

SEMIOTICS

SPRING 2003



Illustration: Leonardo da Vinci, *Study of running water*, about 1508

Center for Semiotics

UNIVERSITY OF AARHUS

Introduction

by Per Aage Brandt

Semiotics as a framework for the seminars listed below is the interdisciplinary study of meaning, the very substance of human reality. The models used in this study stem from linguistics (Saussure¹, Hjelmslev), philosophy (Peirce, Cassirer), psychology (Donald, Ekman), biology (Deacon), cognitive semantics (Lakoff, Talmy), catastrophe morphology (Thom, Petitot), semiology (Barthes, Eco), and other fields and disciplines, including ethnology (Mauss, Lévi-Strauss) and neuroscience (Damasio, Edelman). Each researcher has his own list of preferred ancestors. The common denominator is not a name (Darwin would be a good candidate, though) but a shared interest in understanding the human mind and its products, imaginations, and expressions as they unfold and form the dynamics of basic human interaction and communication, and of human knowledge and affectivity.

The label ‘Cognitive Semiotics’, which is currently used at the Center, is meant to designate a semiotic study of *meaning* influenced especially by the cognitive sciences. The implied term of ‘cognition’ refers of course to the mind’s intelligence-related functions; and the study of this dimension involves trying to grasp everything that goes on in the mind and the brain of an individual between sensory perception and action. Here, the individual is of course an abstraction, in the sense that human beings, like other more or less intelligent organisms, only exist collectively and mainly perceive and manifest bodily behavior interactively. This is therefore the preferred semiotic perspective: we perceive and conceive things according to others’ perceptions and conceptions; we react to things while we react to each other, and to each others’ reactions, and these reactions interact. Similarly, we act on things while acting on each other. Acts can also be mainly dedicated to the latter aspect, whereby there become expressive, or even exclusively intended to address others, instead of being aimed at changing things. By this means they become deliberately aesthetic; but they must change things anyway (creatively, we would then say) to achieve this spe-

cial goal. Cognition can never be fully separated from communication. To what extent can cognition and communication at all be separated or distinguished? This question is technical: part of cognition is perhaps purely mental and neural and distinct from communication. Symmetrically, part of communication is perhaps purely social or purely physical and distinct from cognition. But most of both phenomena are semio-cognitive and involve both minds and signs. This is the part we wish to foreground in cognitive semiotics, the one concerned with what we call meaning. Cognitive structure of certain types conceived in one mind can be caused to appear in another mind by means of what we call communication; these types are the probable basic ingredients in culture, the building blocks of meaning. When some minds share such structures of meaning, they differentiate from those that don’t — and that know that this is the case, and that therefore can share this negative knowledge. So when communities emerge, exclusion will simultaneously take place, and the excluded minds will recognize their shared situation... When cultures differentiate, they apparently do so precisely because of this basic mechanism. Shared meaning creates shared non-meaning; difference is the price of unification. So human intelligence is likely to emerge in a climate of oppositions, conflicts and mutual intolerance. Likewise, languages seem to differentiate deliberately, as if the fact of not being understood were as important and highly valued as the opposite. Semiotics is the study of fractioned universality. Reason evolves in an atmosphere of violence, resentment, and unrest. But all this does not mean that relativism rules; rather, it means that the we need to understand human acts as much as human thinking, and to understand how our species is born into trouble by the way meaning universally works.

If we wish to understand the dramatic dynamism of human cultures and their historical conflicts, it might be best to study the transhistorical nature of our creative minds. We need to understand meaning.

1. The proper names dropped in these parentheses are illustrative examples, nothing more.

Verbs and Syntax

Svend Østergaard | **Wednesdays in seminar weeks, 10:00 - 12:00. Auditorium 221.**

Is there a syntactic structure that exists independently of words and meaning? Is the syntactic structure motivated by aspects of the meaning that the speaker wants to evoke in the hearer? Or is there no syntax at all but only local form-meaning pairings without any global structure? The first possibility is presented in N. Chomsky: *Cartesian Linguistics*, and the second can be found in R. Langacker: *Cognitive Grammar*. In the latter, one finds the standpoint that a choice between different syntactic forms is a choice between profiling different relations in an underlying conceptual cluster. The third position is found in Adele Goldberg: *A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure* (1995). In the course we will use this text as background literature, partly to examine the ideas underlying construction grammar and partly to diverge into general discussions of syntactic and verbal meaning, and therefore additional literature will be suggested during the semester.

The first lecture will introduce the problem. The next two lectures will cover verbal meaning. What aspects of human ontology are reflected in the verbs? How many different “types” of verbs can we find? When can a given verb occur in a given sentence (construction)? These discussions are based on chapter 2 of Goldberg. The following two lectures will be devoted to syntax (chapters 3, 4, and 5 of Goldberg). Since there is no syntax in construction grammar, one has to account for how different constructions relate to each other. The sixth lecture will compare Goldberg’s presentation of the English ditransitive construction with Langacker’s analysis of the same phenomenon. The last two lectures will concern special constructions. We will try to analyze non-English examples and discuss the relevance of blending theory in accounting for construction grammar.

