SEMIOTICS AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

UMBERTO ECO

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MACMILLAN

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Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language

Note

Early versions of Chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5 of this book were written in Italian as entries of the *Enciclopedia Einaudi*; however, these have been reworked and rewritten for the purposes of this book. Slightly different versions of the following chapters have already been published in English: "Signs" (Chapter 1), as "The Sign Revisited," translated by Lucia Re, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 7 (1980); "Metaphor" (Chapter 3), as "The Scandal of Metaphor," translated by Christopher Paci, *Poetics Today* 3 (1982); "Isotopy" (Chapter 6), as part of the article "Two Problems in Textual Interpretation," *Poetics Today* 1a (1980). An earlier version of "Mirrors" (Chapter 7) was written for a volume in honor of Thomas A. Sebeok for his sixty-fifth birthday. The translators mentioned above are not responsible for the changes in the final versions.

Figure 3.5 of this book is adapted from Groupe μ, *Rhétorique générale* (Paris: Larousse, 1970), p. 109. Figure 6.1 of this book is reprinted from Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 14.

In the course of this book, I use (as I did in *A Theory of Semiotics*) single slashes to indicate expressions; guillemets indicate the corresponding content. Thus /x/ means, or is an expression for, «x». However, when it is not strictly necessary to stress such a distinction (that is, when words or sentences are used as expressions whose corresponding content is taken as intuitively understood), I simply use italics.

All the subjects dealt with in this book have been widely discussed during the last four years in my courses at the University of Bologna and during my visiting terms at Yale University and Columbia University; many of the topics were also elaborated in the course of various congresses, symposia, seminars — in so many circumstances that it would be difficult to be honest and exhaustive in expressing my gratitude to all those students and colleagues who have contributed to the original draft with their objections and suggestions. I am, however, particularly indebted to Barbara Spackman and John Deely, who have kindly revised part of the chapters.

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[0]
INTRODUCTION

0.1.

The empirical reader of this book could have the impression that its various chapters deal with two theoretical objects, mutually incompatible, each being focused on as *the* object of a general semiotic approach: the sign, or the sign-function, and semiosis. The sign is usually considered as a correlation between a signifier and a signified (or between expression and content) and therefore as an action between pairs. Semiosis is, according to Peirce, "an action, or influence, which is, or involves, an operation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into an action between pairs" (*C. P.* 5.484).

The Model Reader should (as I hope) understand that the aim of this book is to show that these two notions are not incompatible. If one thinks of the more trivial and current notion of linguistic sign, one cannot match a theory of semiosis as indefinite interpretation with a 'doctrine of signs'; in this case, one has to choose either a theory of the sign or a theory of semiosis (or of the significant practice, of the communicative processes, of textual and discursive activity). However, the main purpose of this book is to show that such an alternative is a misleading one: the sign is the origin of the semiosic processes, and there is no opposition between the 'nomadism' of semiosis (and of interpretive activity) and the alleged stiffness and immobility of the sign. The concept of sign must be disentangled from its trivial identification with the idea of coded equivalence and identity; the semiosic process of interpretation is present at the very core of the concept of sign.

Chapter I ("Signs") shows that this idea was clearly spelled out by the

classical doctrines where the *sēmeîon* was not considered as an equivalence but as an inference.

Chapter 7 ("Mirrors") tackles the question of a threshold between semiotic and presemiotic phenomena. The phenomenology of our experience with mirror images represents the *experimentum crucis* for testing the role played by two fundamental characteristics of any semiosic experience: a sign is an x standing for a y which is absent, and the process which leads the interpreter from x to y is of an inferential nature.

Definition is the subject matter of Chapter 2 ("Dictionary vs. Encyclopedia"), from the allegedly Aristotelian model called the Porphyrian Tree to the contemporary discussions on the possibility of an encyclopedia-like representation of our semantic competence. In this chapter, the current opposition 'dictionary/encyclopedia' is traced back to the classical models of the tree and the labyrinth. /Tree/ and /labyrinth/ are not metaphors. They are topological and logical models, and as such they were and are studied in their proper domain. However, I have no difficulties in admitting that, as labels or emblems for the overall discussion developed in the various chapters of this book, they can be taken as metaphors. As such, they stand for the nonmetaphoric Peircean notion of *unlimited semiosis* and for the Model Q outlined in *A Theory of Semiotics* (Eco 1976).

If texts can be produced and interpreted as I suggested in *The Role of the Reader* (Eco 1979), it is because the universe of semiosis can be postulated in the format of a labyrinth. The regulative hypothesis of a semiosic universe structured as a labyrinth governs the approach to other classical issues such as metaphor, symbol, and code.

