

Book Review

The Swiss Pioneer in Nonverbal Communication Studies: Heini Hediger (1908-1992)

By **Thomas A. Sebeok**

Legas Press, Ottawa

Reviewed by François V. Tochon
University of Wisconsin-Madison

I encourage readers to explore this compact and remarkable piece of semiotic history. My presentation of the book is divided into themes. First, I will discuss how zoosemiotics relates to applied semiotics and how it allows for expanded theorizing of what applied semiotics could be and should become. Second, I will refer to Marcel Danesi's foreword to Sebeok's book, as it is more than an opening: it is a rearticulation of the field and a most interesting introduction to semiotics for newcomers. Third, I will briefly explore the book as the intertwining of two stories: Hediger's and Sebeok's. Indeed, Hediger's story is re-told through Sebeok's narrative voice; the narrative of intertwined experiences is neither a biographic reconstitution nor a chronology, but rather a selection of vignettes, artifacts, lived anecdotes and interactions that give a human dimension to the development of Hediger's zoosemiotic thought. Sadly, this is a timely period in which to recognize Sebeok's genius as he died in December, 2001. Thus, I will start with a short retrospective of his work.

Retrospective

Who was Thomas Sebeok? Jeff Bernard of the International Association for Semiotic Studies published a complete obituary and detailed biography of Sebeok's life last December, and it is this biography to which I am indebted for many of the details of his life. It is difficult to reduce any human life to only the academic, nonetheless, this crucial aspect of Sebeok's life brought him international fame and shows the extent of his interests and the vitality of his search in the field of semiotics. Sebeok was born in November 1920. He left Hungary in 1936 to study at Cambridge University and immigrated to the U.S. in 1937. He earned a B.A. at the University of Chicago, an M.A. and a Ph.D. (1945) at Princeton. He commuted to Columbia to pursue lin-

guistic studies under Roman Jakobson, his PhD advisor. He was also a devotee of Charles Morris at Chicago. Both had a tremendous influence in his development of the renewed transdiscipline of semiotics — this overarching root-discipline, studying all types of signs in any given field of knowledge. Along with Jakobson and Morris, Sebeok became a world respected icon in semiotics. What is little known is that Sebeok worked in the field of foreign language education in the Army Specialized Training Program beginning in 1943. There, he created the Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies and at Indiana University, he directed the Research Center for Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics. Several fellowships from Stanford enabled him to develop specific aspects of biological semiosis, the new scholarly field that he named biosemiotics. The Center for semiotics that he directed since 1956 became one of the most influential institutions in semiotics for decades. The most important post-war semiotic publications were issued from or in relation with this research center. Editor of *Semiotica*, he was also the Series Editor of leading book series in the field such as, *Advances in Semiotics*, *Approaches to Semiotics*, *Approaches to Applied Semiotics*, *Topics in Contemporary Semiotics*. He edited the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* (1986) — a key reference in the discipline. He was a key component in creating the Semiotic Society of America which had its 25th anniversary celebration in 2000 in West Lafayette (IN).

Applied Zoosemiotics as a Model for Applied Semiotics

Howard Smith (2000) compared definitions of *applied semiotics* and credits Charles Morris with originating the compound term by describing semiotics as pure, descriptive, or applied in nature. Applied semiotics is “the application of semiotics as an instrument,...[it] utilizes knowledge about signs for the accomplishment of various purposes” (in Sebeok, 1990, p. 324). Smith notes that applied semiotics is characterized by a practical bent that often guides research in such fields as education, law, medicine, and marketing. And, indeed, a guide to semiotic studies at Indiana University includes practice as a basic element for applied semiotics: “Applied Semiotics involves the practical applications of empirical researches in various organisms, channels of communication, sensory modalities, and different types of codes, as these are found throughout various media.” For instance, the field of medical diagnostics and symptomatology in veterinary medicine is an applied discipline.

To gather some sort of consensus about what constitutes an applied discipline, Sebeok (1990) proposed three intermingling criteria: policy, social action, and information (i.e., semiotics as a resource). Smith (2000) comments on those benchmark notions, expressing his view of applied semiotics as free flows of exchange among the various categories of semiotics with pragmatic and practical objectives that may well lead to action and policy initiatives. Sebeok combined the influences of von Uexküll and Charles S. Peirce, to merge them, bringing forth brand new, applied paradigms. As Jeff Bernard notes, Sebeok focused upon the conditions of

enacted life, arriving at the conclusion that *symbiosis* and *semiosis* are one and the same.

Thomas A. Sebeok's name is associated with the concept of *zoo-semiotics*. This branch of semiotics exists in its 'pure' form, in its 'descriptive' form, and its 'applied' form. The term *zoosemiotics* relates to that branch of semiotics concerned with the study of animal sign use. It concerns the language and communication systems of animals, their meaningful behaviors from a synchronic perspective. Like semiotics at large, zoosemiotics includes a (zoo-)syntax, a (zoo-)semantics, and a (zoo-)pragmatics. I will try to demonstrate that Hediger's work, as reflected by Sebeok (2001), may lead to a unified definition of applied semiotic(s).

