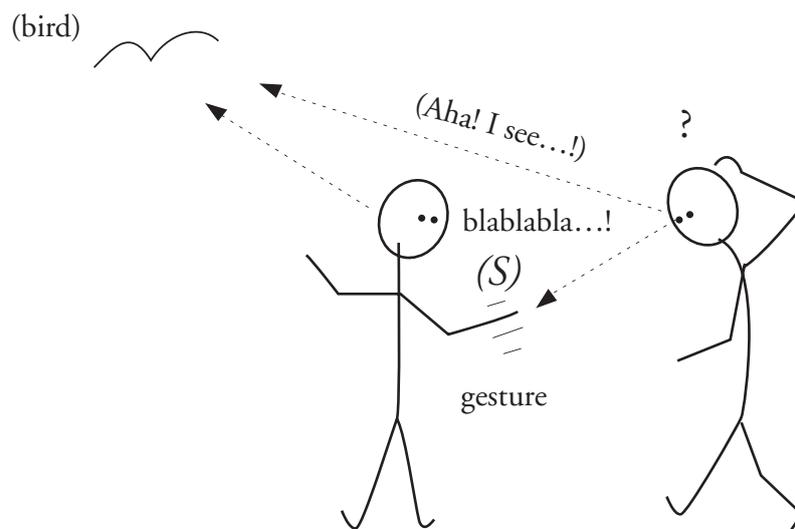


What is Semiotics?

The briefest overview ever seen

Semiotics is the study of *signs*, their forms of expression and contents. So what is a sign? Maybe the best definition is the one that just states that signs in the non-metaphorical sense are phenomena produced intentionally by humans and taken by humans to show the intention of the producer, and its content. Fig. 1:



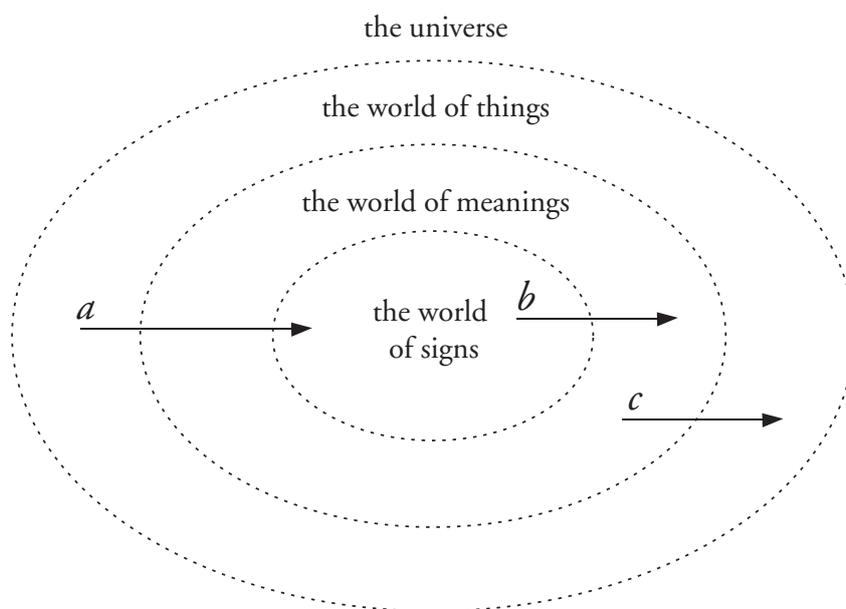
S is a complex, linguistic and gestural sign. The speaker-signer shows to the listener-observer by performing it, namely by his grammatically organized words and his accompanying movements of fingers, hand, arm, trunc, and face (especially his eye movements), that he wants to direct his addressee's attention to an item present to his mind. This item – here apparently including a bird – is then the content of his sign; the *content* of the sign is the part of what is present to the speaker-signer's mind that he wants the listener-observer's mind to also attend to. That part is expressed by S, which is therefore considered to be its *expression*.

If S only uses pictures, that is, photographs, drawings, and the like, or gestures that 'draw' the contours of things in the air, in order to refer to things, events and their circumstances, then these pictorial references to the content make S only consist of *icons*, or *iconical* subsigns. If S also uses imitations of facial expressions of affective and cognitive states of mind, or imitations of yawning, snoring, coughing, etc. it includes *indexical* subsigns. Such signs, *indices*, are intentional versions of spontaneous bodily reactions that are not signs (but that are often called 'signs' metaphorically: "fever is a sign of illness").

