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## **A REPORT ON THE STATE OF SEMIOTICS FROM A PSYCHOLOGIST'S POINT OF VIEW**

*Semiotics uses what constitutes the core of mediation: the sign, and, through the sign meaning, also symbol in experience and sense of reality. Different people from all over the world are attracted to semiotics by the abundance of mediation which brings objectivism to knowledge. The view on sign phenomena makes it possible using the semiotic thought in psychology. The relation between semiotics and psychological subject-matter should not be reduced to the 'use' of formal semiotic system in cognitive methods and forming research results. The problem of semiotics and psychology in their cooperation refers to cognitive processes as builders of semiotic representation of reality in cultural environment, thinking according to social inheritance of semiotic systems, denotation of symbolically expressed content of experience and determination of human identity through values, senses of reality in convictions and beliefs.*

**Key words:** *semiotics, mediation, psychology.*

I leave every semiotic congress with a nagging question: What is semiotics? Despite the fact that I am not a professional semiotician, I follow with great interest the semiotic inspiration in psychology and social sciences. It is worth registering once in a few years the activity of the national semiotic movement. Present-day semiotics is closer than ever to cognitive science and biological sciences; concurrently, in semiotic research resounds the approach accentuating the socio-historical genesis and the diversity of mental representations, emotionality, iconicity, narrativeness, identity, personality, human spirituality. Semiotics expands thematically and geographically. Despite a rather small determinacy of its subject, semiotics has great power of attracting people from all over the world, it is studied at many universities, not only in philosophical and philological departments. Semiotic congresses present the remarkable development of semiotics in South American countries, its expansion in the Asian direction, the achievements of Chinese, Japanese and Korean semiotics.

The answer to the question 'what is semiotics?' usually states that semiotics is an interdisciplinary study of signs. This general answer no longer satisfies those who are deeply concerned with the semiotic issue, nor does it inform those who know very little about the topic. The first illustration of semiotics should be broadened in a way that would correspond to the way of thinking occurring on a deeper level characteristic of the semiotic approach.

Semiotics is concerned with mediating individual and social knowledge by means of a sign function. Semiotics is in general a study of mediation having intellectual and social origin. If one most characteristic word revealing the nature of semiotics had to be chosen, it would be mediation. To encompass with its range the acquisition of knowledge of the world by people and the initial forms of indirect perception existing in nature, semiotics uses what constitutes the core of mediation: the sign, and, through the sign meaning, also symbol and sense. These notions distinguish human mental mediation – in the variety of approaches in the study of phenomena representation, the expression of emotional relation, the cultural construction of an object and the description of cultural as well as historical human identity, adding to it the study of adaptive mediation in the prehuman forms of existence (biosemiotics). Concerning the fundamental problem of sign, symbol, meaning and sense, semioticians differ in their views and research traditions and correlated with them ontologies and methodologies.

Cognition through signs is indirect – illustrative, demonstrative, generative, developing, incomplete and uncertain – takes the form of knowledge. The fundamental role of semiotics is to study the sign representation of human knowledge in different fields of science, practice, art, social roles and spiritual life. Semiotics seeks sign mediation in information processes, learning, professional activities, emotional relations, art, religion, anything that brings a particular kind of knowledge about the reality. The scope of semiotic pursuit is thus colossal.

The concept of correlation between the mind, the sign and the being is included in the semiotic triangles. They derive from Aristotelian tradition of the triad: sign – notion – reference; they present the idea of mediation which leads to knowledge. There is no world of phenomena, accumulation of cultural objects and course of historical events in semiotics without the mind, nor the 'pure' subjectivity, founded on itself. Concurrently to research of sign mediation in the behaviour of organisms in ecosystems and the cognition of physical phenomena by people, more and more frequently research is conducted on the mental representation of human life experience, in which activities and experiences are included, as well as on personal and social human identity in historical-cultural contexts. This demands the broadening of the notion of sign mediation with experience symbolics and the senses constituting identity.

Traditional semiotic research concentrated on semantic processes in logical form; logical semiotics is still, until present, related to formal and empirical sciences. This association is so strong that many of the interested parties do not allow the thought of a different role of semiotics. The founders of semiotics formulated the intellectual concept of the sign. According to the semiotic tradition in formal logic and science philosophy, the sign is an instrument for objectification of the world of objects and phenomena. In Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic system the human subject acts through logical signs. It was not behaviourism but pragmatism, an intersection between American activism and European semiotic idea since Plato and Aristotle. Peirce was aware that actions cannot be performed without emotions, therefore he created the notion of emotional interpretant, direct, the emotion evoked by the sign, and energetic interpretant, the physical effort required in intellectual work. He did not identify emotional and energetic interpretant with the logical one, which he called the ultimate. The feelings and efforts may obtain sign expressibility as thoughts, however, it is only logic that guarantees semantic detachment from individual (emotional) motivation. Peirce did not investigate the symbolic expression of emotional or existential experiences and did not enter the field of human social identity. The sign in the linguistic approach of Ferdinand de Saussure is constituted by the signifier and the signified. The relation between these elements is in the mind; it is not natural, it originates from an established social convention. The sign corresponds with the object through the interpretation in social environment. One sign is substituted by another sign by way of convention, whereas a symbol cannot be freely substituted by any other symbol. A symbol not governed by any convention would be understandable for only one person, and a sign without a hint of symbolicality would have no correlation with individual experience. De Saussure presented the dynamism of the signifier – signified relation in communicative situation, neglecting the symbols as motivated elements of experience in meaningful relation.

