Foreword

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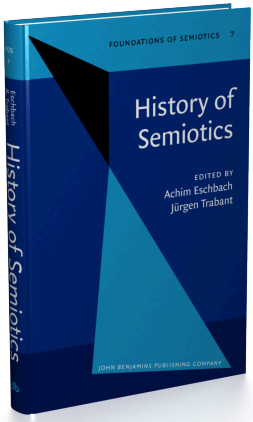

Pages ix–xvi of
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Foreword

By its very title, a *History of Semiotics* would lead the reader to expect a chronological treatment of its subject-matter; it is, after all, the temporal sequence of events and ideas which determines the course of history. In spite of this, however, we had originally planned to arrange the contributions to the volume systematically under broad thematic headings, not realising that they would prove so incompatibly varied as to make such an arrangement impossible. In other words, the chronological order finally adopted for most of the contributions, although the usual approach expected of a history, represents in our case more an acceptable solution to a problem than a foregone decision.

Our difficulty in finding a suitable overall framework arose from the nature of the material itself. With the aim of putting together a study of the theoretical and methodological problems encountered by historians of semiotics, we had asked our colleagues in the field for contributions, either on historiographical problems generally or on specific cases. The response was such a heterogeneous collection of papers on such a variety of themes that we abandoned our efforts at imposing systematic order and concentrated instead on providing a sympathetic forum for discussion along broadly historical lines.

As we consider the general theoretical and methodological problems treated in most of the papers to be of seminal importance for semiotic historiography on the whole, these introductory remarks will be devoted mainly to this portion of the collection. Although our brief discussion on the contributors' views on these problems may also be understood as a guide to the reader, he is, of course, still free to approach the book as it is presented in the list of contents, i.e. as a kind of history of semiotics. In doing so, however, he must remember that the book does not claim to be a history in the conventional sense; even if the main periods and figures in the development of semiotic thought are given due prominence, a collection such as this cannot claim to be an exhaustive, homogeneous history of semiotics, but reflects rather the often contradictory views and theories of its various contributors. Nevertheless, we hope the reader will find stimulation and food for thought in the critical approach to even the least questioned facts of semiotic history and the emphasis given to hitherto neglected problems and figures.

In accordance with the three categories of contributions received the collection is divided into three sections. Two general papers on the problems involved in compiling a history of semiotics make up the first section, entitled Historiography of Semiotics. Fourteen papers on the History of Semiotics form the second section,

the first part of which concerns Ancient and Medieval Semiotics and the second the Rise of Modern Semiotics; we consider the latter to have emanated from the *rupture epistêmologique*, the emancipation of philosophy from theology as a result of the schism that occurred within the philosophical theories of the Enlightenment. The third and final section of the volume covers two papers proffering a semiotic interpretation of western philosophy as such under the title Semiotic History of Philosophy.

Schmitter and Eschbach, the authors of the two contributions which form the first section, discuss some of the general problems implicit in the historiography of semiotics. They point out that historiography in itself poses a problem: the hermeneutic and hence relativistic conception of historiography contrasts with the notion of an immutably 'true' (or at least widely accepted) corpus of historical fact. Taking up this paradox in his provocatively titled paper, A Plea against the History of Semiotics, Schmitter does not dispute the feasibility of a historical approach to semiotics but rather the possible existence of only a single, 'true' history of the discipline. He adopts the relative stance by insisting on the dependence of historiography upon the individual historian's preconceived ideas in regard to its three components: the reconstruction, selection and combination of the facts. With the help of pertinent examples from the history of semiotics he demonstrates how the differing qualifications and presuppositions of the relevant historians can lead to divergences in all three components of historiography. Although this leads to conflicting histories of semiotics, Schmitter claims that relativism is not the result since every historian is bound to observe the basic rules of his trade – a) philologically correct interpretation of written sources, b) adherence to a consistent theoretical basis, and c) follow-up of step-by-step, genetic developments and theories (theory dynamics).

