

22

Göran Sonesson

Full Professor

Department of Semiotics

University of Lund, Sweden

Like many other young people, I thought I was going to be a fiction writer. While I was waiting for the big fit of inspiration, I took up the study of literature. But literature did not seem to have anything new to tell me. On the contrary, linguistics opened up entirely new vistas on such a common sense object as language. What fascinated me was the later much maligned structuralist linguistics, from phonology to grammar. On the contrary, I was very unhappy with the reigning Chomskyan paradigm: it seemed to me to be about some figment of Noam Chomsky's imagination, not about language. Pragmatics was not enough. It treated all kinds of meaning except for language as some kind of auxiliary means for conveying linguistic meaning. Only semiotics seemed adequate for treating all meaning on a par. This impression was very much reinforced, when I travelled repeatedly to Paris to visit my sister who lived there and discovered, in the Parisian bookshops, semiotic books by many of the authors I knew from linguistics, such as Roman Jakobson, Emile Benveniste, Luis Prieto, A. J. Greimas, etc.

Thus I became an unwilling Greimasean. The Parisean seminar of A. J. Greimas was more or less the only place where you could go to prepare a doctorate in semiotics at the time. But I did not like the *a priori* character of the theory, nor, in particular, the postulate that all meaning was born equal. I thought semiotics was about the *differences* between semiotic resources as well as about their common ground. My basic formation having been in linguistics, I was very much disturbed by linguistic terms being used in quite different senses. It did not only seem confusing: it created obstacles to the important task of finding real differences and similarities between semiotic domains.

I spent almost ten years in Paris and later in Mexico City, working in Paris within the Greimas group with the semiotics of gesture, and in Mexico as an ethnolinguist involved with Mayan languages. Apart from what this taught me about gesture and Mayan language, respectively, I think it gave me a very pronounced feeling for the differences between human cultures, which served me well in my later work on cultural semiotics—and in general strengthened my interest in semiotic *differences*. It was an appeal from the Swedish Research Council in the Humanities that brought me back to Sweden in order to introduce semiotics (belatedly) to the Swedish academic public. I have since then remained in Sweden in different functions.

My main contribution to the study of meaning so far has no doubt involved pictorial and, more generally, visual semiotics. This came about in a curious way. To understand language, you must account for the whole situation of communication, which, apart from the verbal elements, is mainly a visual phenomenon. I got interested in the psychology of perception and cognition but also in Husserlean phenomenology. My first teaching at Lund University, in the late seventies, well before this became a fashionable blend in semiotics and cognitive science alike, was about semiotics *and* phenomenology. This focus brought me from language to gesture and from there to pictures. Thus I came to occupy myself with the similarities and differences between language and visually conveyed meaning instead of their interaction in the situation of communication.

Within the semiotics of pictures, my contribution has been at least twofold. Although a lot of scholars have expressed their misgivings about the conventionalist theories of pictures formulated by Umberto Eco (1968; 1976) and Nelson Goodman (1968), notably, and although the true Peirceans have never given up their belief in the existence of icons, I think I am the only one to have given, in *Pictorial concepts* (Sonesson 1989) a complete account of the arguments, of both a theoretical and empirical nature, for the untenability of these theories. I took the empirical arguments from the psychology of perception and cognition, and this emphasis on empirical study has followed me ever since. The theoretical arguments were my own: they consisted in a refutation of the best arguments against the possibility of iconic signs, those formulated by Goodman, and actually much clearly before him, by a little known thinker, Arthur Bierman (1963). The most important ones are the *argument of regression*, according to which there are simi-

larities between all things in the world, and so this cannot be the foundation of a sign relation, and the *argument of symmetry*, according to which similarity is symmetric, which the sign relation is not. I showed that iconicity must either be applied to something which was for other reasons known to be a sign, or else it must be a property of things which are universally prominent in the human Lifeworld, giving rise to *secondary* and *primary iconic signs*, respectively (Sonesson 1993; 1998; 2001). As against the symmetry argument, I claimed, on the basis of experiments by the psychologists Eleanor Rosch and Amos Tversky, that similarity, as understood in the common sense world, is really asymmetric. One twin, the one I knew beforehand, is more similar than the other—which is an awkward, but therefore also, I believe, effective way of saying that a comparison always is made from the point of view of one of the elements involved, the one which is more well-known or otherwise more prominent.