Nature of Descriptions

Per Aage Brandt | **Wednesdays in seminar weeks, 13:00 - 16:00. Auditorium 221.**

This seminar will discuss sign theory, the phenomenology of perception and expression, and the way phenomenology makes natural and cultural signs possible. Texts from J. Petitot et al., *Naturalizing Phenomenology. Issues in ...* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1999) will be discussed in the light of current papers in cognitive semantics, and compared to literary and pragmatic texts that describe places and events. The nature of the

descriptive activity in language and thought is as yet poorly understood and should be studied with all available semio-cognitive tools, a task we will try to assume here by reading selected fragments of novels, articles, and reports in order to obtain a more solid notion of what ‘things’ are out there in our ‘life-world’ according to what minds find meaningful to tell themselves and others about the real.

Variations

Per Aage Brandt | **Thursdays in seminar weeks, 12:00 - 14:00. Auditorium 221.**

Art is a fundamental cognitive habit of hyper-perceiving and perhaps hypo-expressing human experience, contributing to maintaining imaginary variation in conceptualization, and probably to maintaining our capacity to intersubjectively attune our minds. The principle of representational variation is crucial both to maintaining the distance between 'thinking' and belief in one's own mind and sensitivity to 'strange thinking'

in other minds. In this seminar we will study the aesthetics of *variation* cross-modally in the genres of artistic expression, from music to poetry. New issues in cognitive neuro-aesthetics will be critically examined throughout the series of sessions. The classic *Art and Illusion*, by E. H. Gombrich (e.g., London, Folio Society, 2000), will be one of the basic psychologico-aesthetical references for the seminar.

Images and Self

Svend Østergaard | **Fridays in seminar weeks, 10:00 - 12:00. Auditorium 221.**

This semester the course will treat the topics of images and self, respectively, as well as an internal relation between *image* and *self* in the sense that selfhood is critically dependent on an ability to distinguish between images with an external source (perception) and images that are internally generated (mental images). Moreover, the ability to distinguish between changes in perception caused by our own actions and those that occur because of independent events in the outside world is also fundamental for the development of self-awareness; cp. Kant's distinction between self-determined and world-determined sequences of perception (from Critique of Pure Reason).

During the first part of the semester we will continue our discussion of mental imagery and spatial representations and their possible relations to perception. Texts by S. M. Kosslyn and others will be available. During the second part we will discuss the relation between the

executive functions of the brain and embodied experience, self-hood, and self-consciousness. First the executive system will be presented based on a paper by C. Frith. Next we will find available texts on the Internet that address this question — for instance, S. Gallagher: "Phenomenological and Experimental Research on Embodied Experience," "Self-Reference and Schizophrenia," "Philosophical Conceptions of the self: Implications for Cognitive Science," "From Action to Interaction: An Interview with Marc Jeannerod," and M. Jeannerod: "Beyond consciousness of external reality. A "Who" system for consciousness of action and self-consciousness," "Consciousness of action and self-consciousness. A cognitive neuroscience approach."

Finally, we will discuss how questions of *self* and *intentionality* have traditionally been considered in philosophy by taking up the issues raised in W. Lyons: *Approaches to Intentionality*.

S E M I N A R C A L E N D A R

FEBRUARY

Wednesday 12	10-12:Cognitive Linguistics	13-16:General Semiotics	
Thursday 13		12-14:Cognitive Aesthetics	
Friday 14	10-12:Mind and Cognition		
Wednesday 26	10-12:Cognitive Linguistics	13-16:General Semiotics	
Thursday 27		12-14:Cognitive Aesthetics	15-18:Research Meeting
Friday 28	10-12:Mind and Cognition		

MARCH

Wednesday 12	10-12:Cognitive Linguistics	13-16:General Semiotics	
Thursday 13		12-14:Cognitive Aesthetics	
Friday 14	10-12:Mind and Cognition		
Wednesday 26	10-12:Cognitive Linguistics	13-16:General Semiotics	
Thursday 27		12-14:Cognitive Aesthetics	15-18:Research Meeting
Friday 28	10-12:Mind and Cognition		

APRIL

Wednesday 9	10-12:Cognitive Linguistics	13-16:General Semiotics	
Thursday 10		12-14:Cognitive Aesthetics	
Friday 11	10-12:Mind and Cognition		
Wednesday 23	10-12:Cognitive Linguistics	13-16:General Semiotics	
Thursday 24		12-14:Cognitive Aesthetics	15-18:Research Meeting
Friday 25	10-12:Mind and Cognition		

MAY

Wednesday 7	10-12:Cognitive Linguistics	13-16:General Semiotics	
Thursday 8		12-14:Cognitive Aesthetics	
Friday 9	10-12:Mind and Cognition		
Wednesday 21	10-12:Cognitive Linguistics	13-16:General Semiotics	
Thursday 22		12-14:Cognitive Aesthetics	15-18:Research Meeting
Friday 23	10-12:Mind and Cognition		

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www.hum.au.dk/semiotics

ADDRESS Finlandsgade 28,DK-8200 Aarhus N,Denmark PHONE (+45) 89 42 44 99 FAX (+45) 86 10 82 28 E-MAIL semtina@hum.au.dk