Eschbach's paper on a comprehensive range of problems in semiotic historiography complements Schmitter's outline discussion by concentrating chiefly on the difficulty of combining the historical facts. But Eschbach, unlike Schmitter, argues in favour of a consensus of approach among historians of semiotics.

Although it was finally decided to arrange the articles in the second section in chronological order, this was not done with the intention of piecing together a history of semiotics. Nevertheless, the reader of this section on individual semiotic theorists, periods and phenomena will be in a position to follow something approaching a coherent sequence of semiotic developments down through the centuries, exemplified in references to such classic writers and topics as Hippocrates on Greek medicine, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Stoic philosophy, St. Augustine, scholastic thought, Port-Royal, Peirce, Frege and Saussure. At the same time he

will encounter several figures not usually associated with semiotics, like Poinsot, Diderot, the Idéologues – especially Degérando, Hegel, Humboldt and Steinthal. Besides covering large areas of traditional semiotic history, therefore, the essays in this section also contain proposals suggesting how this history might be revised and augmented.

While some of the papers in this second section take up the theoretical and methodological problems already alluded to by Schmitter and Eschbach, others draw attention to interesting historiographical questions beyond the scope of the first general section. Ebbesen's paper, an Odyssey of Semantics from the Stoa to Buridan, is a good illustration of what Schmitter calls the 'theory-dynamic' combination of historical facts. Ebbesen presents the development of early modern semantics as a circular course from the semantic theories of the Stoics, Porphyry and Aristotle (whom he comments upon extensively) via supposition, modism, Bacon and Occam to Buridan who returns dialectically to Porphyry's position. In this way, Ebbesen shows that the history of semantics can be considered as an itinerary through time towards an ever higher exegetical level.

The papers of Scharf, Stetter and Koerner on Humboldt, Peirce and Saussure respectively can all serve to demonstrate not merely how divergent interpretations of written sources may result from the fundamentally different semiotic theories of the historians concerned, but especially how misinterpretations of such texts should be refuted with well-founded philological arguments. In his paper on the 'process of language' (Verfahren der Sprache), Scharf attempts an objectively historical reconstruction of Humboldt's conception of language against the background of Chomsky's totally aberrant interpretation and unhistorical misuse of Humboldt for ends of his own.

The next contributor, Stetter, points out the position and function of Peirce's semiotic schemata within a theory of knowledge, thereby furnishing the reader with arguments to counter those who consider Peirce as the inventor of disjunct sign classes or as the father of a special discipline called 'semiotics outside philosophy'. (Here it must be added that Peirce, not unlike Humboldt, dislodged the traditional representational sign conception by demonstrating the identity of thought and semiosis.) Stetter makes it clear that Peirce's 'sign classes' have to be understood as different aspects of semiosis resulting from his analysis of the Kantian problem of subject-object relation.

Koerner is similarly concerned with the refutation of influential *idées reçues*, this time on Saussure having been inspired by sociological theories. He stresses the role of linguistics (especially the influence of Whitney) in the formation of the concept of semiology and the central position of language in Saussure's sign theory.

Associated with the 'selection of the facts' stage in historiography is the problem of 'neglected figures' in the history of semiotics dealt with (or referred to) by Deely, Gutterer, Dascal, Scharf and Trabant.

With regard to the future compilation of a history of semiotics, Deely develops the idea that it would involve the rewriting of the entire history of ideas and philosophy to date (as is practically envisaged by Parret and Böhler, cf. infra). Deely believes it is necessary to arrive at an objective assessment of our ancestors' achievements before we can recognize the direction a future history of semiotics must take.

John Poinsot's sign theory clearly illustrates that the disregard for sign-theoretical aspects in traditional historical interpretations sometimes stems directly from the very importance of these aspects for future semiotic developments. We cannot, of course, follow Poinsot in relegating Hegel to the 'neglected figures' as far as the history of philosophy is concerned. But also in the history of semiotics reconstructions of a Hegelian sign theory on the basis of his *aesthetics* have indeed been attempted. Nevertheless, Gutterer shows that Hegel's reflections on language are lacking in anything approaching a sign theory, a fact which bears grave consequences.

