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# SEMIOTICS AND PRAGMATICS

AN EVALUATIVE COMPARISON  
OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

PARRET

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## An Evaluative Comparison of Conceptual Frameworks

Herman Parret

*Belgian National Science Foundation  
Universities of Louvain and Antwerp*

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# SEMIOTICS AND PRAGMATICS

# *Pragmatics & Beyond*

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*Editors:*

Hubert Cuyckens

*(Belgian National Science Foundation,  
University of Antwerp)*

Herman Parret

*(Belgian National Science Foundation,  
Universities of Louvain and Antwerp)*

Jef Verschueren

*(Belgian National Science Foundation,  
University of Antwerp)*

*Editorial Address:*

*Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures*

*University of Antwerp (UIA)*

*Universiteitsplein 1*

*B-2610 Wilrijk*

*Belgium*

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IV:7

Herman Parret

*Semiotics and Pragmatics*

*An Evaluative Comparison of Conceptual Frameworks*

"... the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. ...the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself ... Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought. ...In this way, the existence of thought now depends on what is to be hereafter; so that it has only a potential existence, dependent on the future thought of the community." (Peirce 1931: 5.311, 5.314-316)

'Linguistic theory is led by an inner necessity to recognize not merely the linguistic system, in its schema and in its usage, in its totality and in its individuality, but also man and human society behind language, and all man's sphere of knowledge through language. At that point linguistic theory has reached its prescribed goal: *humanitas et universitas*." (Hjelmslev 1961: 127)

## PREFACE

There is no rationality without a community of speaking subjects. Without discourse, no communal interaction, no societal creativity would be possible. Communication, however, presupposes conflictual rather than cooperative mechanisms; human beings are 'passionate'; their discourse is manipulatory; interaction is contractual, thus polemological. These general statements are basic to the four books I have been writing simultaneously for several years. The present monograph can be regarded as the prolegomenon to the three other volumes which have yet to appear. *Les passions: Essai sur la mise en discours de la subjectivité* is another monograph, introducing a theory of passions and emotions as underlying discursive manifestations. *De la rationalité du discours* presents the central part of the project, namely the deduction and justification of the network of strategies by which enunciative rationality is characterized. *Essential opacities: Linguistic fringes reconsidered* concentrates on indirection, manipulation, and seduction in discourse. Each of these works has its thematic autonomy, but their underlying unity derives from the basic philosophical position mentioned above.

*Semiotics and pragmatics* have been for a long time the main inspiration of my theorizing. An epistemologically critical look at semiotics and pragmatics quickly reveals a partial solidarity and a partial incompatibility with the basic philosophical position just presented. I have been interested in evaluating and comparing these disciplines in order to find out how possible their homologation is. One might consider this monograph abstract, dry and, maybe, unnecessary. Indeed, the topics of real concern to me are not directly treated here; I have only epistemologically scrutinized the disciplines treating them. But an analysis of the limitations and the possibilities of conceptual frameworks is the safest introduction to the direct study of their object. This is why *Semiotics and pragmatics: An evaluative comparison of conceptual frameworks* comes first, as the prolegomenon to the other works which will be published in the coming two years, viz. Parret (1984a, 1984b, 1985).

This monograph originated in a series of seminars delivered at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (Paris) in 1981-1982. I owe special debts, both personal and intellectual, to A.J. Greimas who invited me to give these seminars. His name appears in almost every section of this text. I admire

the rigor of his thought and his epistemological consciousness. I want to thank my students at the *Groupe de Recherches Sémiolinguistiques*, and my colleagues and friends, Jean-Claude Coquet, Paolo Fabbri, Eric Landowski, Jean Petitot, Hans-George Ruprecht, Claude Zilberberg, for stimulating discussions. The final version of the monograph was written during my residence at the Department of Philosophy of the University of California at San Diego in the Spring Quarter 1983. I thank the Department (George Anagnostopoulos, Chair) for its moral and material support, and Kristana Arp for the adequate editing of this text.