In the second place, I have tried to bring together, and bring to bear on each other, the theoretical models for picture analyses proposed by, mainly French, semioticians and the empirical work accomplished within the psychology of picture perception, creating finally what Gombrich called "the linguistics of the visual image" (Sonesson 1988; 1989; 1998). The most important contributions in the first domain are no doubt those of Jean-Marie Floch (1984) and Felix Thurlemann (1990). But it was necessary to liberate their models from the *a priori* character given them by the Greimasean paradigm to see that other variants were possible. The true pioneer of the latter domain was really the psychologist James Gibson (1982), who, contrary to most other perceptual psychologists, always insisted on the difference between the perception of pictures and direct perception. Building on Gibson and his followers, as well as on phenomenology, it was also easy to show why the structuralist tenets concerning the picture sign were completely mistaken (Sonesson 1989; 1995). It is true that, already at the time, these ideas (such as the double articulation of pictures) were out of fashion—but I have always believed it was important to understand *why* they deserved to be out of fashion.

A relatively more recent contribution of mine involves the semiotics of culture, which I have understood as a study of the models a culture constructs about its relations to other cultures. This conception has permitted me to develop the analytical tools of the Tartu school (Lotman et al. 1975) in the direction of the analysis of intersubjectivity, in terms of *Ego*, the one whose point of

view defines the model, *Alter*, the one with whom he or she is on speaking terms, and *Alius*, the one who is only talked about. Thus understood, semiotics of culture has turned out to be a potent tool for the study of history, such as the conquest of America, as well as an aid to the understanding of modernity, globalization, and worldwide migration, as I have tried to show in a number of articles (Sonesson 2000a; 2004). Indeed, a quite separate line of work, the study of “performance”, in the art historical sense, which first inspired me to analyse theatre, play, ritual, and many similar phenomena—the *spectacular* function (Sonesson 2000b), turned out to be fundamental for the understanding of urban space, as manifested in the boulevard, the coffee house, and other public places (Sonesson 2003), and then for the understanding of semiosis generally. This branch of study is important to me also, because as an “old left wing intellectual”, I tend to believe that the fact that we live in a (particular) society has important consequences for all semiotic resources.

Semiotics, like so much else, is first of all an intellectual tradition, a series of questions and the answers to them that have provoked new questions through the centuries. But it is our task to try to make something more out of it—something that can serve to bring the human and social sciences together, offering a bridge to parts of the natural sciences erected on the conditions of the former. Contrary to what Saussure said, the place of this discipline is certainly not determined beforehand. Elsewhere I have discussed this issue (most completely in Sonesson 2006a), rejecting the idea that semiotics is a method, a model, and even a branch of the philosophy of language. I think it is—or should be—a science. Some sciences are defined by the particular part of reality that they describe, like Art history or French studies, others by the particular perspective they take on all or some part of reality, such as sociology and psychology. Semiotics, in my view, is of the latter kind: it is defined by its interest in how something comes to carry meaning. However, I also believe there is a limit to the domain to which such a research interest may be applied. Perhaps it is too broad to say, following Sebeok, that meaning is coextensive with life. I would rather say that it requires some degree of consciousness.

For a long time now, a lot of semioticians have argued that the sign is not the fundamental unit of semiotic analysis. There is a paradox to this, of course, since semiotics literally means the science of signs. However, I am quite willing to redefine semiotics as the science of meaning (Sonesson 2006b). Not because I

accept the kinds of arguments against the existence of the sign propounded by, notably, Eco and Greimas. The notion of sign is, I think, quite adequate, not only for characterising linguistic meaning (even though it might be a rather superficial phenomenon of language, as Ferdinand de Saussure maintained), but also for defining at least pictures and some kinds of gesture. But there is much more to meaning than signs. The notion of sign is not at all useful for analysing the meaning with which perception is imbued. It does not account for the way symptoms serve to signify some particular kind of illness: for once all possible symptoms are known, the illness is also known (and the patient is normally dead). Indeed, this is how ordinary perception works: when we know all items of the expression, we know the content. This is why it is better not to talk about expression and content in these cases. The picture sign and the verbal sign, on the contrary, consist of two units that are clearly *differentiated* each other, using a term first proposed by Jean Piaget (1945; 1970; cf. Sonesson 1992; 2006b). One of the units, the expression, is *directly accessible* but it is *not in focus*, whereas the other one, the content, can only be reached over the expression, and yet it is *the focus* of our interest. This characterisation builds on some passages from Edmund Husserl (1913; 1939; cf. Sonesson 1992; 2006b). At first, I was interested in establishing this difference between language and pictures, on one hand, and perception on the other, for systematic reasons—to understand how semiotic resources may differ. Nowadays, however, I think it is more important from the point of view of evolution and development. In the different phases of evolution (which may have parallels in child development) described by Merlin Donald (1991), we have to pinpoint the emergence of the sign function—somewhere in the mimetic phase, well before language and picture, but not, perhaps, before tool use. Not only does it appear that sign use is something of which most, if not all, animals, apart from human beings (and perhaps some other higher primates) are incapable, but the child goes through a number of phases in learning to grasp the nature of the picture sign, as well as the verbal sign. Indeed, in the on-going EU project SEDSU in which I am involved, together with primatologists and psychologists, we have failed to find clear indication of sign use in the precise sense given to the term here (See <http://www.sedsu.org/>).