After a long period of neglect, the Idéologues have again risen to prominence in the general history of philosophy in recent years. Dascal focuses on Dégerando, and sketches the main lines of the latter's semiotic work which bear on our context.

Certainly the figure most deplorably neglected in semiotic history is Humboldt and the tradition of language philosophy he founded. Scharf's paper on this subject and that of Trabant on Steinthal's interpretation of Humboldtian philosophy attempt to draw the attention of the semiotic world to this milestone in the history of thought. They see this event as tantamount to the discovery of the historicity, processuality and dialogicity of language and thought within the context of – and as a critique of – Kantian transcendental subjectivism. (Here it may be remarked that Peirce's semiotics cannot be separated from this context either, as Stetter shows.) Humboldtian thought represents a challenge to universalistic and ahistorical representational and instrumentalistic conceptions of sign by its critique of the Aristotelian tradition of semiotics which has dominated in linguistic and semiotic circles ever since.

Kaczmarek and Holenstein contribute towards a *history of terms* considered as integral parts of the historical subject. They examine the key terms of 'signification' and 'Bedeutung' respectively, thus tackling one of the most thankless but none the less important chapters in the history of thought, namely, the definition of the

exact significance of the terminology employed. The importance of precision in this resepct can be appreciated by all who have come up against the absurd misinterpretations which have resulted from terminological misunderstandings, such as the use of the same signifiant for very different notions.

In opposition to several other contributors, Kaczmarek holds that a history of semiotics cannot be compiled before semiotics is recognized as an independent scientific discipline. However, he does not imply that the would-be semiotic historian must remain inactive until this happens; in his contribution on the 'significatio' in the light of Occam's sign and language theory, Kaczmarek gives an example to illustrate his claim that at present we should be paying more attention to antiquarian study.

Holenstein's research on the meaning of *Bedeutung* in Frege provided him with philological arguments to show that Frege's conception of Bedeutung is by no means as extraordinary as it seems or as has been repeatedly maintained in the literature. Besides discussing this point, Holenstein gives a couple of convincing quotations which underline his argument that Frege, in his use of certain concepts, could be referring to a large number of historical, traditional and contemporary parallels.

Especially complex methodological problems in the historiography of semiotics receive prominent treatment in the contributions of Baer, Droixhe, Spade and Marin. In his paper on symptomatology in ancient Greece (in fact a chapter taken from a comprehensive history of symptomatology from Hippocrates to Freud), Baer confronts semiotic historians with the question how to deal with special cases, such as medical symptoms, which do not fall within the traditional range of semiotic phenomena. This poses serious problems not only for an uncontroversial 'selection of the facts' but also, once this selection has been made, for the actual narration of semiotic history.

Droixhe also concentrates on the problem how to deal with related disciplines where topics relevant to a general history of signs are rooted. Here the issue at stake is aesthetics, more particularly Diderot's handling of the famous Laokoon problem of simultaneity versus successivity in static representation. This is not merely an aesthetic question, but one which also concerns the general theory of signs. The plundering of such disciplines as aesthetics or linguistics for semiotic aims is nothing new, and seems justifiable in view of the semiotic nature of aesthetic and linguistic phenomena. This almost imperialistic attitude of semiotic theorists and historians to these disciplines should not suppress the fact that they have a dynamic force and a history of their own which must be utilised to complement semiotic history.

In his discussion of Swyneshed's definitions of truth and falsehood, Spade highlights a general methodological problem: "To what extent must a historian give an author the benefit of the doubt? It is clearly wrong to dismiss or reject a view simply because one does not yet see how it goes. Yet at some point even the most modest historian ought to begin to suspect that the difficulties with a particularly recalcitrant theory lie not in his own failure to understand but rather in the theory itself. Where does one cross that line?" Thus, Spade's reconstruction of Swyneshed's theory of insolubilia – one of the problems encountered in Ebbesen's journey through ancient and medieval semantics – brings him to the crucial *problem of quality* in the history of ideas. We usually take it for granted that writers in the past were good writers. As Nietzsche would have put it – we hop from top to top of the most outstanding achievements in the study of semiotics without looking down into the valleys between. Literary historians are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that highbrow literature is just the tip of the iceberg of literary production and that it is equally necessary to study popular and trivial literature. It is time we also confronted the problem how to treat the trivial productions of our philosophic heritage.