H.P.



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## 0. INTRODUCTION: SEMIOTICS AND PRAGMATICS – THEIR UNITY AND DIVERSITY

No terms are applied more imprecisely in contemporary philosophy of language and in the social sciences than *semiotics* and *pragmatics*. This monograph aims at reducing the confusion created by the conceptual inflation affecting these terms. A look at the context wherein and the ways whereby *semiotics* and *pragmatics* are used should suffice to reveal that there is no unity at all, that there is not even one common thesis fully accepted by all semioticians and pragmaticians.

### (1) *Normative semiotics, analytical semiotics, structural semiotics*

Considering *semiotics* first, one notices that there are many types of semiotics which have been elaborated in various traditions, each with its own intellectual origins and purposes. Not only is the *vagueness* of the boundaries of semiotics evident, but the *substitutability* of semiotics by other disciplines recognized as truly serious is apparent as well. Can't semiotics be substituted for by the theory of communication (or, for instance, by its powerful variants: information theory, artificial intelligence theory, and so on), since communication is the ultimate essence and purpose of all signifying systematicity? If one is convinced that communication is not the ultimate constraint of the specificity of sign systems, and that sign systems have their intrinsic meaning separable from their functioning in communication, why can't we then substitute semantics for semiotics? Or is semiotics a *generic* notion, substitutable by a combination of disciplines, as it is, for instance, for Morris who claims that semiotics is identifiable with syntax/semantics/pragmatics combined? It may look as if semiotics is a provisional halting-place, and that the place it occupies now will be taken by other disciplines once the social sciences become mature. In fact, semiotics strikes sceptics as having neither a precise object nor a method of its own, thus as *not* being a *discipline* but rather a vaguely defined field of studies, a repertoire of interests that is not at all unified. It concerns itself with subject matters as diverse as codes of taste, animal communication, gestures and body expression, musical codes, formalized languages, face-to-

face communication, plot structures, text theories, mass communication, and even culture as a whole, which, as the enormous set of all things that can be seen as deviant with regard to the brute naturally given, serves as a kind of upper threshold.

However, a closer look at the semiotic landscape should reveal lines of force determining *grosso modo* two orientations with specific and homogeneous philosophical implications. These two perspectives on semiotics seem to have developed separately and without interpenetration. Anglo-Saxon semioticians consider the *Peircean* framework to provide the adequate conceptual apparatus for their empirical research, whereas so-called Continental semioticians refer to the sign theory in *Saussure* and to its interpretation by *Hjelmslev*. Both groups seem to ignore and distrust each other. It may prove to be of importance and interest to go back to the central intuitions of Peirce and Saussure/Hjelmslev themselves in order to consider the solidarities and differences between them. Evaluating each one's projects, methods, and results from the point of view of the other could thus lead to a more balanced view. This constitutes, in fact, the purpose of the second section of this monograph *The two semiotics: Peirce and Hjelmslev*. Let me denominate the semiotics of Peircean origin *analytical semiotics* and the semiotics of Saussuro-Hjelmslevian inspiration *structural semiotics*.

This apparently dramatic split between analytical and structural semiotics notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that semiotics has been proclaimed the queen of all social sciences or the unified science *par excellence* (by Morris and Carnap, for instance). I will argue that this idealized notion of semiotics necessarily contrasts sharply with semiotics as a field of *actual* or realized studies and their heterogeneous and unrelated methodologies. In the first section of the monograph on *Semiotics as a paradigm*, I will consider paradigmatical semiotics to provide the *norm* after which the whole domain of significance in men and culture can be modeled. Semiotics as a paradigm holds that reality and men's place in it should be investigated by re-evaluating the opacity of intermediating processes of signifying. Normative semiotics, as we will see, should not be identified with its actualized counterparts, be they of the Peircean or the Saussuro-Hjelmslevian orientation.

