

# The Semiotic Sphere

***TOPICS IN CONTEMPORARY SEMIOTICS***

Series Editors: Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok  
*Indiana University*

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Edited by

**Thomas A. Sebeok**

and

**Jean Umiker-Sebeok**

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Bloomington, Indiana

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# Preface

Although semiotics has, in one guise or another, flourished uninterruptedly since pre-Socratic times in the West, and important semiotic themes have emerged and developed independently in both the Brahmanic and Buddhistic traditions, semiotics as an organized undertaking began to loom only in the 1960s. Workshops materialized, with a perhaps surprising spontaneity, over much of Europe—Eastern and Western—and in North America. Thereafter, others quickly surfaced almost everywhere over the literate globe. Different places strategically allied themselves with different legacies, but all had a common thrust: to aim at a general theory of signs, by way of a description of different sign systems, their comparative analysis, and their classification. More or less permanent confederations were forged with the most diverse academic disciplines, and amazingly varied frameworks were devised—suited to the needs of the times and the sites—to carry the work of consolidation forward. Bit by bit, mutually supportive international networks were put together.

Today, it can truly be asserted that semiotics has become a global enterprise. This, of course, is far from saying that the map is uniform or even that world-wide homogeneity is in the least desirable. While our conjoint ultimate goal remains steadily in focus, the multiplicity of avenues available for its realization is inherent in the adventure of the search itself. The contents of this book will bear witness to this uniformity of ends coupled with the variety of means currently being used to achieve them. At the present, still formative, stage of semiotics, this seems to the editors to be a good thing; it was, in fact, the primary purpose of this compilation to reflect the state of our art and science around the world. We scrupulously avoided imposing on the contributors either our own conception of semiotics or our terminological preferences.

Every collection, when reviewed, is judged “uneven,” and this charge will be found true here. When stones are dropped into a pond, the waves emanating from their point of contact encounter obstacles which might deflect them from propagating evenly, as they might in an ideal space free of natural and man-made obstructions. The 27 chapters of this volume mirror the uneven evolution of semiotics as a scholarly discipline and as a doctrine of signs. This is due both to the situation in a particular country and to the predilections of the author(s) asked to delineate it. Although all authors were requested to discuss the history of semiotics in the political entities



assigned them as well as the institutional structures within which semioticians there are called upon to operate, some contributors have seen fit to dwell at much greater length than others on the political and ideological battles, both inside and outside academia, accompanying the introduction and spread of semiotics in their area. Both the similarities and differences between such accountings provide a fascinating—if sporadic—glimpse of the often turbulent social setting of science in the process of paradigmatic change. Across the chapters yet another impressionistic picture begins to emerge—namely, that of the spread of competing doctrines within semiotics itself, influenced by the usual human problems of language barriers, conflicting cultural traditions, and the like.

Certain countries, where we know that semiotics has made powerful inroads, are omitted, as, for instance, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Israel. Without wishing to specify the reasons for this seeming neglect, we want to assure our readers that such omissions are due to miscellaneous but compelling causes beyond our control. We also regret the underrepresentation of Third World nations, which may be attributed variously—depending on the country in question—to factors such as lack of sufficient semiotic activity to warrant a chapter, insufficient professional organization or cooperation to enable an author to produce an adequate survey, or unfavorable political or economic conditions. We are keenly aware of the recent, dramatic emergence of semiotics in Africa, as well as of the fact that the 1985 International Winter Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies met in Mysore, India, just recently.

We hope to fill these and other gaps in future editions, undoubtedly with more flexible format and production techniques to keep pace with the anticipated rapid progress in semiotics in the coming years, as it continues to spread and mature much as it has over the past quarter of a century. Although the present volume was meant to serve as a straightforward documentation of semiotic activities in representative countries, it will also, we trust—by providing scholars with the data necessary to compare and contrast local and global trends in research—help to bring about a greater degree of understanding and collaboration among the present and emerging semioticians of our world.

*Bloomington, Indiana*

THOMAS A. SEBEOK  
JEAN UMIKER-SEBEOK

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