The followers of Peirce and De Saussure worked in a particularly intensive manner on the semiotic representation of the phenomena world in the human mind and its prelogic forms in living organisms. It is interesting that the semioticians in the Soviet Union and countries of the Communist Bloc, with the exception of the Polish mathematical and logical school, were often less interested in logical semiotics and more in the language and communication in the social environment. The authorities consented to forming mathematical logical models of information and language structures, examining cultural systems in the socio-historical framework of Marxism or in the similar categories of capitalistic system criticism in western authors' publications. It was Russia that brought forth Lew Wygotski, Vladimir Propp, Michail Bachtin, Leonid Uspienski, Juri Lotman, the Moscow formalist school cooperating with Estonian Tartu. Let us leave political complications and rather focus on a significant fact that the cultural-historical path of research still presents considerable problems for the semioticians.

The configuration of the life years of people especially distinguished in the field of semiotics, intellectuals of great distinction, depicts the transfer of interest from logic and epistemology of formal and empirical cognition to linguistic, cultural, psychological, sociological and historical phenomena: Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), Vladimir Propp (1895–1970), Michail Bachtin (1895–1975), Lew Wygotski (1896–1934), Jean Piaget (1896–1980), Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), Luis Hjelmslev (1899–1965), Charles Morris (1901–1979), Emile Benveniste (1902–1976), Leonid Uspienski (1902–1987), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), Roland Barthes (1915–1980), Algirdas Greimas (1917–1992), Thomas Sebeok (1920–2001), Juri Lotman (1922–1993), Umberto Eco (1932–).

The logical and 'semiological' current is evidently strong in modern semiotics, however, it would be an exaggeration to talk of its dominance. The second current is taken by social and cultural semiotics. What is striking at semiotic congresses is the abundance of image and social identity themes. Numerous symposiums are devoted to the semiotics of iconism, visuality, architecture, space, city, fashion, gestures, the art of performance, literature, music, film, television and new media. Another considerable part of world semiotics constitutes the semiotics of existence and spirituality, constructing history, discursive forms of social representation, e.g. national, political and legal. What distinguishes semiotics of existence is subjectivity, values and dialogue. The semiotic construction of history takes into account the sign and symbol in institutional history. From this perspective, history is not seen as the Hegelian or Marxist system, but mental representations of objects and events in social activities, diversifications and transformations of institutions which manufacture and control symbolic systems.

New generations of semioticians do not abandon the theories of the masters, it is difficult to create a revolutionary theory. It can be stated that due to an excellent philosophical, logical and linguistic foundation the present-day semiotics continues the logical and linguistic tradition. The expansion of semiotics in the direction of culture and history, human emotionality and identity correlates with the tradition of information mediation found in organisms' behaviour in the environment, which assumes a logical form, an autonomous cognitive form in the human mind. The sign representation of objects constructed on the basis of natural abilities and its simulations in formal models and artificial intelligences is undeniably visible in semiotics, although logicians,

mathematicians, computer scientists and engineers work in their fields with little interest of what semiotics is concerned with. For many logicians and semioticians the emotional subject-matter evoked by the growing popularity of the problem of symbolic mediation in psychoanalysis was completely incomprehensible, it was obscured by bias resulting from leftist manifestations in the 1960s and 70s. Jacques Lacan reformulated the structuralistic approach of de Saussure and exposed the genetic dependence of sign on the symbol. The symbolic character of experience is widely mentioned in the field of psychoanalytical theories of relation with the object (Melanie Klein, Susan Isaacs) and almost non-elaborated in cognitive psychology. The turn in humanities and social sciences towards human identity, their spiritual existence and social history creates an additional difficulty in semiotic studies. Despite the fact that humanistic and existential trends focus on the role of consciousness and values, speech acts, conversation, narration and dialogues, humanistic concepts, as in psychology, depict strong biological and evolutionary inclination, before 1989 tolerated on the cognitive science grounds in the 'I' identity research in the Communist Bloc countries.