There are an immense number of contributions to semiotics that I admire very much. Of course, Charles Sanders Peirce (1998) is among the two or three most important thinkers in our domain,

but he is also very obscure, and I am not interested in forming part of the Talmud crowd. I don't care very much to know "what Peirce really said". There is such an enormous amount of ideas in Peirce's work. One must read Peirce to get ideas, and there is really no way of knowing if these are really the ideas intended by Peirce. Thus, Peirce's notion of sign is probably not at all the sign that I have characterised above, at least not in the case of many of his numerous definitions. The issue is not, as it is often stated, that Peirce, contrary to Saussure, was interested in all kinds of signs, not just verbal ones. As Peirce noted late in life, the term "sign" was really too narrow for what he intended. Instead he suggested the terms "mediation", "branching", "semi-osis". I think what Peirce is describing really comes much closer to the situation of communication or, even better, the situation in which a signification is conveyed (from somebody or something) to someone. In this sense, it would also apply to perception. It is a pity, however, that Peirce never took care to separate this very general notion from the more precise and limited concept of sign (Cf. Sonesson 2006b).

The fundamental work of the Prague school is today sadly neglected, as is that of Louis Hjelmslev and Luis Prieto. I am fascinated by the former, because it permits a serious analysis of society as a socio-cultural lifeworld, in which some things are taken for granted, already because it is a human lifeworld, and other things only seem obvious and uncontested because they are embodied in the norms and canons of this particular society (cf. Mukarovsky 1974; 1978). The social dimension added by the Prague school to the situation of communication stands in stark contrast to the abstract notion of semiosis propounded by Peirce. It is a pity that, even today, scholars who want to add a social dimension to their semiotic work, like for instance Gunther Kress and Theo von Leeuwen, rely on the fuzzy ideas of Roland Barthes, instead of building on the much more useful and precise notions of the Prague school (to which could be added the partially similar work of the Bakhtin circle). The interest of the work of Hjelmslev (1943) and Prieto (1975), on the other hand, lies in their formalism. They allow us to discover the system character, which, for instance, separates verbal language from most other semiotic resources. I was very much helped by their ideas when I tried to show how different pictures were from language, and I found their notions helpful also recently (in Sonesson 2006b), when criticising some ideas of Deacon's (1997) about the semiotic specificity of language.

Few people within semiotics have set the standards of rigour and creativity as high as Groupe μ (1977; 1992). Jean-Marie Klinkenberg once said to me that, if I only had been a Belgian, I could have been a member of the group. I really take that as a very big compliment. If I had ever been able to form part of a school, that would certainly have been the Liège group. Sometimes I do regret not being a Belgian. It is a remarkable fact that both the two traditions that have renewed rhetoric in our time, Chaïm Perelman and Groupe μ , have their origin in Belgium, in Brussels and Liège, respectively. But, not being a Belgian, I have built on their work and tried to extend it in different dimensions. Most notably, I have treated the norms as being something basically social, as in the Prague school model. But, of course, this supplement depends on the earlier distinction between norms as *normalcy*, the things taken for granted in the Lifeworld, and as *normativity*, that which is required in a particular society. My second contribution has consisted in showing that the rupture of norms with which Groupe μ is concerned really involves relations of contiguity and of parts and wholes in the Lifeworld, and that transgressions of norms may also pertain to other dimensions, among which must be counted more or less similarity than expected, more or less levels of signs than expected, as well as the unexpected combinations of channels of circulations, social function, and kind of construction (See Sonesson 1996; 2004).