Furthermore, S can include gestures of politeness, paramusical sounds like claps, clicks, small jingle-like songs, whistling, etc. to indicate modes of addressing the other; such subsigns are metaphorically called coded, and they are probably at the origin of the stable

conventional *symbols* used in calculus and writing (numbers, letters) and the stable natural expressive units in spoken language (phonemes, 'signemes' in sign language). So they can all reasonably be considered *symbolic*.

In the same sense, objects can be signs or just objects. Places in space, slots in time, the presence or absence of people, and configurations of situations or coincidences of events, can all be signs (intentionally arranged) or just states of affairs (casually and causally occurring). Writers of human history are semioticians of (mainly) collective signs that occur through specified time and space. The human world is massively semiotic, there are signs almost everywhere anytime, and it may be tempting to therefore let semiotics be the science or study of everything human – but let us introduce a *caveat*: between the *world of signs* and the *world of things* (also called Nature) surrounding the former, there is a *world of meaning* that signs have sedimented and sign users can presuppose, refer to, retrieve arguments from, find authority in, but equally be stopped or inhibited by when trying to think out or work out new concepts, and that people therefore have felt to be a 'second Nature', namely the *Cultural* realm of reality. Fig. 2:



The arrows a, b, and c in this diagram indicate different very important processes at work simultaneously in the real 'world' we live in:

The *a* arrow. – In the natural world, human individuals spontaneously and individually have intentions and cognitive experiences of representing, wondering, imagining, believing, remembering, fearing and hoping, in short: thinking and feeling, and they (we) continuously generate sign expressions of these contents, by which they (we) establish mental contact with other individuals equipped with similar minds (brains and bodies). So communication and signification spontaneously pop up from Nature.

The *b* arrow. – The use of signs in interhuman contact sediments in the human

habitat and slowly builds up an 'artefactual' Umwelt or circumstantial sphere, a 'semiosphere' of habitual routines or conventional communicative behaviors that individuals share without knowing it and without being able to directly experience its presence. This sedimented mass of echoes of other echoes of signs constitutes a layer of objectified (desubjectified) 'meanings', distributed all over the surface of communication and divided into more or less distinguishable lumps and clods – the single 'cultures'. According to cultural semiotics, this mass of 'unconscious' or, rather, unintendedly and passively accumulated mass of 'used meanings', *Meaning* as such, that humans 'take for granted', then rely on, then consult, compare new phenomena to, is often stably structured and form time-resistant and locally describable blocs of interrelated submeanings, that characterize the 'mentality' or 'imaginary' or 'style' of given *cultures*, and thus make cultural analysis possible. It can be assumed that Culture, or historically reified Meaning, as a sort of underlying epistemic bloc, is beamed by the constant phenomenological principles of elementary intelligibility, for example in terms of universal life-world-related semantic domains, dynamic schemas for situational understanding, structures of modality and intersubjective modes of conflict and cooperation.

The *c* arrow. – Culture in this sense covers almost the entire surface of Nature in the modern world. But Culture nevertheless sinks slowly back into the physical world, not only when single cultures and languages disappear, but constantly as traces are left in our habitats, bodies, and offspring. The cultural ruins of ideas, norms, ritual meanings, and in general *ways* of understanding the world, for example (maybe prototypically) in the lexical part of natural languages, can then be recycled by new emergent intentional sign-making. These recycling practices are proudly called Traditions; in reality, they neither trade nor transmit much if anything, that is: anything else than the mere impression or feeling of intention left in the decorative but inert ruins as attractive traces, almost scents, ghostly shadows, of *human presence* as such.

Arrow *c* leads back to arrow *a*, so that a constant flow of social inscription (*c*) and individual appropriation (*a*) of meaning permeates Nature, Culture, and ourselves.

To refer to a general study of Signs, Meaning, and the human and physical Nature in which signs and meanings thus first emerge then stepwise persist, and eventually merge, may be to propose a slightly better definition of Semiotics than the one presented in the first sentence of this text.

(Aarhus, 17.04.2004)