

Sebeok

Thomas A. Sebeok (Budapest 1920–Bloomington 2001) emigrated to USA in 1937, where he became a citizen in 1944. He was a faculty member of Indiana University for the whole time of his academic career. He acted as Editor-in-Chief of *Semiotica*, journal and main organ of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (**IASS**), from the time they were founded, in 1969. Sebeok has greatly contributed to the institutionalization of **semiotics** internationally, and to its configuration as ‘biosemiotics’, ‘semiotics of life’ or ‘global semiotics’ (*Global Semiotics* is the title of his 2001 monograph). His work was inspired by Charles S. **Peirce**, Charles **Morris** and Roman **Jakobson**. Sebeok’s diversified interests broadly ranged from the natural sciences to the human sciences.

The entire universe is perfused with **signs**, stated Sebeok after Peirce, and enters ‘global semiotics’. In light of his ‘holistic’ approach, Sebeok’s research on the ‘life of signs’ was closely connected with his interest in the ‘signs of life’: *semiosis* and *life* converge. Semiosis originates with the first stirrings of life, which led to Sebeok’s cardinal axiom: ‘semiosis is the criterial attribute of life’. ‘Global semiotics’ provides a meeting point and observation post for studies on the life of signs and the signs of life.

Sebeok’s global approach to semiotic theory and practice presupposes his critique of anthropocentrism and glottocentrism. He opened the science or ‘doctrine’ of signs (the term he preferred recalling Locke) to include **zoosemiotics** (a term he introduced in 1963) or even more broadly **biosemiotics**, on the one hand, and endosemiotics, on the other, extending his gaze to semiosis throughout the whole living universe, to the realms of macro- and microorganisms. In Sebeok’s conception, the sign science is not only the “science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale” (Saussure), the study of communication in culture, but also of communicative behaviour from a biosemiotic perspective.

Sebeok’s global approach to semiosis favours the discovery of new perspectives, interdisciplinary interconnections and interpretive practices, new cognitive fields and languages, which interact dialogically, as foreseen by the open and detotalized nature of his semiotics. Sebeok identifies sign relations where there only seemed to exist ‘mere’ facts and relations among things, independent from communication and interpretation processes. Use of the expression ‘doctrine of signs’ keeps account of Peirce and of Kantian critique. According to Sebeok, the task of semiotics is not only to observe and describe signs, but also to interrogate the conditions of possibility that characterize and specify signs for what they are and for what they must be (cf. Sebeok’s Preface to his monograph of 1976).

A pivotal notion in global semiotics is ‘modelling,’ used to explain life and behaviour among living entities conceived in terms of semiosis. On the basis of biosemiotic research, Sebeok averred that the modelling capacity is observable in all life forms and that these subsist in species-specific worlds – living beings signify and communicate in species-specifically modelled worlds. Modelling is an a priori, transcendental in the Kantian sense, the foundation of communication and signification. Modelling systems theory (cf. Sebeok and Danesi 2000) studies semiotic phenomena in terms of modelling processes. Sebeok dubs the human species-specific primary modelling device ‘language’ (capable of constructing multiple worlds, therefore the condition for the evolution of humanity), distinguishing it from ‘speech’ (the capacity for verbal communication) which appeared much later in human evolution. With speech different historical languages arise, which assume a secondary modelling function

through exaptation and generate a plurality of cultural systems. which constitute tertiary modelling (cf. Sebeok, *A Sign is Just a Sign*, 1991, *Signs. An Introduction to Semiotics*, 1994).

Sebeok's opening remarks to *The Sign and Its Masters* (1979), a 'transitional' book, can be extended to all his research viewed in light of current debate in philosophico-linguistic and semiotic theory. A transition is now occurring from 'code semiotics' to 'interpretation semiotics', from semiotics centred on linguistics to one which is autonomous from it.

Sebeok privileged interpretation semiotics in his early theoretical volume *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs* (1976), and explored semiotics as an adequate methodological tool applicable to different fields in his more discursive volume, *The Play of Musement* (1981).

Other important volumes have since followed in rapid succession: *I Think I Am a Verb: More Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs* (1986), *Essays in Zoosemiotics* (1990), *A Sign is Just a Sign* (1991), *Semiotics in the United States* (1991), and *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* (1994).

See also Sebeok (this volume).

Further Reading

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