Metaphors can be read according to multiple interpretations; yet these interpretations can be more or less legitimated on the grounds of an underlying encyclopedic competence. In this sense, Chapter 3 ("Metaphor") aims at improving some of the proposals of my essay "The Semantics of Metaphor" (Eco 1979, ch. 2), where the image of the Swedish stall-bars required a more rigorous explanation in terms of a representable encyclopedic network.

The notion of symbolic mode outlined in Chapter 4 ("Symbol") accounts for all these cases of textual production that do not rely on a preestablished portion of encyclopedia but invent and propose for the first time a new interpretive connection.

0.2.

The principle of interpretation says that "a sign is something by knowing which we know something more" (Peirce). The Peircean idea of semiosis is the idea of an infinite process of interpretation. It seems that the symbolic mode is the paramount example of this possibility.

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However, interpretation is not reducible to the responses elicited by the textual strategies accorded to the symbolic mode. The interpretation of metaphors shifts from the univocality of catachreses to the open possibilities offered by inventive metaphors. Many texts have undoubtedly many possible senses, but it is still possible to decide *which one* has to be selected if one approaches the text in the light of a given topic, as well as it is possible to tell of certain texts *how many* isotopies they display. (See Chapter 6, "Isotopy," where I discuss the many senses of the concept of isotopy.) Besides, we are implementing inferences (and we are facing a certain interpretive freedom) even when we understand an isolated word, a sentence, a visual sign.

All this amounts to saying that the principle of interpretation (in its Peircean sense) has not to be identified with the farfetched assumption that — as Valéry said — *il n'y a pas de vrai sens d'un texte.*

When considering contemporary theories of interpretation (especially in the literary domain), we can conceive of a range with two extremes *x* and *y*. (I refuse to represent it spatially as a line going from left to right, so as not to suggest unfair and misleading ideological connotations.) Let us say that at the extreme *x* stand those who assume that every text (be it a conversational utterance or a poem) can be interpreted in one, and only one, way, according to the intention of its author. At the extreme *y* stand those who assume that a text supports every interpretation — albeit I suppose that nobody would *literally* endorse such a claim, except perhaps a visionary devotee of the Kabalistic *temura*.

I do not think that the Peircean notion of semiosis should privilege one of these extremes. At most, it provides a theoretical tool for identifying, according to different semiosic processes, a continuum of intermediate positions. If I ask someone what time it is and if he answers /6:15/, my interpretation of this expression can conclude that (provided there are no other co-textual clues and provided the speaker is not a notorious liar or a psychotic subject) the speaker positively said that it is forty-five minutes to seven and that he intended to say so.

On the other hand, the notion of interpretation can explain both in which sense a given text displays two and no more possibilities of disambiguation and why an instance of the symbolic mode requests an indefinite series of alternative or complementary interpretations. In any case, between *x* and *y* stands a recorded thesaurus of encyclopedic competence, a social storage of world knowledge, and on these grounds, and only on these grounds, any interpretation can be both implemented and legitimated — even in the case of the most 'open' instances of the option *y*.

0.3.

In order to discuss these points, all the chapters of this book, while examining a series of fundamental concepts traditionally related to the one of sign, revisit each of them from a historical point of view, looking backward at the moment they were posited for the first time and were endowed with a theoretical fecundity that sometimes they have lost in the course of a millenary debate.

It is clear from the index that most of my authors are not linguists or full-time semioticians, but philosophers who have speculated about signs. This is not solely due to the fact that I started my academic career as a philosopher, particularly interested in the Middle Ages, and that since the Second Congress of the IASS (Vienna, 1979) I have advocated a revisitation of the whole history of philosophy (as well as of other disciplines) to take back the origins of semiotic concepts. This is not (or not only) a book in which a semiotician pays a visit, *extra moenia*, to the alien territory of philosophy. This is a book on philosophy of language for the very simple reason that a general semiotics is nothing else but *a* philosophy of language and that the 'good' philosophies of language, from *Cratylus* to *Philosophical Investigations*, are concerned with all the semiotic questions.

It is rather difficult to provide a 'catholic' definition of philosophy of language. In a nondogmatic overview, one should list under this heading Plato's discussions on *nomos* and *phusis*, Aristotle's assumption that /Being/ is used in various senses, Russell's theory of denotation, as well as Heidegger, Cassirer, and Merleau-Ponty. I am not sure that a general semiotics can answer all the questions raised during the last two thousand years by the various philosophies of language; but I am sure that all the questions a general semiotics deals with have been posited in the framework of some philosophy of language.

0.4.