To me, however, Eco has been exceptionally important, not only because he has formulated many of the essential questions of semiotics, but also because he tends to come up with answers that I find inadequate. So thanks to Eco I am in business. Indeed, I have found faults with Eco, both when he argued that pictures were conventional and made up of features, and when, more recently, he has argued that most of them, and notably television images, are like mirrors, and that mirrors are no signs, but examples of what I would have called direct perception. In my early work on iconicity (Sonesson 1989; 2001), I opposed his idea, formulated during the first period of his iconicity critique, in *La struttura asente* (Eco 1968), that pictures were conventional and made up of features, thus having double articulation, just like language, being constructed from something similar to phonemes and something similar to words, and that, as a consequence, the cinema has a triple articulation. I also argued against Eco's conception in *Theory of semiotics* (Eco 1976 - what I have called his second period in Sonesson 2001), according to which pictures were

conventional but not made up of features, that, on the contrary, they were basically motivated by similarity, but still made up of a kind of features (in accordance with the tenets of the psychology of picture perception). As against Eco's (1997) third conception of iconicity, I think the mirror can be shown to be a sign by the same token as the Peircean weather-cock: more exactly, a given *mirror image* is a sign, just as a particular constellation of the weather-cock in space and time is. But although the mirror is more picture-like than Eco would admit, the television image is not at all like the mirror: it is very much amenable to manipulation, even when, as happens today very rarely, it is based on direct transmission, which is the ideal case considered by Eco (cf. Sonesson 2003).

Finally, I cannot see the point of Eco's claim that special branches of semiotics, like the study of gesture, are sciences, but general semiotics is some kind of philosophy, in fact a part of the philosophy of language. My basic complaint is not that it should be the other way around, because general semiotics must have a more general subject matter than whatever is concerned with language, but that if general semiotics is a philosophical school, it would have no continuity with the study of specific semiotic resources—and this would be a very inconvenient relationship. If, as Eco suggests, general semiotics should define what a sign is, then the special disciplines would only be valid for those who accept this philosophical conception. I am not saying, of course, that science can do without philosophy: but, rather than being a scientific conception, semiotics, like any other science, can be conducted from many different philosophical points of view (Cf. Sonesson 2006b).

But the real cultural heroes of my brand of semiotics are some thinkers who would hardly call themselves semioticians: Husserl, who used the term only once, in an earlier article on the “logic of the sign”, to refer to his own writings, Piaget, who only late in life talked about the semiotic function, Ernst Cassirer, who used the term sparingly, Lev Vygotsky, James Gibson, Aron Gurwitsch, and Karl Bühler, who never used the term, and so on. I must insist immediately that I admire Husserl, and his one true follower as well as best critique (notably involving the function of the ego), Gurwitsch, not as builders of a philosophical system, but as scholars dedicated to the painstaking, ever repeated scrutiny of meaningful phenomena. Before the word was invented, and at least before I heard the term, I have been “naturalizing” phenomenology. It is really interesting to compare the detailed research man-

uscripts found in Husserl's *Nachlass*, where he tries, over and over again, to arrive at an adequate analysis of some apparently simple, mundane phenomenon (in the everyday, as well as the technical, sense), with Peirce's *Collected Papers*, which never stops rehearsing the abstract definition of semiosis. I think Husserl's advantage consists in staying closer to the facts. The facts of consciousness, of course. As for Gibson, he did not only initiate the psychology of picture perception, but his theory of perception is really an early instance of naturalizing phenomenology. Curiously, he often uses the same examples as Husserl. Although Gibson never refers to Husserl in his published works, it has been said by at least one of his students that he often referred to him in his classes. If Gibson did not read Husserl, they were certainly kindred spirits. Or perhaps the concordance of their work shows that phenomenology is not as subjective (in the sense of common sense) after all.

Cassirer and Bühler are interesting for their ability to combine general, "philosophical" reflection with empirical information. The same observation applies, in practice, to the work of Gurwitsch, although he officially insists very much on the difference between phenomenological psychology (which is a way of describing the mind) and phenomenological philosophy (which is about the world, how it can appear to us, but since the world only appears through the mind, the structures found in both cases are identical). As I said before, this is how I see the spirit of semiotics: combining what is traditionally known as philosophical reflection with empirical work. For the same reason, I am not very happy with Eco's suggestion that general semiotics is a kind of philosophy. Rather, philosophy that is worthwhile is a kind of semiotics.

I very much admire the work of both Piaget and Vygotsky, although they are often presented as (and, to some extent, really are) diametrically opposed. As is well known, they could not agree which came first, the chicken or the egg—or, as we also say, the individual or society. Basically, however, I think there was some kind of misunderstanding between them. They did not mean the same thing by the term "society". The society from which the Vygotskian individual starts out is society in terms of the common cultural values, the norms that are taken for granted by all members of the crowd. This is a society which is imposed on us—and, which, in Simmel's phrase, which Cassirer (1942) takes over to turn it against him, is not only "a tragedy of culture", not only structural violence acted out on the individual, but a common ground to stand on, in order to grow and learn. The Piagetean society is

were the individual ends up after a long journey: it is society in the sense of interaction, of dialogue, modelled, now doubt, less on the marketplace, as in Mikhail Bakhtin, or on the political sphere, as in Jürgen Habermas, but rather on scientific discussion, closer, in the respect, to the scientific community according to Peirce. It has long been said that the stages of Piaget's theory are stages in the emergence of the little scientist. As a corollary, however, the Piagetean society is the scientist's discussion club (Cf. Sonesson 2003).

