

The endless frontiers of semiotics

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In the 1960s, at the onset of the semiotic movement, then called semiology in Europe, there was no doubt in the mind of its practitioners that semiotics was a frontier science. A terse, programmatic sentence from Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was quoted at the beginning of most articles and books that purported to advance knowledge through applying the models of structural linguistics to any cultural object construed as forms of communication. Another stream was derived from the writings of C. S. Peirce, who had styled himself as a pioneer for the science of signs. This other stream was first lead by Charles Morris, and was aiming at no less than creating a science of science itself.

Semiotics was then conceived and experienced as an epistemological challenge: how to adequately describe and truly understand human meaningful productions, and, ultimately, meaning itself, independently from the logical and philosophical traditions that mostly took such notions for granted. These early decades of semiotics could be labelled its "age of innocence". Some had no doubt that whatever cultural object they chose to investigate was structured like language itself.

Others expected to find the Peircean sign categories and processes at work in any activity of significance, whether human or not, and thus to unlock the secret of meaning thanks to the key provided by St. Augustin mantra and the Peircean dialectics.

In both streams, there was an unquestioned belief that similar abstract patterns were sustaining the human propensity to make sense of things and to communicate by producing meaningful works of art and science, thus creating meaning.

Approximately two decades later, these two streams of inquiry progressively recast their epistemological status, explicitly or implicitly, as "doctrines" under any other names. [Greimas was referring to the "good semiotics" as distinct from all the other schools of thought, and Sebeok was labelling his own kind as the "major" one as opposed to the "minor" one, that is, the others such as Greimas's "Paris School".

The heuristic explorations of the beginnings of semiology and semiotics, aiming at scientific knowledge – that is, falsifiable knowledge under the rule of empirical evidence -- were transformed into the formulation of dogmas grounded in axiomatic pronouncements coming from "fountain heads" whose authority was first invoked in order to interpret whatever data one selected for research.

Notwithstanding the reluctance expressed by those who had inspired the early semiotic movements, -- both Peirce and Saussure were explicitly humble and tentative in their self-defining statements -- the principle of authority became dominant and the epistemological

legitimacy of research became dependent on the theoretical and methodological conformity with whatever doctrine in which one happened to have been groomed.

A new feature emerged in the semiotic landscape: the constitution of “schools” centered on a cult figure. These doctrines were (and are still) intolerant of each other and their troupes were fighting for converts toward the ultimate triumph of “the good or the best semiotics” through teaching and publications.

As mentioned above, this is when a high-profile American semiotician who had jumped on the Peircean wagon at a relatively late date labelled his own hybrid brand the “major” school and degraded the heirs of Saussure, Hjelmslev and Greimas, a.k.a the Paris School, by referring to them as the “minor” school. It is tempting to explain these conflicting developments in the light of Thomas Kuhn’s definition of paradigms that might actually have served as an inspiring model for the politically minded leaders of such “schools”.

As we entered the 21st century, two additional streams emerged in full force: social semiotics and cognitive semiotics, the former being grounded in long-standing research in the pragmatics of discourse and the works of linguist Michael Halliday among others, **the** latter being based on the philosophy of mind and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and his followers. These streams, too, tended to form full paradigms by creating their own associations and organizing conferences, editing journals and series, and paying tribute to historical authoritative figures.

The notion of frontiers, from the point of view of paradigms of any kind, takes the defensive sense of boundaries. Expanding one’s boundaries is not the same as exploring new territories. It means, in some respect, competing with other paradigms toward colonizing neighboring disciplines. It is very informative to parse the literature published under the aegis of these movements and to note how combative is their rhetoric about theoretical issues. Their “results” are not open to discussions from external sources as they are meant to be taken at face value as long as they are consistent with the premises of their theoretical home base, in other words, their dogma.

At this point in time, we can raise the legitimate question: how to assess the epistemological and practical results of a century of intellectual engagement with the models and methods forming the backbone of semiotics or semiology?

First, several theoretical variants have emerged and now constitute separate paradigms and sub-paradigms that offer distinct models of description and interpretation of human cultural productions and, in some cases, extending their purview not only to animal communication but also to all biological processes.