In order to make this point clear, one must distinguish between *specific semiotics* and *general* semiotics. I understand that this is a very crude distinction as compared with more subtle classifications. I am thinking of Hjelmslev's proposal according to which there are a *scientific semiotic* and a *nonscientific semiotic*, both studied by a *metasemiotic;* a *semiology* as a *metasemiotic* studying a *nonscientific semiotic*, whose terminology is studied by a *metasemiology*. Since semiotics can be either denotative or connotative, there is also a *meta (connotative) semiotic*. Pelc (1981) has outlined a far more analytical classification of the many levels of a semiotic study. At the present state of the art, I am inclined to take these and other

distinctions as fruitfully descriptive, while I am not sure that they can be taken as normative. In any case, for the purposes of the present discourse, I think it will be sufficient to work upon the distinction between general and specific.

A specific semiotics is, or aims at being, the 'grammar' of a particular sign system, and proves to be successful insofar as it describes a given field of communicative phenomena as ruled by a system of signification. Thus there are 'grammars' of the American Sign Language, of traffic signals, of a playing-card 'matrix' for different games or of a particular game (for instance, poker). These systems can be studied from a syntactic, a semantic, or a pragmatic point of view. Sometimes a specific semiotics only focuses on a particular subsystem (or s-code, as defined in Eco 1976) that works within a more complex system of systems: such is the case of the theory of phonemic distinctive features or of the description of the phonemic oppositions holding for a given verbal language.

Every specific semiotics (as every science) is concerned with general epistemological problems. It has to posit its own theoretical object, according to criteria of pertinence, in order to account for an otherwise disordered field of empirical data; and the researcher must be aware of the underlying philosophical assumptions that influence its choice and its criteria for relevance. Like every science, even a specific semiotics ought to take into account a sort of 'uncertainty principle' (as anthropologists must be aware of the fact that their presence as observers can disturb the normal course of the behavioral phenomena they observe). Notwithstanding, a specific semiotics can aspire to a 'scientific' status. Specific semiotics study phenomena that are reasonably independent of their observations. Their objects are usually 'stable' — even though the duration of a code for traffic signals has a shorter range than the duration of a phonological system, whereas lexical systems are in a continuous process of transformation. Being scientific, a specific semiotics can have a predictive power: it can tell which expressions, produced according to the rules of a given system of signification, are acceptable or 'grammatical' and which ones a user of the system would presumably produce in a given situation.

Obviously, there are different degrees of scientificity, according to the rigidity or the flexibility of the sign system in question. The 'grammar' of traffic lights and the structure of a phonological system seem to be more 'objective' (more 'scientific') than the description of the narrative function in Russian fairy tales; and the narrative function of the Russian fairy tales seems to be less questionable than, let us say, a possible system of narrative function in the novels of French Romanticism. Not every specific semiotics can claim to be like a natural science. In fact, every specific semiotics is at most a human science, and everybody

knows how controversial such a notion still is. However, when cultural anthropology studies the kinship system in a certain society, it works upon a rather stable field of phenomena, can produce a theoretical object, and can make some prediction about the behavior of the members of this society. The same happens with a lexical analysis of the system of terms expressing kinship in the same society.

In this sense, a specific semiotics (as any other science) can also have effects in terms of social engineering. When the anthropologist increases our knowledge of a given society, his or her descriptions can be used for 'missionary' purposes in order to improve, to preserve, or to destroy a given culture, or to exploit its members. It goes without saying that the natural sciences have engineering purposes, not only in the strict technological sense; a good knowledge of human anatomy also can help one to improve one's physical fitness. In the same way, the description of the internal logic of road signals can suggest to some public agency how to improve the practice of road signaling. Such an engineering power is the result of a free decision, not an automatic side effect of the scientific research.

All around this area of more or less established and rigorous 'grammatical' knowledge is a hardly definable 'twilight zone' of semiotically oriented practices, such as the application of semiotic notions to literary criticism, the analysis of political discourses, perhaps a great part of the so-called linguistic philosophy when it attempts "to solve philosophical problems by analyzing the meanings of words, and by analyzing logical relations between words in natural languages" (Searle 1971:1). Frequently, these semiotic practices rely on the set of knowledge provided by specific semiotics, sometimes they contribute to enriching them, and, in many other cases, they borrow their fundamental ideas from a general semiotics.

0.5.