This last book by Thomas Sebeok examines Heini Hediger's work. Hediger created the field of zoobiology and was famous for animal psychology. He directed the Zürich zoo while being a professor at the University of Zürich. He had what Sebeok describes as "an encyclopaedic grasp over his domain" and an incomparable prestige in his specialty, zoosemiotics. Hediger revealed the nonverbal language of animals, many of its rules in different species, and the ways humans can take advantage of this knowledge to master interactions with wild animals, for instance fostering tameness among panthers for a circus repertoire. He showed that any animal's flight and postures obey quantitative rules, ignorance or knowledge of which can kill or bring 'super-alpha status' and control. Being understood as a subordinate among felines can indeed be suicidal. Thus, non-verbal communication studies elicit rules of conduct that are directly operational for the trainer: he or she can use this knowledge and apply it concretely in practice. This knowledge makes the difference between inappropriate and appropriate behavior within the prevailing system of signs that is particular to the studied species. The operability of the study is emphasized here. Semiotic knowledge has a direct impact. For instance, in a restaurant where Hediger had invited Tom Sebeok and his wife, the former was able to rapidly bisect a fly between its eyes along its anterior-posterior axis with his table knife as the fly was bothering everybody and he knew the intricacies of its ways of perceiving. The absence of knowledge of an animal semiotic system may be dangerous: exemplary is Sebeok's story of "a lad who, routinely tending a deer enclosure he was assigned to, was attacked by a rutting stag, pinning him to the fence and goring him to death," this tragic killing being precipitated by "a fatal misinterpretation on his part of a complex set of nonverbal territorial warning signals that Hediger had explicitly cautioned him, on that very morning, to be on the lookout for" (p. 17).

These few examples illustrate what is (can be, should be) considered applied semiotics. It is all about the transferability and operability of knowledge of sign systems: how people can use, as well as, interpret interactions, and exhibit appropriate behaviors. Behaviors acquire meaning and are meaningful within the system of signs under study. This situates applied semiotics within the realm of an epistemology of practice. It is an intentionality-grounded study of sign systems. Not only are sign systems intentionalized: applied semiotics brings a 'meta-intentional' level to semiotic study. It is a semiotic study with a purpose. Thus Hediger's studies

exemplify an encompassing and purposeful definition of the broad field of applied semiotics.

Danesi's Introduction to the Biosemiotic Paradigm

Marcel Danesi excels in presenting Hediger through Sebeok's eyes. Danesi built the Center for Communication and Information Sciences in Mississauga and Lugano, and as such, connects the present to the future; Sebeok is linking the present to the past, and Hediger enters history. Thus, a diachronic relationship among the three authors is suggested, as three levels of discourses are embedded in the book. It is almost the building up of a tradition of Masters. If a zoosemiotic metaphor is allowed, they represent a succession of trainers in the difficult arena of the semiotic academe. In this historical metaphor, semiotic discourse is the virtual, wild animal that the semiotician aims to master through *Dressur* (in German), or a 'dressing-up.' Not surprisingly the tradition emerged from Hippocrates and the exploration of bodily *semeion*. Symptoms were meaningful for Aristotle as well, who first deciphered bodily and animal meanings. In biosemiotics, a text can be defined as a composite form of life or a set of behavioral patterns. Various referents are represented in a combinatory way that have bioenergetic meaning. Because forms are meaningful, they are connective, represent something, and this somethingness has lived impacts. Recognized patterns in things and in life are gathered into models. Sensory modeling leads us to recognize events: mental forms become concepts. Danesi's introduction to the "symptomatology between body, mind, and culture" (p. 12) modeling phenomena is outstanding.

Intertwining life stories: Sebeok's Tale on Hediger

"Space permits me to report here, more or less at random, only a few samples of what he casually revealed to me about the life of his animals" (p.16). The claim is modest, and indeed the text appears as a series of organized notes and anecdotes, with pictures from Hediger's works. It is a tale on how Tom Sebeok and his wife entered a meaningful relationship with Heini Hediger. In a sense, it is the story of a conceptual friendship, a respectful account of friendly meetings and encounters in diverse places of Zürich where Hediger spoke about his work and how he lived the zoosemiotic sign systems in his daily routine at the zoo. The tale is both serious and charming. It embodies principles into personal realities, which provides a fascinating dimension to these personal lives and, by extension, to life as a whole. Not that Sebeok would be building a myth of Hediger and their relationship: it is rather in the non-assuming tone of the tale that the life's texture gets unraveled and enlightened, with the subtle nuances of their long-term interest and respect for the other's mind as an instrument able to decipher the most intimate infra-informational aspects of interactional realities.

