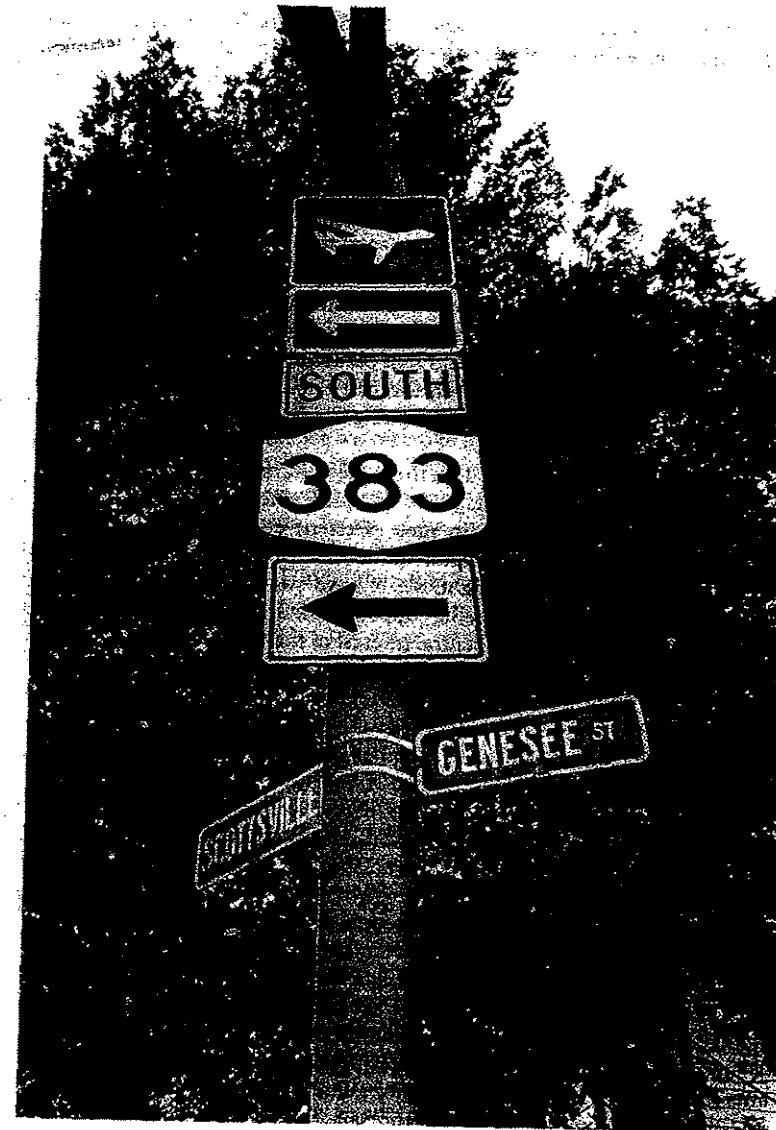


Figure 1: Signpost in Rochester, New York.



vertisements for toys, jokes, or works of art. In other words, you need to be able to activate various rules, embedded and overlapping, by which the members of the culture you live in have agreed to provide signs with meanings and to set up signs in order to convey meanings—in brief, to communicate.

The rules we have thus to know how to activate correlate signs and meanings, one by one. But they are not enough. Signs seldom operate alone. There are also rules according to which signs are combined in order to produce complex messages. In order to read your way to the airport, for example, you also have to be accustomed to the composition of the set of signs itself. Had the order of the sequence been different, all those accustomed to the top-bottom order as the "logical" one would have been confused. The same happens if the words in a sentence or the shots in a film are presented in reverse order. The order of the elements of a compound sign participates in the semiotic process. Had sign 3, the road number, been the first one we see, it would make no sense. The road number is irrelevant as long as we don't know where the road leads to.