The task and the nature of a general semiotics are different. To outline a project for a general semiotics, it is not sufficient to assert, as Saussure did, that language is a system comparable to writing, symbolic rites, deaf-mute alphabets, military signals, and so on, and that one should conceive of a science able to study the life of signs within the framework of social and general psychology. In order to conceive of such a science, one must say in which sense these different systems are mutually comparable: if they are all systems in the same sense of the word system; if, by consequence, the mutual comparison of these systems can reveal common systematic laws able to explain, from a unified point of view, their way of functioning. Saussure said that such a science did not exist as yet, even though it had a right to exist. Many semioticians assume

(and I rank among them) that Peirce in fact outlined such a discipline; but others maintain (and I still rank among them) that such a discipline cannot be a science in the sense of physics or electronics.

Thus the basic problem of a general semiotics splits into three different questions: (a) Can one approach many, and apparently different, phenomena as if they were all phenomena of signification and/or of communication? (b) Is there a unified approach able to account for all these semiotic phenomena as if they were based on the same system of rules (the notion of system not being a mere analogical one)? (c) Is this approach a 'scientific' one?

If there is something which deserves the name of general semiotics, this something is a discourse dealing with the questions above, and this discourse is a philosophical one. In any case, it encounters the problem raised by philosophy of language because, in order to answer the questions above, it is obliged to reconsider, from a general (not merely 'linguistic') point of view, classical issues such as meaning, reference, truth, context, communicational acts (be they vocal or else), as well as many logical problems as analytic vs. synthetic, necessity, implication, entailment, inference, hypothesis, and so on.

Naturally, many problems that originally were simply philosophical now belong to the province of some science. Perhaps in the future some of the problems raised today by a general semiotics will find a 'scientific' answer — for instance, the debated and still speculative problem of the universals of language, today tackled by the catastrophe theory. Some others will remain purely philosophical.

General semiotics was first of all concerned with the concept of sign. This concept is better discussed in Chapter 1, where I give the reasons why I think it is still tenable, despite the various criticisms it has undergone. It must be clear that one can decide that the theoretical object of semiotics can be a different and more fruitful one, let us say, text, semiosis, significant practice, communication, discourse, language, effability, and so on — but the real problem is not so much *which* object has to be appointed as the central one; the problem is to decide whether there is a unified object or not. Now, this object (let it be the concept of sign) can become the central object of a general semiotics insofar as one decides that such a category can explain a series of human (and maybe animal) behaviors, be they vocal, visual, termic, gestural, or other. In this sense, the first question of a general semiotics is close to the capital question of any philosophy of language: what does it mean for human beings to say, to express meanings, to convey ideas, or to mention states of the world? By which means do people perform this task? Only by words? And, if not, what do verbal activity and other signifying or communicative activities have in common?

A general semiotics at most improves some of the traditional ap-

proaches of philosophy of language. It assumes that it is impossible to speak about verbal language without comparing it to other forms of signification and/or communication. In this sense, a general semiotics is fundamentally comparative in its approach. But it is enough to think — for instance — of Wittgenstein, Husserl, or Cassirer to realize that a *good* philosophy of language necessarily takes up this issue.

A general semiotics is influenced, more than any philosophy of language, by the experiences of specific semiotics. But the history of philosophy displays other examples of speculations about signification and communication that have attempted to elaborate a systematic approach to every sort of 'language' — starting from the results and from the technicalities of some specific semiotics. Thus a general semiotics is simply a philosophy of language which stresses the comparative and systematic approach to languages (and not only to verbal language) by exploiting the result of different, more local inquiries.

0.6.

Not all philosophers of language would agree with such a project. Many of them assume that the categories provided in order to explain verbal language — including 'signification', 'meaning', and 'code' — cannot hold when applied to other systems of signification. In Chapter 1 of this book, I discuss a strong objection formulated in this line of thought, according to which semiotics unduly fuses three different problems concerning three different and mutually irreducible phenomena, studied by three different theoretical approaches — namely, *intended meaning, inference from evidences,* and *pictorial representation*. It goes without saying that, on the contrary, I assume that these three problems concern a unique theoretical object. Elsewhere (Eco 1976) I discussed in which sense verbal signification and pictorial representation (as well as other phenomena) can be subsumed under the general model of the sign-function. Here I shall maintain that inferential processes (mainly under the form of Peircean *abduction*) stand at the basis of every semiotic phenomenon.

It has been suggested (see, for instance, Scruton 1980) that the word *sign* means too many things and points to many functions; thus semiotics would play on mere — and weak — analogies when it asserts that a cloud *means* rain in the same sense in which the French sentence 'je m'ennuie' *means* that I am bored. What these two phenomena have in common is "only a small feature on the surface of each" and "if there is a common essence of 'signs' it is sure to be very shallow; semiology pretends that it is deep" (Scruton 1980). I suspect that no semiotician would say that *on the surface* a cloud and a sentence have something in common. As I recall in Chapter 1 of this book, Greek philosophers took a long time to rec-

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