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Volume 1:
Language as Social Semiotic

Edited by
Robin P. Fawcett,
M. A. K. Halliday,
Sydney M. Lamb and
Adam Makkai



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The Semiotics of Culture and Language

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Foreword

Semiotics, which I take to be the study of sign systems and their use, is not a subject that has many practitioners who actually *call* themselves 'semioticians' (or 'semiologists' to use the term favoured in the mainland European tradition). On the other hand it could well be argued that the world is full of applied semioticians, in that semiotic issues are inherently involved whenever a language is taught and learned, whenever a linguist studies language in general or a language in particular, whenever a psychologist studies gaze or proxemic behaviour, and whenever a student of art or music or literature is at work. But this is a little different: the student of semiotics is also concerned with the *general* principles of signs and sign systems. And it is perhaps here that we can locate the reason why, so far, semiotics has not captured the imagination of all these unconscious practitioners. It could be, I suggest, that, at each stage of the development of knowledge and for each broad class of phenomena, there is a crucial level of generality that operates. An analogy from the English lexical system would be our preference for the relatively specific terms *car*, *lorry/truck*, *bicycle*, etc., instead of *vehicle*. In both cases a key factor is prominence of the sub-categories in the affairs of the social group concerned, and so in its culture. The fact is that there is intense interest in language in society at large—and now increasingly in other specific semiotic systems such as body language—but relatively little, so far, in the general principles of sign systems.

Yet semiotics, it could be argued, is crucial to an understanding of human nature—both social and psychological. For it is the sign systems that we use for interaction with other living beings that determine our potential for thought and social action. Central among these, of course, is language, but other codes that till now have been studied less from a semiotic perspective, such as music and architecture, perhaps have a more important place in our cognitive and social lives than our current cultural prejudices allow. As the Editors' 'Introduction' suggests, one of the main tasks for the second half of the 1980s and of the 1990s may well be to bring the essentially humanistic science of semiotics to bear on the question of the impact on society of the current technology-led revolution in information

storage and communication. An awareness of the importance of general semiotic principles could be crucial to the right conduct of this revolution.

The implicit claim of the contributors to this important two-volume work is that linguistics has something very specific to give to semiotics, and that relational network models of language in particular, i.e. systemic and stratificational linguistics, have a fundamental contribution to make. Their claim to this role is a double one. First, they are theories that give a central place in their overall framework to the concept of 'culture' as well as to that of 'language'—as indeed does tagmemics. Second, they make use of a 'network' notation that emphasizes *relationships* rather than *entities*. It is a notation which is certainly equally applicable to modelling language-like semiotic systems, and which may well be equally applicable to modelling culture.

This is an important book, and its two volumes should make a significant impact, both on the burgeoning field of semiotics and on the work of that growing number of linguists who recognize the need for a wider perspective—i.e. the semiotic perspective—in their study of language.

The Polytechnic of Wales
February 1984

Robin P. Fawcett

Introduction

It was three centuries ago that the philosopher John Locke proposed that we should recognize, as one of the three major sub-divisions of science, *semiotic*, 'the business whereof is to consider the nature of signs, the mind makes use of for the understanding of things or conveying the knowledge to others'. The modern term *semiotics*, however, was introduced to the English language only in 1962. It was proposed for this role by the anthropologist Margaret Mead, at an important conference whose scope included the fields of cultural anthropology, education, linguistics, psychiatry, and psychology. The proceedings are reported in *Approaches to Semiotics* (Sebeok, Hayes and Bateson: 1964), and on pages 275-6 we can read how 'semiotics' triumphed over 'communication' as the label for the field that Mead, in words that interestingly complement those of Locke, described as 'patterned communication in all modalities'. Today, however, both labels are in regular use: there are steadily growing numbers of courses and departments of 'communication studies' and 'human communication', while 'semiotics' tends to connote work at a more advanced level.

The conceptual territory proposed for semiotic(s) by Locke, and later claimed for their subject by semioticians such as C. S. Peirce and Charles Morris and others, was truly on the grand scale. And yet, while there has been steady progress in recent years, the promise of Locke's original striking proposal has barely begun to be fulfilled. It may be pertinent to ask why this should be so and, further, to suggest some ways in which we might begin to change this situation. We shall return to this topic in the closing section of this introduction.