Less conspicuously, but based on the same cultural training, is the composition of a complex visual image. In cultures where writing and reading proceed from left to right, as in most Western countries, photographs of landscapes tend to focus on a point slightly above and right of the middle. Trained to look from left to right, we tend to sweep our eyes in the same direction, and the photograph being supposed to hang slightly above eye-level, the eyes are drawn toward the central interest of the image. This can be easily seen when we compare the visual effect of photographs from a culture where reading and writing go from right to left, like Japan. Japanese photographs, even when subject, style and colors are not recognizably different from Western landscape pictures, are often "composed" from right to left and are less immediately appealing to those trained in the other tradition—and, of course, the other way around. The position of the central point of the image determines the interest of the whole, even if we hardly realize it. This is a subliminal, minimal sign that still has a crucial influence on the interpretation of the photograph as a whole.

The combination of strictly conventional rules and rules which combine a cultural convention with other relations makes the set of rules on which basis most sign-events can take place—that is, if the sign-user has the competence, learned throughout his or her life, to work with them. One more example will demonstrate how complex the combination of rules at work can be and why acquiring maximal competence in interpreting the signs built on that combination is worthwhile. What does a tour guide mean who tells tourists in front of a beautiful temple belonging to the Jain religion in India: "The Hindus worship the three main gods, but the Jains don't believe in those idols"? The sentence is not extraordinarily complex or difficult to understand. The tourists who listen to this guide and are eager to visit the temple are likely to be content

with a global interpretation: the Hindus have three main gods which the Jains don't recognize. Maybe they will conclude from the statement that this difference between the two religions was the initial cause of the split between them. Making such an interpretation is sufficient and easy, and no major interest is done any harm if we stop the process there.

Yet a trained semiotician or someone who simply likes getting more out of signs will soon be baffled if s/he tries to understand the sentence beyond the level of tourism. There are two elements that show that the statement is not a neutral description: "the main gods" on the one hand, "those idols" on the other. The respect toward the gods expressed in the hierarchical "main" is undermined by the contempt expressed by "those idols." The difference indicates a contradiction to which we are led when we try to figure out where the speaker himself stands. One cannot hold both beliefs at the same time. Yet both views are presented partially, neither of the two parts of the sentence, hence neither of the two views, is presented from an outside perspective. There are signs in the sentence which make the acute listener feel that there is a continuity between the speaker and the statements, in each of the two conflicting parts of the sentence. This continuity is expressed by signs which, like the arrow in Rochester, "point" from the speaker to the view, connect them together so strongly that the one almost stands for the other. We first get a sense that the guide *is* a Hindu, then that he *is* a Jain. This continuity is not so much expressed in the words "main" versus "idols." The signs that produce the contradiction are, rather, the small, seemingly unimportant details. A person who speaks of *the* main gods does hold them to *be* the main gods, or otherwise there would be no definite article; the person who speaks of *those* idols expresses contempt. A more neutral rendering would have been, say, "The Hindus worship three main gods, but the Jains consider those to be idols." Hence, the small, unimportant words "the" and "those" become major signs that produce a problem of interpretation.

We must conclude that the sentence, descriptive at first sight, is deeply illogical because contradictory, unless we return the charge and explain the contradiction as the effect of yet another sign. That sign is the structure of the sentence itself, including the ill-matching signs. While we listen to the first part, we identify, or are asked to identify, with the Hindus and take the major status of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu for granted. The speaker speaks in their name, expresses their views. The opposition introduced by "but" changes the perspective. It introduces, not a factual opposition but an opposite view, and we go along with the Jains. The speaker has turned around 180 degrees, and we no more identify with the Hindus. In both parts, we are in fact not addressed by one speaker, but by a speaker who presents someone else's view. In comparison to the more neutral rendering, we could say that the speaker presents an inside perspective, makes us sympathize with both parties, and thus makes us aware of the deep and painful conflict they each experience in a

society where some feel offended by the other's use of "idol" for what they cherish. Thus conceived, the sentence is not confused or unclear, but deeply effective. It not only tells us something, but, by making us participate in both views *and* in the implied experience of conflict, it impresses upon the listener a different kind of knowledge than sheer touristic, superficial, global knowledge.

