

Introduction

Marcel Danesi

University of Toronto

In the 200s b.c., the Greek mathematician Eratosthenes (276?–195? b.c.) developed an ingenious method for identifying prime numbers. These are numbers other than 1 that can be divided evenly by only 1 and themselves. Today, mathematicians use computers to identify prime numbers. But Eratosthenes' method, though much slower, always works. To find prime numbers with it, the series of whole numbers starting with 2 is written out. Then, every second number after 2 is crossed out, thus eliminating all numbers that can be divided evenly by 2, except for 2 itself. Similarly, every third number after 3 is crossed out, including those numbers that have already been crossed out, thus eliminating all the numbers that can be divided evenly by 3, except for 3 itself. This process is continued *ad infinitum*. Eratosthenes' method is called a "sieve" because the numbers that are not crossed out can be thought of as having passed through a sieve (strainer) that has caught all the rest. Any number that has not been crossed out is prime.

With his ingenious method, Eratosthenes indirectly provided a practical framework for investigating the nature of numbers in a concrete way, becoming a "thought stimulus" for important theoretical ideas in mathematics. Semiotics can analogously be thought of as a sieve—i.e., as a method designed to sift sign-based phenomena from purely biological phenomena in human life. This special issue of the *International Journal of Applied Semiotics* brings together important contributions that, in fact, emphasize the sieve-like nature of semiotics. As such, they highlight the fact that it is basically an "applied science." Like mathematics, semiotics builds its theoretical edifice from practical applications, rather than the other way around. The studies in this issue show this perfectly. They deal respectively with such apparently diverse, yet strangely interconnected phenomena, as understanding literary processes and genres as post-colonial renditions of history and the structure of biological processes.