Accordingly, the fundamental problem of semiotics considering emotional, visual, historical and social matters is to develop a concept of signs that denote symbolically expressed content of experience and determine human identity through values, senses of reality in convictions and beliefs, without exchanging feelings and values for thought constructs. Semiotics has not widely entered the field of humanities and social as well as psychological sciences, where the need for symbolic meanings and objective senses in their sign effects ought to be most observed. Humanists, psychologists and sociologists get acquainted with logical terminology of semiotics and become convinced that the core subject of semiotics is the mind with its natural abilities. It is on a par with the position of modern cognitive psychology: natural human abilities, cognitive processes and language is considered mostly in the function of signifying phenomenal objects. The bonds between the recently emerged cognitive semiotics and cognitive sciences are numerous and strong. Semiotic mediation possesses natural history, genetic and brain determination, however, the question about the particular symbolic character of emotional dramas and the peculiar rationale of cultural-historical world representation in human minds remains unanswered, the person and community are not perceived as autonomous subjects of social history. Wygotski assumed that the sign, the instrument of social practice, is a social message assimilated by the developing and communicating mind. The problem is that in present cognitive science the sign phenomena are often the aspect of behaviour determined by the brain, genes and biological evolution. In this approach the culture is an evolutionary invention of the species, rendered accessible to people and communities in social history through artefacts in resemblance to making accessible life environment by natural phenomena in the evolutionary history of the species: the culture 'creates', enables exteriorization of natural abilities. Since the 1990s the era of cognitive science about the mind considered as a bio-cognitive system has began. It has happened as foreseen by a well-known intelligence researcher, Robert Sternberg – the further development of cognitive psychology and the whole cognitive science will not be possible without the precise knowledge of the nervous structures and processes.

With semio-cognitive models arose the problem of differentiating empirical semiotic research from research in psychology and social fields. Empirical studies in semiotics are concerned with establishing cognitive mediation in living creatures and humans. In a classical example given by Aleksiej Leontiew, insects were getting used to omitting an obstacle that was placed on their way and did not cut short when the obstacle was removed, as if it was still there. Empirical semiotic studies lie in discovering semiotic phenomena mediating action (behaviour) on a specific level of activity (reaction), forming or mediating experience relation resulting from an emotional quality or intentionality of a given sense adopted in a specific conviction or belief in groups and institutions following a certain value system. The speculative (theoretical) method of semiotics connects with empirical methods in psychology. In accordance with the presented hypothesis, semiotic models accentuate the sign character of the studied mental processes, which represent knowledge, in relation to reality. The studies performed on semiotic foundation distinguish sign effects of human behaviour, activities, emotions, attitudes as representatives of a particular individual knowledge that is included in the knowledge intersubjectively shared in the cultural environment. Semioticians treat of representing semiotic phenomena 'on the outside' of the psycho-physiological processes, whereas psychologists are oriented on differentiating the contents of individual reactions, meanings, feelings, attitudes determined by numerous factors. Semiotics studies objective effects of logically formalized and cultural meanings; semiotic cognition assumes the absence of reduction of the sign to a psychological factor, although the bio-psychological process contributes in its way to creating semiotic phenomena. Semiotics enriches methodological awareness of the social and humanistic sciences in a way that it accentuates the semiotic, objective character of human knowledge, its creation from physiological through developmental and linguistic to text and narrative processes. Signs can be reproduced regardless of their understanding by individual people. If signs were constructs of individual people, the communication in the scientific community, and, therefore its existence, would be impossible.

It is possible to practice cognitive studies without the psycho-physiological reductionism. The formation and development of phenomenological semiotics (Zahavi, Thompson, Gallagher) proves this fact. According

to Husserl's tradition, the principal method of phenomenology lies in careful observation of phenomena which appear in consciousness and generalization of the observation results. Phenomenological research yields a priori forms of meaning separating them from empirical studies of conscious processes. Phenomenological semiotics was created as a combination of Husserl's slogan 'to get to things directly' and an assumption that the logical thought (in Peirce's as a triad, a composition of message medium, denotation and interpretant) is capable of signifying any object in reality: conscious thinking assumes a sign form. Thus, the phenomenological approach in semiotics lies in studying the cognition of objects in semiotic mediation through consciousness – the sense of semiotic phenomena that appear in the consciousness, that is at the moment of their existence. The semiotic perspective enables understanding of the fact that cognitive elements constructing the knowledge in the sign form are ingredients in the forming of the conscious thought in its relation to the object.

As a conclusion to this report I assert that in semiotics a variety of subjects is discussed. What fundamental issue connects different people who come to semiotic congresses, what kind of fervour and quest? It can be assumed that it is the abundance of mediation: information, linguistic, symbolic and evaluating, biological and cultural-historical – a kind of the mental relation to reality that brings objectivism to knowledge. The aspirations of semiotic studies reach for the boundaries of cognition by semiotic medium; it is no longer sufficient to relate only to the achievements of the classic of logical semiotics. As treatment of everything in an individual's and society's life exclusively as a subject of knowledge about behaviour and phenomena brings negligence and simplifications, unless it is founded on an attempt to resolve the issue of the relation of semiotic form with symbolic content of experience and pre-reflexive senses of socially inherited identity. The connection between semiotics and psychology is still rather weak. Since the second half of the 19th century semiotic research was performed in opposition to psychologism. Semioticians were rarely concerned with semiotic models created in scientific branches and social practices, and vice versa. The 'use' of semiotics in sciences and practices focused on human being and society incur numerous fundamental problems, because nor behaviourism nor cognitive approach has engaged in cognitive processes as builders of semiotic representation of reality in cultural environment, and, therefore, the relation of semiotic constructs with the symbolics of expression of emotional relation and with reflective senses that create social identity of people. At present the hope for a change in this state of affairs is brought by the semiotic thought which is becoming a part of the humanistic background of qualitative research.