In terms of topics, I think the plurality, and difference, of meaning or semiotic resources is the most important one contributed by semiotics (though this insight is not shared by all who call themselves semioticians). This can be understood in several ways: there are many kinds of semiotic resources, and the choice of one over the others changes the message that they convey; and there are other kinds of meaning than signs. I have already discussed signs as opposed to other meanings above. Let me add a few words about the diversity of semiotic resources.

We know the idea that language determines thinking from Wilhelm von Humboldt and, with a different emphasis, from Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Piaget, on the other hand, thought that (the stages of) thinking determine(s) language. His disciple Hans Furth even believed he had shown that since mute children went through the same stages of development as other children, language could not be important. But he forgot that even mute children's thinking might be mediated by other semiotic resources. Vygotsky seems to open up for a wider interplay of thinking and different kinds of semiosis, even though, in practice, he hardly considers other examples than language. There is nothing wrong with finding semiotic universals, but I think too little has been done trying to define the difference between semiotic resources. Goodman, with his "ways of world-making", has been more explicit about the different ways of representing (thinking about) the world. But, in the end, Goodman's stipulation of a nominalist metaphysics renders impossible any descriptive approach. The deepest thinker in this domain, in spite of all his shortcomings, remains Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Udo Bayer and David Wellbury did a great job trying to rework Lessing's observations into a more modern semiotic terminology, that of Peirce and of Hjelmslev, respectively. I have myself tried to go on from there, using observations from cognitive psychology on the "dual coding" of memory, to criticise some of their contentions (cf. Sonesson

2007). However embryonary the state of this work, it is certainly much more worthwhile than the arbitrary declarations of Kress & van Leeuwen about the difference between language and pictures. They have done a great harm to semiotics, because their work, instead of more serious contributions to pictorial semiotics, has proved acceptable to linguists.

There is of course any number of open problems remaining within semiotics—as there always will. The most important task at present may well be to integrate the contributions of semiotics and cognitive science. Semiotics, it will be remembered, like most sciences in the course of time, has separated out from the magma of philosophy. The case of cognitive science is very different. It represents the amalgamation of fully-fledged sciences like biology, neurology, computer science, philosophy, linguistics and cognitive psychology. This latter-day marriage of the arts, however, received its benediction from the computer. The possibility of simulating theories on the computer may have been useful at times. But the most important thing cognitive science accomplished was the rapprochement of theory and empirical facts. Semiotics should have done that long before. A few semioticians, like Martin Krampen, René Lindérens, Paul Bouissac, and myself have long argued for the use of psychological, biological and other kinds of data in semiotics. Since cognitive science has already realised this, it is rather the integration with cognitive science that must now take place. I do think we have something to contribute. The notion of representation in cognitive science, like the notion of sign in semiotics, is at present too general and vague to accomplish any theoretical work. It does not help denying the existence of representations, as George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and their followers do. We need to understand the *different* ways of representing the world. And before we can do that we need to define “representation” (and/or “sign”).

Another meeting with biology has taken place within semiotics proper. Biology-minded thinkers have opposed their own biosemiotics to what they call anthroposemiotics, which turns out to be a vast waste-basket containing all other kinds of semiotics. In the strict sense, however, anthroposemiotics must be a part of biosemiotics, because the way human beings convey signification cannot be completely independent of their being part of the animate world. So, again, we need to take a comparative approach: in what way are human beings like other animals, and how are they different? In order to answer these questions, and to help integrate

anthroposemiotics within biosemiotics, the latter first needs to be informed by anthroposemiotics, or rather, by classical approaches to semiosis. Biosemiotics needs to limit its semiotic imperialism. All life is not semiotic—only life which is aware of being life. Meaning is an intentional concept.

One issue which is important and which has some prospects of being elucidated in the near future is that of the evolution and development of semiotic resources, how the capacity for using gesture, pictures, and of course language grows in time, in the history of the individual and the species—and perhaps even in historical time. Adding this diachronic dimension helps justifying the classificatory approach that has always been a feature of semiotic theory. It also affords semiotics the possibility of saying something that no other academic discipline has even been able to say: to show us how, in a number of stages through evolution and development, life has become consciousness of life. Life signified.