His study of the logic of Port-Royal enables Marin to demonstrate that the Catholic dogma of the Eucharist, that is, the orthodox interpretation of *hoc est corpus meum,* is a model of semiotic theory. (Cf. Holenstein's reference to Zwingli's use of 'bedeuten' in this pivotal point of dogma in the Reformation.) By stressing the dependence of semiotics on theological dogma and pointing out the identity of semiotic and theological tenets, Marin attempts to reassess the ancillary role played by sign theory before its emancipation from theology and the rise of modern thought. In doing so he emphasizes that the *problem of philosophical autonomy and heteronomy* has not yet received due prominence in semiotic historiography. Modern sign theorists take the autonomy of philosophical thought so much for granted that they tend to overlook the way semiotics was completely subordinated as an instrument of theology from St. Augustine to Port-Royal.

(It was Marin's demonstration of the theological derivation of Port-Royal's theory of knowledge which prompted us to include the latter's semiotics under the heading Medieval Semiotics. The thought of Poinsot and Port-Royal can be called medieval in the sense of heteronomous, even though they are actually important figures in the period of transition from an ancillary to an autonomous theory of knowledge.)

This blindness towards the instrumentalisation of semiotics seems to be linked with a serious omission in semiotic history in general and in the present volume in

particular – the *social history of semiotics.* We all seem to imagine the history of ideas as something completely independent of human society and institutions. The instrumentalisation of semiotics by theology and its subordinate position in hierarchical Church institutions appear to have caused the emergence of the secular tradition of what Böhler calls 'solipsistic' semiotics. By this is meant the Augustinian idea of the solitary individual's lone dialogue with God more or less to the exclusion of the other members of the community, which was later taken up by Lutheran protestantism as its model of communication. This tendency towards solipsism, but also the ecclesiastical hierarchy itself (which made the communication even more artificially one-sided by interposing the priest as mediator in this private dialogue with God) may have been the obstacles hindering the development of dialogue as a thought process in European philosophy. It may be no accident that three socio-historical contexts which particularly favoured the actively communicative approach, viz. German idealism and the ideal of a republic of scholars, American protestantism and democracy, and the English university colleges (linked respectively with the names of Humboldt, Peirce and Wittgenstein), acted as the breeding-grounds of model processes of thought by dialogue.

A different line of thought is pursued in the third and last section, where Böhler and Parret open up new perspectives for the history of philosophy as a whole. For Böhler, the figures of St. Augustine and Wittgenstein represent two different assessments of the function of language, namely the 'solipsistic-cognitive' theory which dominated European thought for nearly 2,000 years, and the 'pragmatic' or 'communicative' theory associated with Humboldt and Peirce as well as with Wittgenstein. He thus sees the mainstream of European thought as a history of the repression of the pragmatic foundation (through history and dialogue) of human knowledge.

In the concluding article, Parret gives his grounds for considering semiotics as the third fundamental paradigm in the history of western philosophy after ontology and epistemology. For him, semiotics is the ultimate *prima philosophia,* in fact he believes we have already entered the semiotic era of the history of thought.

We dare not picture the full consequences of this position for our projected history of semiotics. Not only would the differences between the Saussurean and the Peircean positions (the two mainstreams of current semiotic thought) have to be reconsidered as purely secondary in nature, but the whole history of philosophy would have to be rewritten in the light of its newly perceived, ultimate – semiotic – development.

Our thanks are due to the German Society of Semiotics, at whose third Semiotic Colloquium in Hamburg in October, 1981 the opportunity was given to discuss the contributions (or previous versions of them) of Schmitter, Ebbesen, Droixhe, Kaczmarek, Stetter and Scharf.

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