We can do several things with the tour guide's sentence. We can ignore the contradiction, ignore the little signs. We can acknowledge the little signs, hence, the contradiction, but be simply baffled by it. This attitude comes to a refusal to pick up the message that doubtlessly counts more for the guide, a member of the torn society he talks about, than the factual message. Or, worse, we can take it as a sign of the speaker's defective competence, as his inadequate mastery of "our" language and logic. But we can also work with the assumption that even difficult or strange signs could very well have meanings that we can usefully take in. In the former cases we respond non-communicatively to the speaker's otherness, in the latter positively, thus reducing the difference between him and the tourists. This latter process can be pursued further, for example, by seeing a similarity between the Hindu-Jain conflict and the Catholic-Protestant one. The Indian situation then stands in for, becomes a sign of, the European one.

The semiotic situation in this sentence is much more complex than in the Robinson story. We can, however, simplify it and distinguish three steps. First, we only interpret the sentence as one sign and get the factual, superficial message. Then we notice the contradiction, brought about by "the main gods" versus "those idols." Then we realize that what seemed a contradiction is a highly sophisticated narrative-empathic form, constructed by "the" and "those" and based on ambiguity as a logical possibility. Each step implies a more analytic treatment of the sentence, for the signs become smaller and smaller. At the same time, the message becomes more interesting, reaching more levels of communication and meaning production. The semiotic effort pays off.

In the case of the Indian tour guide, the problem of interpretation was solved once we accepted that ambiguity is not a mistake but a sign in itself. Narrative devices like the empathic form—variously called Free Indirect Discourse, Free Indirect Style, or Embedded Focalization in literary theory—have been used by the guide in order to express what he could not express by sheer informational language. Technically, he conveyed the ambiguity in the relationship between Hindus and Jains in India by using the subliminal meanings of respect and contempt embedded in "the" and "those" and establishing a connection between himself and those meanings. But his technique only works if we recognize it, or if we are at least open to take it in subliminally. If we eagerly denounce contradiction before we try to understand the message, than the effort is lost on us. And we can only recognize the signs if we have

previous knowledge or experience of the conventions of narrative that allow such connections to be established.

Like in the Robinson story, we need to make second and third interpretations of the same signs in order to get at the message about the Hindu-Jain conflict. For the Rochester signpost as for the tourguide, we needed to activate various rules which correlate signs with meanings, and signs with other signs. The interpretation of signs requires the activation of various rules of correlation between signs and meanings. One such rule is the recognition of the image as a representation of an object (the plane, the conflicting sentence of the tour guide as an image of the Hindu-Jain conflict, and eventually the Hindu-Jain conflict as an image of the Catholic-Protestant conflict). This rule is also called iconicity, producing iconic signs or icons. Another such rule is the connection of a sign to something with which it exists in continuity (the arrow and the direction of the airport; the "the"-"those" views and the speaker who pretends to hold them). This is the indexical rule, producing indexical signs or indices. Another such rule is the conventional agreement that certain signs mean certain things (the road-number for a certain route, the words of the tour guide). That is the rule of symbolicity, producing symbolic signs or symbols. These rules are also called codes.

The difficulties of getting messages are related to the number and variety of codes to be activated, the obliteration of the message under the more obvious message, and the combination of signs relating to different subjects which can produce a sense of contradiction. In addition, compound messages consist of concatenations of signs and a nebula of meaning elements which form a complex, but not necessarily coherent whole.