The process of change in semiotics has, however, already begun. This can be demonstrated most obviously in terms of the increasing numbers of courses, departments and research centres devoted to this field. But fundamental to this has been the fact that linguistics, anthropology, literary analysis and, perhaps to a lesser extent, social psychology, have begun a historical convergence in the discipline of semiotics. Originally a branch of pragmatist philosophy (*à la* William James and C. S. Peirce), semiotics has undergone considerable changes within this century. The growth of interest in semiotics is evidenced by the setting up, in 1976, of the Semiotic Society of

America, to parallel similar societies in Germany, Poland, Hungary and elsewhere. Earlier, the Association Internationale de Sémiotique had been established, and its journal, *Semiotica* (edited by T. A. Sebeok), has been appearing since 1969. In all these ways, then, we are witnessing the emergence of this vital new and broadly interdisciplinary field.

However, it is an odd but noteworthy feature of the field that many of its practitioners have been working in it without labelling their efforts as semiotics. There is thus a relatively 'official' field of semiotics, labelled as such and practised by recognized semioticians, and a relatively 'unofficial' variety, which includes those with interests in various individual semiotic systems. Among these are an ever-growing number of scholars who are interested in the semiotic exploration of language in relation to other cultural systems that have not been labelled as semiotics. The present work represents in part a statement by practitioners of the latter variety who would now like to claim explicitly that their work, too, qualifies as semiotics. In so doing they hope to bring some fresh thinking into this fertile field.

For the contributors to this book, an event of particular significance in the development of the semiotic dimension in their work was the Burg Wartenstein Symposium, sponsored by the Wenner-Grenn Foundation for Anthropological Research, held in August 1975. All the contributors were present, and in many cases the papers included here constitute a later and more complex working of ideas first presented there in tentative form. In other cases the papers are completely, or almost completely, different. That symposium was originally planned by Charles Frake, M. A. K. Halliday, Martin Kay, Sydney Lamb and W. C. Watt, and their purpose for it—and so the topic addressed by many of these papers—was summarized in the following background statement, which was sent to all the participants.

It has often been proposed that structural patterns found in language might exist also in other cultural systems, and that analytical tools developed in linguistics might prove illuminating if applied in cultural anthropology; but up to now the nature of linguistic structure has been too poorly understood to enable this proposal to be convincingly demonstrated. Against this background, recent developments in linguistics show promise of providing valuable new techniques in cultural anthropology and new insights into the structure of culture. Thus, perhaps there is now some chance of finally fulfilling the promise of old, and perhaps a firm basis can be established for breaking down the fences that separate linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

The basic aim of the symposium is to promote the integration of linguistics

and cultural anthropology by exploring (1) the use of methods of formal linguistics (especially relational network analysis) for illuminating our understanding of culture, and (2) the use of cultural and social information for illuminating our understanding of the structure and functions of language.

More particularly, it may be profitable to view the social system as a system of information and, accordingly, to view social interaction as information processing. In keeping with this viewpoint, the relation between language and culture can be considered as a relation between two (possibly intertwined) semiotic systems, the linguistic and the cultural.

The symposium itself was co-organized by M. A. K. Halliday, Sydney Lamb and John Regan, and it was a highly interactive, often very insightful, occasionally frustrating, and always stimulating week. The thanks of all of us go to the Wenner-Grenn Foundation for Anthropological Research, and particularly to Dr Lita Osmundsen, the Foundation's Director of Research, and to the staff at Burg Wartenstein.

It may be of value to indicate some of the ways in which the subsequent work of most of the contributors to that symposium has grown more overtly semiotic. M. A. K. Halliday, for example, published in 1978 his influential *Language as Social Semiotic*. The intertwined topics of language, social context and culture are never far from the centre of his writings, and the courses in the Linguistics Department of the University of Sydney reflect this orientation. So, indeed, do those of his wife Ruqaiya Hasan at Macquarie University. W. C. Watt's interest in semiotics in general and the Roman alphabet in particular has continued in a series of articles entitled 'What is the proper characterisation of the alphabet? I, II and III'. Robin Fawcett has since moved to the Polytechnic of Wales, Cardiff, where he teaches and researches on linguistics in the context of a BA(Hons) Communications Studies degree, in which semiotics plays a unifying role. This is one of half a dozen such courses that have been developed over the last few years in British polytechnics, and the work of Kress, Fiske and others is now leading to the development of similarly academic courses in Australia and the United States. Fawcett's recent *Cognitive Linguistics and Social Interaction* (1980) places language in a cognitive-social (and so cultural) framework that embraces other codes beside language, and in 1982 he gave the Invited Lecture to the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, 'Language as a semiological system: a re-interpretation of Saussure'. Michael O'Toole has moved to the Chair of Human Communication at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia, where there are now lively undergraduate courses that give semiotics a central place. Similarly, Sydney Lamb has moved to Rice University, where he has been prominent in the foundation of the new Department

