

# SEMIOTICS

FALL 2004



Giovanni Bellini: *St. Francis in the Desert*, c. 1480.

Center for Semiotics

UNIVERSITY OF AARHUS

# What A Sign Is

Per Aage Brandt

A sign is not always a sign. All existing notions – including the sign notion – can be used both literally and metaphorically. In the latter case, when using them, we are referring to something else and are just taking the notion as a predicate presenting our topic in some way. This is what happens when we call the symptom of an illness a sign: in this metaphor, the illness is seen as an agent communicating and presenting itself to us through the symptom, e.g. fever or nausea. The relevance of such a metaphor is to ‘say’ that we should pay special attention to this »sign«, the symptom in this case, since it is important and both deserves and requires close ‘reading’, rather than ordinary observation. But we do not mean to say that someone is thereby intentionally signifying anything to us.

By contrast, a sign that *is* in fact a sign is a sign in the sense that it is a gesture, a trace or an artefact made by someone for the purpose of communicating something to someone. A real sign is thus really intentional. We should pay special attention to signs in general because it often takes a close reading to pick up the messages they convey, whereas inanimate things are understood more routinely.

Signs include written alphabetical characters, which can be numerical names (in addresses) or algebraic symbols (in equations) or parts of alphanumerical codes (almost everywhere), depending on the context, but basically they owe their existence to the phonographic writing system in which they (the letters) combine into strings that are linguistic representations (of words) in some language, often in more than one. The

intentional use of a character suggests a concomitant use of other characters of the same semiotic paradigm (alphabet) and suggests the intention to ‘mean’ some word in some language by combining the characters; their combination is normally further motivated by an overarching intention to ‘mean’ something about something and thus to reproduce the word in question as a part of the wish to produce a corresponding utterance in that language. *Intentions* thus naturally and by themselves form paradigmatic and syntagmatic networks, since they imply choices and nesting of choices, and then temporal series of choices, which require recursive part-whole relations, and therefore regularly lead us to create conventional *systems*, culturally, and *processes* running through these systems. So it can be shown that the very intentional attitudes of our minds are responsible for the semiotic structures appearing in culture and conventionality altogether. In this sense, conventions are natural.

In order *not* to do semiotics you would have to ignore intentionality and decide that all and every connection between two entities in the world is a sign. Pan-semiotics resembles pan-textualism (everything is a text) – both want to ignore the difference between phenomena related to consciousness, as intentionality is, and phenomena that are not; probably because they feel that taking consciousness into account would be philosophically problematic (dualistic). However, *not* taking it into account means not taking meaning into account at all. But why would we then bother to ask what a sign is?

## SEMINAR IN COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

# Language Acquisition

Svend Østergaard | **Wednesdays in seminar weeks, 10:00 - 12:00. Room 390.**

The topic of this seminar is language acquisition, and for this reason there will be a connection to the course in mind and cognition (for instance, joint attention is a prerequisite for the development of a language). M. Tomasello: *Constructing a Language* is the text book for the seminar, and we will use the various chapters in this book to take up different linguistic phenomena. For instance, in relation to the acquisition of word meaning we will discuss a cognitive theory of word classes, and in relation to constructions we will discuss syntactic forms

and their meanings. We will also look at the origins of language, and in relation to complex constructions we will be presented with various discourse phenomena. Finally, we might take up the question of universals in language, based on the theories of A. Wierzbicka.

Recommended background literature is R. Dirven & M. Verspoor: *Cognitive Exploration of Language and Linguistics*, R. Langacker: *Grammar and Conceptualization*, and A. Wierzbicka: *Semantics. Primes and Universals*.

## SEMINAR IN PHENOMENOLOGY

# Phenomenology

Steven Ravett Brown | **Wednesdays in seminar weeks, 13:00 - 15:00. Room 390.**

I have developed a structural model of phenomenal consciousness that integrates contemporary experimental and theoretical work in philosophy and cognitive science. I argue that phenomenology must be “naturalized” and that it should be acknowledged as a component of empirical psychological research. I use this model to describe important phenomenal structures, and I then employ it to provide a detailed explication of particular cognitive phenomena.

The primary aim of “structural phenomenology” is the creation of a general framework within which descriptions of phenomenal experiences may be organized. The work of Husserl, Gurwitsch, the Gestalt psychologists, and many contemporary philosophers and cognitive scientists, while requiring extensive modification, reveals several basic parameters underlying subjectivity.

