

COGNITIVE SEMIOTICS

#4 (SPRING 2009)

ANTHROPOSEMIOTICS vs. BIOSEMIOTICS

Deriving our inspiration from a workshop which took place at the 9th Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in Helsinki in 2007, we would like to invite authors to submit articles on the relationship between meaning as experienced in human culture and meaning in the wider biologic sphere. Articles accepted will be published in *Cognitive Semiotics* (Issue 4, Spring 2009).

If the separate traditions of cognitive science and semiotics are going to merge, the relation between consciousness and meaning, on one hand, and biology, on the other, will certainly be at centre-stage (though not necessarily as the sole actor). In cognitive science, the brain, instead of the computer, has already become the leading metaphor (though usually not perceived as such) for the mind. Biosemiotics claims to be operating the reverse reduction: of biology to meaning. However, as long as differences as well as similarity between consciousness/meaning and biology are not accounted for, the two reductions do not appear to be very different.

In recent decades, biosemiotics, largely based on the inspiration of the "Bedeutungslehre" elaborated by Jakob von Uexküll, in conjunction with Peircean semiotic theory, has appeared to be one of the most vital parts of semiotics. The biosemiotic conception has been projected onto the level of cells as well as manifesting itself on a more traditional ethological, "zoosemiotic", level. However, if signs appear already in the interaction between cells, then it is not clear in what sense entire organisms differ, or how primates are different from other species, and human beings from other primates. One of the most valuable contributions of biosemiotics to these questions has been the concept of "semiotic threshold", but, to be useful, it has to be made more precise, and to be explicitly related to evolution and ontogenetic development.

Within biosemiotics, classical semiotics has often been described as "anthroposemiotics" and given rather short shrift. From a developmental and evolutionary perspective, however, anthroposemiotics is clearly not completely

discontinuous with biosemiotics. This does not only mean that classical issues of anthroposemiotics must be reconsidered from the point of view of biosemiotics, but also that “the difference which makes a difference” in the human species has to be accounted for – which means that biosemiotics itself must be reconceived. The question then becomes whether semiotics can give a more satisfactory description of human semiotic activities than currently fashionable “Memetics” and Neo–Darwinism.

Interestingly, the semiotic turn in the cognitive sciences, taken by scholars such as Merlin Donald, Terrence Deacon and Michael Tomasello, has taken place within the framework of the study of human evolution and development. Both traditions suggest a stage–like unfolding of human semiotic potential, retaining the capacities of earlier stages. Human (bodily) mimesis appears to be a unique capacity, independent of language, and new abilities seem to accrue to the human species after the end of biological change, with the emergence of pictures, writing, and theoretical thinking. In both transitions, the specificity of human culture appears to be crucial, first through imitation, leading on to the sign function, and then through external, relatively permanent representations, the “third embodiment”, completing those of Ego–embodiment and Alius–embodiment. Thus, in the end, it may well be that also classical semiotics could contribute an important perspective to the empirical findings of developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and other cognitive sciences.

By clarifying the relationship between biosemiotics and anthroposemiotics, we may also be able to achieve, at least on one level, the amalgamation of semiotics *tout court* and cognitive science. Thus, we invite submissions that:

- Discuss the interrelations of the semiotic study of human beings, on the one hand, and living matter, in particular animals, on the other, using, for instance, the concept of semiotic threshold.
- Attempt to account for the specificity, from a cognitive and semiotic point of view, of human beings, in relation to other animals, conceived both on the level of evolution and within history in the strict sense, i.e. within culture.
- Examine the possible parallels of evolution and development from a cognitive–semiotic perspective.

We welcome multi–authored submissions.

THE EDITORS

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Potential contributors are encouraged to contact any of the editors in advance of submission. Submitted publications should follow the style instructions for *Cognitive Semiotics* (<http://www.cognitivesemiotics.com>).

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Deadline for submissions: June 2nd 2008.

ABOUT COGNITIVE SEMIOTICS

The first of its kind, *Cognitive Semiotics* is a multidisciplinary journal devoted to high quality research, integrating methods and theories developed in the disciplines of cognitive science with methods and theories developed in semiotics and the humanities, with the ultimate aim of providing new insights into the realm of human signification and its manifestation in cultural practices. Accordingly, readers will have the opportunity to engage with ideas from the European and American traditions of cognitive science and semiotics, and to follow developments in the study of meaning – both in a cognitive and in a semiotic sense – as they unfold internationally.

The initiative to create a transatlantically based journal comes from the Center for Cognition and Culture at the department of Cognitive Science at Case Western Reserve University (Cleveland), and from a group of researchers, based in Aarhus and Copenhagen, trained in cognitive semiotics at the Center for Semiotics at the University of Aarhus, and in language and literature at the University of Copenhagen. By bringing together scholars from multiple disciplines, the editors hope to provide a revitalized perspective on the semiotic field.

Further details of the journal, including a free-to-download Issue 0, can be found at <http://www.cognitivesemiotics.com/>.

Cognitive Semiotics is published internationally twice a year, in April and October, by Peter Lang Publishing Group (www.peterlang.com).

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