of Linguistics and Semiotics—the first in existence—together with the Doctoral Program in Linguistics and Semiotics. It was inaugurated by an important symposium ‘Directions in linguistics and semiotics’, in March 1983, and contributors included Lamb, Halliday and Preziosi from the Wenner-Grenn Symposium, as well as many other well-known linguists and semioticians, including Conklin, Fillmore, Hockett, Longacre, Ross and Sebeok. The proceedings of that symposium have been published as Copeland (1984). The Rice tradition continued with a second symposium in February 1984, and the participants included, from this book, Fawcett, Halliday, Hasan and Lamb. We could give even more examples, but the above will illustrate how the semiotic dimension is becoming an increasingly strong force, both in the work of the contributors to this volume and in the academic world at large.

This work is arranged in three parts. Volume 1 contains Part I, and volume 2 Parts II and III. The title of Part I is ‘Language as social semiotic’—a form of words taken from the title of the well-known book by M. A. K. Halliday mentioned above. Part I offers five perspectives on this topic, and the first, appropriately, is by Halliday himself.

The first part of Halliday’s chapter provides an interesting perspective on recent work in linguistics, and so a perspective for the book as a whole. He shows us that linguistics has in recent decades been undergoing a period in which the view of language as code, which he terms the ‘logical-philosophical’, has for most linguists been divorced from the ‘ethnographic-descriptive’ view of language as behaviour, but he suggests, significantly, that this should be regarded simply as a temporary phase. Systemic functional linguistics, to the development of which he has been the pre-eminent contributor, can then be seen as a contribution to the search for a ‘unified “code-and-behaviour” linguistics’—as indeed can stratificational-relational grammar. So far so good, but where does culture come in? Halliday’s answer is that, just as the social context of linguistic *behaviour* is the ‘context of situation’, so the social context of the linguistic *code* is the ‘context of culture’ (to use Malinowski’s terms). In order to relate the two, Halliday suggests, ‘we need to represent the culture as . . . a network of information systems: that is, in semiotic terms.’ And he continues: ‘the central problem is to interpret language in a way which enables us to relate it to other semiotic processes.’ Halliday then illustrates his own approach to this problem: he represents certain aspects of culture relating to the code for dialogue as ‘behaviour potential’ (using

a simple system network) and then in turn relates these to their 'realisation' in networks at the 'semantic' and the 'lexico-grammatical' levels of language. He then comments on some short texts in the light of these proposals, and finally outlines the ontogeny of dialogue as it occurred in the case of a single child (Nigel). These closing sections thus serve as an exemplification of the relationship of culture to language, as Halliday sees it in relation to the dialogue of a child. The chapter also includes a brief addition to his proposals for modality.

John Regan's contribution traces the relationship between teacher and pupil as mirrored in and constructed by the discourse patterns of instruction. A long-time student of the Whorf hypothesis, Regan presents data suggesting that the discourse patterns employed by teachers in various countries—and these exhibit a surprising uniformity—exert a powerful influence on the child's conceptual system, quite apart from the content of the instructional material which is overtly being conveyed.

Yoshihiko Ikegami presents a wealth of evidence exploring the notion that all linguistic expressions of change and state are modelled after those of the most concrete types of change and state, i.e. motion and existence in location. Since this type of meaning ('transitivity' in Halliday's terms, 'cases' in Fillmore's) would, in a Whorfian view of language, be held to be closely bound up with the wider culture of the society using the language in question, the whole paper is, in a sense, concerned with language and culture. He concludes that, although there is clearly a set of common underlying patterns in the linguistic representation of change and state, and that these patterns can very closely be approximated to those for representing motion and location, the claim of universal priority of the localistic notions does not hold.

Jeffrey Ellis proposes a framework for exploring relationships among descriptive linguistics, historical linguistics, and sociolinguistics, with particular reference to the socio-cultural aspects of language contact. He draws extensively upon data of language use in Ghana, including problems of contact between English and native languages, and socio-cultural aspects of the use of English by the British, as opposed to natives who use English as a second language.

