

Hongbing Yu

Semiosis as the Criterial Attribute of Life

Introduction to the Plenary Speeches Delivered at the 11th
World Congress of the IASS/AIS

Hongbing Yu: Nanjing Normal University, E-mail: njnubrandon@126.com

In the past, semiotics, as an interdisciplinary inquiry, rightfully focused on revealing the secrets and mechanisms of semiosis. At present, in the second decade of the 21st century, we are increasingly tempted by sophisticated modern-day science and technology to ask ourselves an old question: who are we? Interestingly, this question invariably leads to another relevant one: what is life? Is it merely a way of meaning-seeking existence, or a massive collection of random cells grouped and organized the way they have been for millions of years as a result of incessant evolution? Here, from a semiotic perspective, we have something different to offer. As the late master semiotician Thomas Sebeok posited, semiosis can be considered to be the criterial attribute of life. Therefore, sign activities are not only the outcome of organisms but also the definer of life. In a phrase, the semiotic process coincides with the life process.

It is in this light that Issue 10-3 of the new Chinese Semiotic Studies continues to bring our readers three more plenary speeches delivered at the 11th World Congress of the IASS/AIS, namely José Enrique Finol's "On the Corposphere", John Deely's "Physiosemiosis as an Influence of Signs: How Would Semiosis Precede Life?" and Anne Hénault's "Semiotic Theory and Experiences of Life: The Vital Abstraction". The reason why these three plenary speeches are grouped together is a very simple but instructive one: each of them has presented us with a unique standpoint for observing the various manifestations of semiosis in the realm of life.

We firmly believe that semiotics will eventually reveal the true nature of the way human beings and the other forms of life on earth create, interpret and constantly reshape their species-specific Umwelts. It is with this belief that we fully devote ourselves to the cause of global semiotics.