## (II) *Pragmatism, pragmatics, pragmaticism*

There is no less paralyzing confusion and vagueness surrounding the concept of pragmatics. The situation is almost hopeless here because the

proliferated terms *pragmatism*, *pragmatics*, and *pragmaticism* share the same stem but have a truly different scope. *Pragmatism* is foundational in analytical or Peircean semiotics: Peirce was led by Kant's use of *pragmatisch* in the *Critique of pure reason* where it means "in relation to some definite human purpose". Thus pragmatism has an anthropological motivation, being in fact a theory of reasoning (reasoning as motivated by fundamental human purposes). I will use the term 'pragmatism' consistently with the Kantian and Peircean sense (see, for instance, 3.1). Pragmatism, however, should be distinguished from pragmaticism. *Pragmaticism*, in my terminology, is 'perverse' pragmatics, just as semanticism is 'perverse' semantics (see 1.2, where I introduce these distinctions).

Pragmatism as a global philosophical position seems, at first sight, to be wholly distinct from structural semiotics. Moreover, it *can* be distinct from pragmatics as well. There are many variants of pragmatics (for instance, Montague pragmatics) not influenced at all by pragmatism in the sense of Kant and Peirce (and, in fact, Montague pragmatics should better be called 'indexical semantics' than pragmatics). There is an essential link between pragmatism and pragmatics, in my view. The 'pragmatic attitude' is characterized by three features: meaning is *context-bound*, rationality is *discourse-bound*, signifying should be seen *as understanding*. So the 'pragmatic attitude' is inspired by pragmatism.

The third section of the monograph on *The homologation of semiotics and pragmatics* evaluates semiotics, especially structural semiotics, in comparison to pragmatics. The parameters of subjectivity, rationality, intentionality, modality, and deixis will be used, not only in order to compare the existing conceptual frameworks of semiotics and pragmatics, but even in order to homologate them partially. I consider it to be a point of deontology to preach reciprocal understanding between pragmaticians and semioticians, and it is an aspect of the ethics of my philosophico-epistemological role to inseminate disciplines with each other's generative ideas and intuitions, in order to render them generalizable and more powerful.





## 1. SEMIOTICS AS A PARADIGM

Instead of starting my conceptual analysis of *semiotics* and *pragmatics* by elaborating a taxonomy of the various senses and uses of these terms in contemporary theorizing, I prefer to sketch, rather deductively, the scope of so-called *normative semiotics*. My project would collapse into eclecticism and scholasticism if I merely list an inventory of definitions of semiotics, from the Stoics to Sebeok and Greimas. An investigation of all the tendencies and orientations in semiotics, and the study of their essential differences and isomorphisms should *follow* rather than precede a consideration of the nature and function of semiotics *as a norm*, or of semiotics *as a paradigm*. For this reason, this first section is devoted to the investigation of the precise location of semiotics within the panorama of intellectual disciplines (philosophy and the social sciences), that is, to regarding it not as a constituted discipline but rather as a *perspective* contrasting with its alternatives. However, the birth of semiotics as a perspective cannot be considered to be a contingent historical fact. Therefore, I will not be interested here in the factual diachrony of the meanings of *semiotics*. On the contrary, I will focus my attention on the logic by which conceptions of reality and man's place in it, among them the semiotic one, are dialectically generated. Semiotics as a paradigm or normative semiotics transcends other paradigms, and the specificity of the semiotic perspective supplies us with distinctive criteria by which the authenticity of realized or constituted semiotic orientations can be evaluated (see Parret 1983a, 1983b).

### 1.1. *First Philosophies*

#### (I) *The teleology of First Philosophies*

Semiotics can, in fact, be said to be a prominent paradigm within the panorama of philosophical doctrines. The idea of semiotics as a First Philosophy has been developed by Apel (1974, 1975, and 1980). I will take over the succession of First Philosophies suggested by him, although I don't agree that the transcendentalist orientation Apel sees as a basic aspect of an adequate