One final example. Imagine overhearing the following dialogue in a hospital's consultation room:

"Ever had scarlet fever as a child?" "No, doctor." "German measles?" "No, doctor." "Ra... Ricketts?" "Eh... no, doctor." "Do you know what ricketts is?" "Well, no, doctor." "Why do you say 'no' then?" "I was afraid that you would ask further questions if I said 'yes.'" "But you can also say 'I don't know,' can't you?" "Is that allowed, doctor?" "How many times have you been pregnant before?" "I don't know, doctor." "You don't know?!!" "Yes I do, doctor. Eight times." "Eight?" "No no, doctor, eleven." "Are you absolutely sure?" "To tell you the truth, no... eh... doctor." "But you must be able to tell me how many children you have exactly?" "Oh dear, professor, you look so intimidating." "I am not a professor. I am a training resident." "Really... my friend was also delivered by a training resident. She had some very good laughs with him." "No wonder. I bet your friend knew exactly how often she had been pregnant." "Or, that the resident was not as intimidating and less precise... Good, now you are laughing. What a relief. You were just glaring at that paper from behind those glasses. To be exact, I have seven children, and I've had two miscarriages and one was still-born. Is that clear enough for you to do the counting?" "And, eh... your last period, could you guess, approximately, no need to be precise, about which month, which week it was perhaps? Before the vacation or



after?" "The 28th of June." "The 28th of June?!!" "Absolutely, the 28th of June. A woman does know those things, you know."

The exchange of signs between the two people pursuing the same goal, adequate medical treatment, is very unsuccessful in the beginning. The resident uses normal English words, and if the woman patient is reasonably educated and English-speaking, there should be no problem. Yet, there is. The accompanying signs preclude communication at the expense of both parties. The doctor gives signs of various kinds which the woman interprets as intimidating: his impatience when she hesitates, and the rebuff when she gives an inadequate answer, and his looking at the papers instead of at his partner; his firing off question after question, leaving no room for hesitation, the whole setting in his office, and the social context of power that pertains to it. These signs, subliminal in various degrees, are not intended by the speaker, but are nevertheless decisive. No more than the sun, the sign-post and the tree does this speaker want to produce the sign-events that have this negative event. No more than they could he help their occurrence.

What is meant as a question, an open request for information, becomes, in the eyes of the intimidated woman, an order. This confuses her, and prevents her from responding adequately. The result is the total incapacitation of the woman: she cannot answer any question any more. To see this woman as stupid, uneducated or unable to cope is one way of interpreting her behavior. But that would be a pretty rude, unsophisticated response, unworthy of the competent sign-user. To think with the doctor that it is utterly stupid not to know how many times you have been pregnant is missing the various possibilities in the question. Did he mean the number of medically acknowledged pregnancies, the number of deliveries, or the number or actual living children? For a woman for whom each of these possible questions yield a different answer, the question is hard enough and some time to think should be granted her; but the situation of intimidation does not let her. This exchange in fact shows that in some ways, the doctor who does not realize this is no more competent at communication than the woman. His question is unwittingly ambiguous.

The kinds of signs the doctor intends to send out—questions clear enough to yield clear answers—do not match the interpretations the addressee makes of them—seeing them as orders or as unanswerable. This situation could go on forever, and the interview would turn out to be useless. The woman manages to reverse the situation, however, by breaking through the false relation of authority, and restores communication. Exchange of information becomes possible. Now that the sign [question] is no more interfered with by the subliminal sign [order] and by the other contextual signs, it can be answered. No trace remains of the impression of incompetence.

The dialogue was, in fact, a short story, entitled "Anamnesis" and published in 1984 by Hanna Verweg, in a Dutch newspaper. The title is relevant: it is a

word that not all readers know; for one, I did not. It is certainly not a word expected in a small newspaper column. As a consequence, the word is intimidating. It makes the reader insecure. Just like the image of the plane in Rochester and the empathic style of the Indian guide, it is an image of what is going to be the story's point: an icon. Unlike the fellow-patient overhearing that dialogue who may respond by identifying with the patient—if she is next—or by proudly taking her distance and looking down on her—if she has been more successful—the reader intimidated by a difficult word is likely to sympathize with the woman immediately, warmed up as s/he is by the title at the doctor's expense. There is, then, a continuity between the writer who is also the first speaker of the story, the woman-speaker in the story and the reader at the other end.