At the end of the book, Sebeok acknowledges the importance of the Swiss German School of semiotics. In very few words, he re-situates the Geneva School to show its very relevant impact on semiotics as a field of

knowledge, and emphasizes major discoveries of the Zürich School of Semiotics in Switzerland. On this issue (it is indeed a real issue), Sebeok's assertions are most brief and sharp in the last two pages of the book, that represent section III. He directs what might be partly interpreted as a direct and fundamental criticism toward the School of Geneva, though expressing his gratitude for having been warmly invited at the 1990 Geneva conference. Peircean semioticians have always have a hard time with Saussure—or is it the opposite?

References

- Sebeok, T. A. (1990). Semiotics in the United States. In T. A. Sebeok & J. Umiker-Sebeok (Eds.), *The semiotic web 1989* (pp. 275-395). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Smith, H. A. (2000). *What is applied semiotics?* Kingston, Ontario: Queen's University, Faculty of Education. [Http://labweb.education.wisc.edu/semiotics/](http://labweb.education.wisc.edu/semiotics/)

Note

In his obituary, Jeff Bernard notes that Thomas Sebeok has been a driving force of the semiotic scientific community for decades. His death leaves a void. This is a loss for the world of semiotics, and the sciences as a whole. To give an idea of the breadth of perspective of this key author, here is a list of other works from Thomas Sebeok as author, editor, or co-editor:

- Spoken Hungarian* (1945)
- Spoken Finnish* (1947)
- Studies in Cheremis Folklore* (1952)
- Psycholinguistics: A Survey of Theory and Research Problems* (1953)
- Myth* (1955; ed.)
- Studies in Cheremis 2. The Supernatural* (1955; and further vols.)
- American Studies in Uralic Linguistics* (1960; ed.)
- Style in Language* (1960)
- Soviet and East European Linguistics* (1963; ed.)
- Approaches to Semiotics: Cultural Anthropology, Education, Linguistics, Psychiatry, Psychology* (1964; ed.)
- Selected Writings of Gyula Laziczus* (1966; ed.)
- Theoretical Foundations* (1966; ed.)
- Communication Systems and Resources in the Behavioral Sciences* (1967)
- Linguistics in East Asia and South East Asia* (1967; ed.)
- Animal Communication: Techniques of Study and Results of Research* (1968; ed.)

Ibero-American and Caribbean Linguistics (1968; ed.)
Approaches to Animal Communication (1969; ed.)
Linguistics in South West Asia and North Africa (1970; ed.)
Linguistics in Sub-Saharan Africa (1971; ed.)
Linguistics in Oceania (1971; ed.)
Paralinguistica e cinesica (1971; ed.)
Linguistics in Western Europe (1972; ed.)
Perspectives in Zoosemiotics (1972)
Linguistics in North America (1972; ed.)
Diachronic, Areal, and Typological Linguistics (1973; ed.)
Linguistics and Adjacent Arts and Sciences (1974/75; 4 vols.; ed.)
Six Species of the Sign: Some Propositions and Strictures (1974)
Structure and Texture: Selected Essays... (1974)
Historiography of Linguistics (1975; ed.)
The Tell-Tale Sign (1975; ed.)
Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs (1976)
Native Languages of the Americas 1 & 2 (1976/77; ed.)
How Animals Communicate (1977; ed.)
A Perfusion of Signs (1977; ed.)
Aboriginal Sign Languages of the Americas and Australia (1978; 2 vols.; ed.)
Cheremis Literary Reader (1978; ed.)
Sight, Sound, and Sense (1978; ed.)
The Sign & Its Masters (1979), *Speaking of Apes* (1979; ed.)
"You Know My Method" – A Juxtaposition of Charles S. Peirce and Sherlock Holmes (1980)
The Clever Hans Phenomenon: Communication with Horses, Whales, Apes, and People (1981; ed.)
The Play of Musement (1981)
The Sign of Three: Holmes, Dupin, Peirce (1983; ed.)
Sign, System, and Function (1984; ed.)
Classics of Modern Semiotics (1985; ed.)
The Semiotic Sphere (1986; ed.)
I Think I am a Verb (1986)
Monastic Sign Languages (1987; ed.)
Essays in Zoosemiotics (1990)
A Sign is Just a Sign (1991)
Semiotics in the United States (1991)

American Signatures: Semiotic Inquiry and Method (1991)

Signs. An Introduction to Semiotics (1994)

Semiotik: Ein Handbuch zu den zeichentheoretischen Grundlagen von Natur und Kultur (2 vols. 1997/1999; vol. 3 to appear; ed.)

Essays in Semiotics I: Life Signs & II: Culture Signs; Forms of Meaning; Modelling Systems Theory and Semiotic Analysis; Global Semiotics; and Signs. An Introduction to Semiotics.

Translations were published in many languages.