However, these approaches have not produced data themselves but rather interpretations of data in the form of formal redefinitions or semi-formal descriptions that are consistent with their own theoretical vision. They tend to demonstrate how the data they examine confirm their a priori models and, consequently, how the data are supposedly explained by the theory. It is difficult to disprove these interpretations because they are not “falsifiable”, that is, they cannot be proven wrong. A significant feature of semiotic research, in any of the current paradigms, is that they never result in counter-intuitive knowledge.

Another significant feature is that they do not result in practical applications that would solve puzzling phenomena or remedy psychological illnesses and social dysfunctions. They are top-down processes not bottom-up research that would start from actual problems or solve some of the problems and ills that plague human lives and societies. either theoretically or practically. Naturally, anybody who holds that semiotics is a doctrine or a speculative philosophy aiming at some abstract, universal truths will find the issue of its accountability irrelevant. Semiotics is featured by some as an exciting phenomenon. *Semiotics continues to astonish* as Paul Cobley et al. claim, meaning that semiotics is amazing as an intellectual entertainment, a vein that Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Thomas Sebeok exploited to the full in their essays..

The core questions of semiotics in all its guises, though, bear upon vital issues: the meanings that sustain our lives, the functionality of our means of communication, the adaptive strategies based on the sound interpretations of information conveyed through natural or artificial sources. The evolution of scientific knowledge progressively enabled humans, for better or worse, to control the hostile forces of nature and to construct tools and institutions aimed at improving our individual and social fitness, or, as some philosophers would say, our happiness. In this respect, it is legitimate to ask: Has semiotics so far contributed to the common good in a significant way? This is doubtful, except through the efforts of social semiotics with the use of discourse analysis for identifying the implicit rhetoric that promotes discrimination and exclusion, thus countering social dysphoria.

Semiotic knowledge has also been put to great use toward improving the manipulative power of communication **in** political and marketing strategies, thus raising by the same token intractable ethical issues. [for instance, helping the big pharma to market lethal opioids].

It seems obvious that in spite of serious predicaments, semiotics still constitutes a credible blueprint for advancing knowledge toward the common good. However, it must first emancipate itself from the 19th century models that carry the weight of history and are badly in need of updating in view of the profound changes that have occurred in the epistemological landscape of the 21st century. Semioticians must redefine their conceptual tools and break away from stifling theoretical views arising from the mediaeval scholastic grand narratives.

A science can progress only in as much as it is able to determine what is not known and what problems are to be solved. It advances toward a horizon of ignorance and powerlessness that sets its goals. It must adapt its methods to handle unexpected data and not expect that the results will confirm the assumed theoretical premises. It must allow space for serendipity. We can see challenges rising on the epistemological and practical frontiers. To address these, functional collaboration with a multitude of disciplines is necessary. This will be demanding tasks. For too long, we have heard semioticians say: "I am not this or that, I am a semiotician" thus shying away from the hard way of advancing human knowledge through confronting real problems, not those that are conveniently proposed by their school.

This presentation would be vacuous and frivolous if I were to conclude with such a merely programmatic statement. Suggesting some concrete tasks is therefore in order even if they provoke strong objections on practical or ideological grounds.

Serious debates and conversations are essential for the genuine advancement of scientific knowledge. By contrast, school fights are sterile exercises.

Let us start with multimodality that is a focus of research at Chemnitz University. There is not a single meaningful human communicative interaction that occurs in a single sensorial modality. However, past semiotic researchers have tended to restrict their focus to the visual or the auditory medium abstracted from their actual context or studied in artificial laboratory conditions.

Touch, taste and smell have hardly been considered, or they have been treated in isolation as accessories, with literary rather than scientific value. Gesture research is a case in point as their object has been usually flattened in two dimensions and their dynamic taken for granted or left to impressionistic, qualitative evaluations.

At least two frontier areas have been insufficiently prospected: first, the fact that gestures are space-time phenomena and are as much relevant to physics as to biology, semantics and rhetoric; secondly, the fact that gestures are both evolutionary and developmental phenomena that cannot be understood independently from the brain's connections and its neurotransmitters dynamics [e.g. Parkinson disease]. In this respect, lots can be learned from the pathology of gestures. As I suggested earlier in a Berlin symposium, all the sensorial modalities are present in actual gestural interactions.