As in the other examples, the interpretation of signs is dependent upon the subjects who use them. The writer of the piece could write in this way because s/he had, for whatever reasons, sympathy for the intimidated woman. The reader is strongly suggested to do the same, but a training resident who reads the story before setting off to his first practice may very well put his sympathy elsewhere. The women readers will better understand the final exchange, and probably be more strongly gratified by the role-reversal at the end than most men readers will, but this division according to gender lines does not necessarily hold for every single person. Each person brings to the signs her or his own baggage. The story itself shows that roles are not fixed. It displays how the initial incapacity to get the message is changed into a perfectly adequate semiotic behavior which includes, aside from the information requested, a surplus to it, a subtle humorous message, a view on gender-boundaries and a sign of restored self-confidence; in the original Dutch text, the resident is clearly male; in English, it is not the language that shows he is male, but the traditionally male role s/he takes on suggests as much. And the author, writing under a woman's name, turns out to be a man.

Signs and meaning are not only determined by the individual sign-users, but are at the same time contingent on the alliance to a social group. It is clear that the positions in "Anamnesis" are determined, not so much by individual character, but by gender and class. Gender and class are, in turn, not isolated divisions in a society, but are produced by the history of the culture. Thus there is virtually no end to the relations which determine the nature, occurrence and success of sign-events.

If all sign-events happen according to systematic rules, how can innovative semiosis take place? Firstly, the rules which govern the interpretation of signs are fixed in some systems, more flexible in others. But the number of possible rules is limited by the capacity for the people sharing in the communication to grasp and to memorize them. Although there is an enormous difference between the sign-system of Morse-code, with one rule of correlation, and that of cinema, which uses language, images, light, movement and much more,

most signs and combinations of signs operate according to rules of correlation, of choice, of combination, and of use. Innovation, the production of as yet unknown signs and meanings is possible and takes place constantly within the systems consisting of those rules.

Yet, some degree of innovation, not within the rules but of the rules themselves, is possible. The difficulty of many to feel comfortable with avant-garde film has to do with the relatively high input of new possibilities for meaning, not yet known. The same holds for other avant-garde art, for cultural productions the sign-receiver is not familiar with. Two processes begin then: on the one hand, the viewer tends to look for meaning, and if s/he cannot interpret the signs, s/he will bring in his or her own ideas and *suppose* some basis for meaning to be active. This can be a new basis, unknown to the cultural community at large, maybe even to the film-maker who had not foreseen the viewer's interpretation. On the other hand, those new ways of making meaning which are recognized will soon become more familiar and lose both their unsettling and their creative power. They become part of the system.

But let me stop this introduction to semiotics here. The preceding remarks should suffice for anyone who so far has not been acquainted with semiotics to follow the arguments in the various essays collected here, as well as any number of semiotic publications. Semiotics, then, enables humanists in any field not only to address the traditional questions of their discipline in new ways, to raise new questions, and to re-examine their assumptions in terms of a social perspective. It also encourages connections between the disciplines. My own experience with this kind of crossing-over has been exhilarating, and I am pleased to share some of it through this volume.

I began *On Story-Telling* with a discussion of the main strands of criticism my work on narratology has encountered. Much of what was said in the introduction to that volume could be kept in mind for this one, too. But I wish to mention something else as well. When I decided—by a number of historical accidents as well as by motivations of which I was not aware at the time—to change fields and explore such diverse bodies of texts as biblical narrative, seventeenth-century painting, and twentieth-century cultural images, I did not expect to be received so hospitably by the fields I invaded. I am deeply grateful for the keen interest in my work within the fields of biblical scholarship and art history. That interest betokens a real change in the academy towards dialogue and interdisciplinary reflection. Together with *On Story-Telling* this volume traces an intellectual voyage that many of my colleagues have also taken, albeit with different routes, detours, and destinations. Semiotics is a collective endeavor in more senses than one. I am extremely grateful to all those, students, colleagues, and friends, who have been so important to me in the years during which these essays were written, and whom I can, alas, not begin to enumerate.