Ruqaiya Hasan develops the fascinating concept of semantic distance across languages, using data from English and Urdu, and argues that a culture has a characteristic semiotic style, whose crucial characteristics are reflected in all systems of communication, whether verbal or non-verbal. She concludes that semantic differences between languages cannot be properly studied without

consideration of their socio-cultural settings, and moreover that the failure of most testers of the Whorfian hypothesis to properly include such considerations 'effectively bears Whorf out in his assertion that it is a characteristic of the SAE [Standard Average European] cultures to treat the abstract relational notion as a concrete object'. This emphasis on relations as distinct from entities is a concept that is taken up in other papers, most notably Lamb's.

Volume 2 contains both Part II and Part III. If the central object of study in semiotics is semiotic systems, Part II offers three stimulating approaches to fulfilling this task. It is a task that in traditional semiotics has received rather less attention than semioticians coming from a linguistics background might expect. This, then, is one of the ways in which 'semiotically aware' linguists may have something very specific to contribute to the general field of semiotics: the commitment to constructing working grammars that make clear predictions about what will and will not occur when a semiotic system is being employed. Each of the three contributors develops a treatment of a specific cultural system which appears to have structural analogies to language. In two of the cases the analogies are well-known and have received considerable study in the past: writing systems and narrative structures. The third, environmental structure, is less obviously a semiotic system, and is a relative newcomer in this family of related topics.

W. C. Watt frames his study of our system of capital letters within an examination of the case for an area of study to be called 'psycho-semiotics', on the model of 'psycho-linguistics'. He thus brings an explicitly cognitive approach to the study of semiotic systems—an approach taken up again later in the contributions of Lamb and Fawcett. Watt argues for the view that 'for human sign-systems "what people have in their heads" is not a peripheral enquiry: it is the *only* enquiry.' He discusses the nature of evidence and criteria in semiotics, and presents a specific semiotic study of structural patterns in the Roman alphabet. The semiotic system that he is discussing is thus not language itself, strictly speaking, though it is one that relates closely to, and is indeed parasitic on, language.

In a somewhat similar way, L. M. O'Toole's contribution concerns a semiotic system that is closely related to language, but is not the code of language itself, as this is usually conceived. His paper concerns a particular genre of *discourse*—as indeed do those of Halliday and Regan—but here the genre is written rather than oral. O'Toole presents and compares two contrasting models for the analysis and interpretation of fictional narrative: an analytic model that he has used for some time in the interpretation of Russian short stories, and

a generative model proposed by the Russians Zholkovsky and Scheglov. He emphasizes, among other things, the patterns of relations between the social roles and functions of the dramatis personae and the linguistic devices used by the author in characterizing them, and he concludes with an evaluation of the two models.

The semiotic system that is the object of study in Donald Preziosi's contribution is, on the other hand, quite unrelated to language—except that it is another semiotic system. He draws on the concepts and notation of stratificational-relational grammar to describe the relations between human beings, their culture and the semiotic system that is realized in the spatial structures that we surround ourselves with. In so doing, he demonstrates the use of relational network analysis for the study of architectural form, and concludes that 'it remains a reasonable assumption . . . that common cognitive operations underlie' the deep semantic organizations of both language and architecture.

Before leaving Part II, it may be of interest to mention that, while Preziosi's paper illustrates the application of stratificational-relational grammar to a semiotic system that is very different from language, there are also examples of the application of a systemic approach to non-linguistic codes. One such is Terry Winograd's (1968/81) systemic study of (Western classical) music.

The question of the nature of the relationship between language and culture hovers in the background, as it were, of most of the contributions to Parts I and II. But the three extended papers in Part III stand out from the others in that all three are specifically addressed to this question. Each of the three offers a general scheme for the study of semiotics, each based upon a somewhat different approach from the other two.

Sydney Lamb explores the possibility of extending the relational network theory of stratificational grammar to a general relational semiotics. Lamb gives Saussure's concept of the 'sign' a relational network definition, and then uses it to explore the concept that the structure of a culture is a network of relations. He thus presents the hypothesis that 'the relation between language and culture can be considered as a relation between two (possibly intertwined) semiotic systems' in the strongest form to be encountered in this book. A notable feature of the paper is the breadth of the variety of examples given to support this view. In an approach such as Lamb's, in which the emphasis is on relationships rather than entities, the question arises of how the relational network relates out to non-semiotic phenomena; how the mental (since Lamb's is a cognitive model) relates out to the physical. There has long