In a similar manner, language has been approached as a disembodied faculty that is perceived and conceived through the filter of the artefact of writing, a very recent phenomenon in human evolution that biases the experience of literate people. Orality is all too often treated as the verbal implementation of the written medium not as the live source of acoustic communication that it has been ever since it emerged with other cognitive competences in the genus *Homo* about two millions of years ago according to current paleontological and archaeological evidence.

Another pressing frontier is the issue of *memes*. Since this notion was tentatively proposed by Richard Dawkins some fifty years ago, and uncritically championed by some philosophers and psychologists, the counter-intuitive power of this hypothesis has been defused to the point that memes simply refer now to successful posts in social media, or even any fashionable trend. The lack of scientific investigation of what allows a narrative algorithm or a composite image to hijack human brains and overwrite some of the adaptive functions that were finetuned by natural selection, has led to the trivialization of this concept. Today's semioticians in general abhor counter-intuitive knowledge as their thinking is biased by the principles of the intuitive evidence of phenomenology. Many have fiercely fought the idea of memes as if it were a fox in the chicken coop or a wolf sign among the sheep signs, the kind of signs with which they feel comfortable. To pursue the metaphor, it could be claimed that the signs that are herded by most semioticians are domesticated algorithms. They remain in the realm of predictability that is characterized by bounded information. Unbounded information is kept at bay by the dominant theories. In the meantime, it is likely that memetics has been weaponized and is used to manipulate decision making in commercial and political contexts with tragic consequences. We still don't know what causes a Tik Tok or Twitter post to become viral, or a fake news item to overwrite a proven true fact. This is a crucial problem that should be one of the basic concerns of semioticians. It could shed some needed light on language changes and cultural evolution. Naturally, the existing conceptual tools of semiotics, that are inherited from the psychology and linguistics of the 19th century, would not suffice to address this problem and the necessity to interface such inquiry with sociology, informatics and the cognitive neurosciences should be obvious. This is a daunting epistemological challenge but frontiers in the conquest of knowledge are not easy by definition.

Affectivity is a domain of inquiry that is difficult to handle conceptually. The abundant, inconclusive literature about emotions bears witness to the magnitude of this challenge. Semioticians in all paradigms have mostly kept their distance with the issues of affectivity. Their core focus is supposed to be meaning itself although it is hard to pinpoint a clear and unambiguous definition of what meaning means. For some it should be restricted to the truth value of a proposition; for others it is located within the tension between intension and extension. For most, it is taken for granted. For Peirce, it is a perpetually differed interpretant on the model of Hegel's dialectics; for Greimas, it is an unattainable grail, like the "thing in itself" of Immanuel Kant, that can be apprehended only **in as** much it is articulated through a narrative structure that, of course, involves time and space, Kant's a priori categories. The Greimas school has tried to meet this challenge under the heading of "semiotique des passions" but only through the semantic filter of lexicology and the *a priori* forms of narrativity. Perhaps, after all, meaning is an indefinable emotion, a counter-intuitive process. Experiencing or discovering the sense of whatever is indeed a euphoric moment; lacking this experience is dysphoric: it leads some people to suicide.

Scientific discovery, the deciphering of a pattern or relation that suddenly makes sense, conveys an exhilarating feeling. This brings semiotics back to its raw evolutionary dimension. Adumbrations of this direction of research are noticeable in some emerging domains such as, for instance, the semiotics of space and architecture. But emotions and affectivity in general are at the dark core of individual and social problematic existence that beg for semiotic enlightenment and solution at a time when we can anticipate that drastic climate changes will shatter the human sense of predictable reality. On another front, we know that technology impacts human physiology, social modes, and cognition. Semiotics has not yet come to terms with the Anthropocene **Era**, its affordances and discontents. The Internet of things is dismissed as gadgets and gimmicks by most semioticians. This is obvious for anybody perusing the semiotic journals that have become, for the most part, remarkably boring and irrelevant. We are at the dawn of a new information technology wave now dubbed the Metaverse, now coming of age as AI in which three-dimensional reality under the rules of gravity become functionally blended with virtual reality to form hybrid spaces and experiences. Mark Zuckerberg, of Facebook fame, defines the Metaverse as an “embodied Internet”. Where are the semioticians on this front of human techno-evolution? Finally, I would like to claim that the most urgent