# The Communicating Mind

Per Aage Brandt | **Wednesdays in seminar weeks, 15:00 - 18:00. Room 390.**

Thinking and communicating are closely related activities of our minds. We can at least in principle 'say' or 'express' what we 'think'. So 'saying' or 'expressing' and 'thinking' must share some meaningful patterns. If thought and the content of expressive utterances can share properties at all, then the connection between cognition and communication should be studied: communication must depend on how the mind works, and the design of our expressions must depend on the general layout of the human imaginary (since we do not share singular existential experience, there must be an overarching layout). And the minds, which in every instant define the possible frames of communication, are themselves constantly shaped by significant exchanges between the persons whose minds they are;

concepts are negotiated between dialogical agents, symbols are tried and critically tested during ongoing communication, and specific meanings are enjoyed with particular emphasis (especially if it takes initiation to know what is expressed). This discussion is also about difference and sameness in the world of meaning.

The seminar will treat these and related basic issues of the general study of meaning and the philosophies that are dynamically involved in the development of semiotic research.

## Literature

P. Aa. Brandt 2004, *Spaces, Domains, and Meaning. Essays in Cognitive Semiotics*. Berne: Peter Lang, European Semiotics Series No. 4.

# Social Cognition

Svend Østergaard | **Thursdays in seminar weeks, 10:00 - 12:00. Room 390.**

In this seminar, we will discuss the following aspects of the child's development: a) The notion of *self* – what do we mean by the term 'self'? And how does the child obtain a feeling of selfhood? b) The ability to follow others' *attention* and its consequences for the acquisition of language. c) The development of a *theory of mind*, i.e. an understanding of the difference between my knowledge and the other's *belief*. d) The ability to form *analogies*, and finally, e) the *symbolizing* faculty, which does not only refer to the use of symbols but also to the disposition for organizing space according to a value system (holy places, places for rites etc.).

It is the intention to show that these faculties develop automatically in a social environment. Very

simple neural mechanisms in the individual organism are responsible for the development of a self-generating complex social dynamics when the individuals are exposed to each other. And it is this secondary dynamic system which generates the different social competences that we ascribe to the fully developed adult.

The teaching will be based on articles, but the following background literature is recommended: M. Tomasello: *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, M. Donald: *A Mind So Rare*, and T. Deacon: *The Symbolic Species*.

## SEMINAR IN AESTHETICS AND SEMIOTICS

# The Meaning of Art

Per Aage Brandt | **Thursdays in seminar weeks, 13:00 - 15:00. Room 390.**

It is easy to see that art in general is linked to sensory perception; it is perhaps less easy to see that it is necessarily involved in imaginary and purely representational processes in our inner life, processes that may *not* be derived from perception, but that we have to understand as inherent in 'meaning' as such. Art – when produced – often emerges as a more or less explicit exploration of meaning and its limits; furthermore, when a work of art is perceived, it is regularly, perhaps always, felt as an existential statement. Semiotics traditionally studies art in the imaginary

mode, and thus as a source of phenomenological information about semantics outside of language; the latter mode, the irresistible drive that make us 'love' good art as existentially or emotionally meaningful, is of course equally challenging and pertinent in a cognitive perspective. This discussion, and its relevance to modern art, contemporary poetics and aesthetics in general, will be accompanied by analyses of textual, pictorial, and musical works, and by analytic exercises for the participants.

## SEMINAR ON NARRATOLOGY

# The Structure of What Happens

Lene Fogsgaard, Svend Østergaard, Per Aage Brandt | **Fridays in seminar weeks, 9:00 - 12:00. Room 390.**

Stories have *historical* structure, in the sense that they share striking features with the temporal reality of human life; fictional stories and representations (e.g. recollections) of real episodes thus share the property of showing us their imaginary events in a dual perspective: as seen and experienced from 'within', and as reported from 'outside': in a deictic and situated form and, simultaneously, in an objectivist third-personal form. Narrative enunciation addresses a second person – an implicit *you* – and 'sends' this person from one pole to the other of this opposition. Space 'delegation' has still other dimensions that contribute to the shaping of voice and view in narrative discourse. Another shared feature

is the double representation of 'forces' that determine beings and doings in space: volitional forces in *persons* contrast deontic or strategic forces emanating from *places* in space. Narrative structures are possibly even basic in the process of semantic integration of situations in the human memory system. But *fiction* seems to offer an absolutely unique property that may explain its sovereign authority in human cultures: fiction and only fiction can present ontologically absolute facts, and worlds about which we can know *all there is to know!*

This seminar will study various aspects of narrative discourse and its semio-pragmatics.

# Cognition and Literary Text

Line Brandt | **Thursdays in seminar weeks, 15:00 - 17:00. Room 390.**

The seminar takes a practical approach to textual analysis within an interdisciplinary framework, borrowing ideas from linguistics, traditional literary analysis and semiotics, and developing ideas that may be useful for further implementation of a theoretical merger between literary studies, cognitive semantics, philosophy and semiotics as a specialized, textually oriented branch of cognitive semiotics.

Making a methodological distinction between the reading of a text and possible literary interpretations of it, the primary focus will be on the meaning construction involved in the process of reading, though to some extent interpretation will also be discussed for the sake of clarifying the relation between these two dimensions. A theoretical framework is proposed for the reading of literary texts, suggesting a layering of semiotically relevant aspects of textual comprehension, where each level influences and informs other levels in an online reading process that stabilizes as a prerequisite for interpretation. These interconnected 'semiotic layers' are the levels of enunciation, semantic analysis of narrative as well as non-narrative storytelling strategies, and rhetorical effects.

Enunciation, as proposed by the grammarian Benveniste in his analysis of personal pronouns, has to do with the built-in subjectivity in all human languages, displaying its presence as linguistic markers of a presupposed communicative situation enabling any utterance. Such an implied situation indicates a speaking subject, an addressee, an object of shared attention, and a deictically given place and time. Subjectivity in this sense, as it relates to meaning construction, and only indirectly to propositional truth-value, is understood as the explicit, as well as implicit, existence of a subject in a given text (and only secondarily to the philosophical subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy).

The enterprise of cognitive literary analysis may prove helpful to scholars and artistically inclined individuals engaged in the reading and/or writing of literature. From a cognitive perspective, the directionality is inverted: since literary text is a product of language, and language is motivated by our mental capacities and predispositions as thinking and communicating

creatures, literary text is one of our best sources of information about how the mind works.

The approach here is a phenomenological one; our intersubjective experiences of texts informs us about cognitive processes involved in meaning construction. From the perspective of cognitive studies, then, the directionality is two-fold: it is equally plausible to focus on the literary aspect (cf. its relevance to Comparative Literature and the Study of English, as proposed by Mark Turner 1991) as on implications for cognitive semiotics. It is also two-fold in the sense that theoretical hypotheses can be tested and new ones materialize by looking at empirical manifestations of the cognitive affordances about which these hypotheses are formulated; the text serves to confirm/disconfirm as well as generate hypotheses.

The aim of the literary semiotic endeavor is to develop a framework for close reading of texts, paying attention to enunciational structure, viewpoint structure, affect and 'temperature', temporal structure, schemas, and mental spaces (cf. Mental Space Theory), as well as inform us about the intrinsic features of these notions, investigating the applicability of concepts from cognitive semantics, such as 'framing', and introducing Conceptual Integration Theory (CIT) into literary studies.

The main body of empirical material will consist of short fictional prose. An advantage of using *literary* texts is that it eliminates the need for ethnographic data accompanying the utterances analyzed, because the contextual situatedness is unspecified. An advantage of using *short* texts is that their brevity allows for comprehensive analysis, and that the formal condition of brevity, given the limited duration of the experience, breeds interesting literary effects, as well as an inherent propensity for humorous indulgence.

## Literature

Peer F. Bundgaard 2004, *Kunst. Semiotiske beskrivelser af æstetisk betydning og oplevelse*, Copenhagen: Haase & Søns Forlag

P. Aa. Brandt 2002, *Det menneskeligt virkelige*, Copenhagen: Politisk Revys Forlag

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

## SEPTEMBER

Wednesday 8	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-15: Phenomenology	15-18: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 9	10-12: Mind and Cognition	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics	15-17: Literary Semiotics
Friday 10	09-12: Narratology		
Wednesday 22	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-15: Phenomenology	15-18: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 23	10-12: Mind and Cognition	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics	15-17: Literary Semiotics
Friday 24	09-12: Research Meeting		

## OCTOBER

Wednesday 6	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-15: Phenomenology	15-18: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 7	10-12: Mind and Cognition	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics	15-17: Literary Semiotics
Friday 8	09-12: Narratology		
Wednesday 20	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-15: Phenomenology	15-18: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 21	10-12: Mind and Cognition	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics	15-17: Literary Semiotics
Friday 22	09-12: Research Meeting		

## NOVEMBER

Wednesday 3	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-15: Phenomenology	15-18: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 4	10-12: Mind and Cognition	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics	15-17: Literary Semiotics
Friday 5	09-12: Narratology		
Wednesday 17	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-15: Phenomenology	15-18: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 18	10-12: Mind and Cognition	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics	15-17: Literary Semiotics
Friday 19	09-12: Research Meeting		

## DECEMBER

Wednesday 1	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-15: Phenomenology	15-18: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 2	10-12: Mind and Cognition	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics	15-17: Literary Semiotics
Friday 3	09-12: Narratology		
Wednesday 15	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-15: Phenomenology	15-18: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 16	10-12: Mind and Cognition	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics	15-17: Literary Semiotics
Friday 17	09-12: Research Meeting		

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