

Hongbing Yu*

A Remedy for the *Pars Pro Toto* Fallacy in Chinese Semiotics

Abstract: This article reviews one of John Deely's insightful works on semiotics, *Basics of Semiotics*, and its profound significance for present-day Chinese semiotics. Considering critical responses from the readership of all previous editions of *Basics*, this article argues that Deely's *Basics* has probably stood as the only successful book that traces the subject matter of semiotics not only in human cultures, but also in animal and plant kingdoms to the full extent of biosemiosis, and even to the state before the existence of life. This anti-anthropocentric treatise is of particular import to much-vaunted contemporary Chinese semiotics, which is rife with what is known as the *pars pro toto* fallacy, something that could have been avoided had Yuen-Ren Chao's words of about 50 years ago been duly heeded, something for which Deely's *Basics* may well serve as a fine remedy.

Keywords: Deely; Basics of Semiotics; Chinese semiotics; Sebeok; semiotics; Yuen-Ren Chao

***Corresponding author, Hongbing Yu:** Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China, E-mail: njnubrandon@126.com

Basics of Semiotics (henceforth referred to as *Basics*) was written by John Deely in Brazil in late 1989/early 1990, and originally published simultaneously in English and Portuguese, with subsequent expanded editions rendered from English into Japanese, Spanish, Ukrainian, Italian, Estonian, Chinese, and Russian. By courtesy of Deely, who has sent the author of the present review the inventory of editions of *Basics*, a full list of its publication history is shown chronologically below for the purposes of complete documentation and reference:

1st edition:

Article note: Deely, John N.: *Basics of Semiotics*. 6th Edition. Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2012, pp. 351, Paperback 59 RMB, ISBN: 978-7-300-16276-8.

1990. *Basics of Semiotics*. 1st edition; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
1990. *Semiótica Basica*, trans. Julio Pinto and Julio Jeha. São Paulo: Atica Editora.
1993. *Bazele Semioticii*, trans. Mariana Neș. Bucarest: ALL s.r.l.
1994. Japanese edition. Tokyo: Hosei University Press.
- 2nd edition, expanded:
1996. *Los Fundamentos de la Semiotica*, trans. José Luis Caivano and Mauricio Beuchot. Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana.
2000. Ukrainian edition, trans. Anatolij Karas (Lviv University).
- 3rd edition, further expanded:
2004. *Basi della semiotica*, trans. Massimo Leone, with an Introduction by Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio. Bari: Laterza.
- 4th edition, expanded again, bilingual Estonian and English:
2005. *Basics of Semiotics*, trans. Kati Lindström. (Tartu Semiotics Library 4) Tartu: Tartu University Press).
- 5th edition, again expanded, English only:
2009. *Basics of Semiotics*. (Tartu Semiotics Library 4.2) Tartu: Tartu University Press.
- 6th edition, yet again expanded, Chinese only:
2012. 符号学基础, trans. Zujian Zhang. Beijing: Renmin University Press.
- 7th edition, yet further expanded, Russian only:
- In press. trans. Sergei Proskurin. Novosibirsk, Russia.
- 8th edition, again expanded, English only:
- In press. *Basics of Semiotics*. Nanjing: Nanjing Normal University Press.

The most recent edition of this masterwork available, to wit, the sixth edition published in Chinese, has expanded the already rich content of the fifth edition. The list of its republication history has already said enough about the success of this pivotal work on semiotics. When it was first published in 1990, Thomas Sebeok viewed *Basics* as the only successful modern English introduction to semiotics, a clear, creative, and provocative synthesis of major trends, past and present. For more or less similar reasons, a survey conducted by the Department of Semiotics at University of Tartu comments on Deely's *Basics* as follows:

The overall impression is that his historical account ends in the future, not in the present. John Deely is a prophet of a time to come and few, if anyone, have with such vigour and

faith defended the thesis that semiotics matters not only to semioticians, but to science and thinking as such. (Kull et al., 2015: 296–297)

The reason why we need to study Deely's primer on semiotics, among many other introductory books bearing similar titles, could not be more clearly explained than by the Sebeok review and the comment above. Moreover, the import of this invaluable work that has been widely read and cited in semiotic inquiries and even philosophical studies from the 1990s onwards is actually self-evident in that it has kept evolving and synthesizing major trends in contemporary semiotics, philosophy, ethics, and science.

Nevertheless, an even more critical fact, also one of the most significant features of *Basics*, that needs to be taken into account and makes this book a must-read for all interested in the study of signs today is that although the content of the book has undergone more than 20 years of massive extension and in-depth revision by means of expanded editions across more than eight different languages, its resolute standpoint in respect of what Sebeok criticized as the "pars pro toto fallacy" has remained unshaken since the first edition. Deely rightfully interprets and warns against "pars pro toto" as "the fallacy concretely of taking the limited action of signs within the realm of human language and culture to constitute the whole of the action of signs" (2012 Preface to the Chinese edition: 3).

For this particular reason, Deely's *Basics* may well serve as a fine remedy for the same *pars pro toto* fallacy that is rife in the much-vaunted achievement of contemporary Chinese semiotics as a whole, given the historical traces left by the development of Chinese semiotics as an entirety over the past decades since Yuen Ren Chao (1926) and its many semiology-tinged features that have been brought into existence by the heavy influence from its deep entanglement with the development of modern linguistic studies in China. Interestingly enough, Deely must have foreseen this, as he thus writes in the Preface to the latest Chinese edition,

[M]any have been the attempts to dodge the implications of this fallacy as Sebeok so effectively and unmistakably exposed it! As a result – and as of the time of the publication of this Chinese translation of this book in hand there is, perhaps, no single fact of which it is more important for the reader to have an explicit awareness – the "*pars pro toto* fallacy" as Sebeok exposed it is far from dead in contemporary intellectual culture. (Deely, 2012: 3)

It is quite likely that Deely's *Basics* has stood as the only successful book that traces the subject matter of semiotics not only in human cultures, but also in animal and plant kingdoms to the full extent of biosemiosis – but this is hardly the end of story. Deely has also treated semiosis far beyond the

forementioned areas, referring, as well, to the state before the existence of life (2014), a stance he has argued for since the earliest edition of *Basics* (cf. Chapter 6 of the edition in 1990). In the 5th edition and the subsequent Chinese edition of *Basics*, Deely speculates in the following passage that even Sebeok's final view of semiosis as co-extensive with life is not broad enough:

[W]hen Sebeok notes that “life modifies the universe to meet its needs, and accomplishes this by means of sign action”, while feeling at the same time “strongly drawn to Wheeler's suggestion that the fundamental physical constraints, the nuclear and cosmological parameters, and others, are constrained by the unbudging requirement that life evolve”, is he not suggesting without realizing it that the development of the physical universe prior to the advent of life was itself a product of semiosis, even if that prior development, as Peirce suggested, cannot be fully revealed or brought to light by the sign alone, as such. (Deely, 2009: 258)

The territory of contemporary Western semiotics was broadened to be co-extensive with life by Thomas Sebeok, and it is clear that Deely played a significant part in the collaboration to broaden that territory. However, it must be pointed out that in the early days Deely was strictly critical of this grand view of semiotics, which he openly and harshly challenged by asking “What are we to say of this grand view? Basically, in my judgment, we must say that it is too grand, not in the sense of over-ambitious, but in the sense of actually erroneous” (Deely, 1978: 168) and that “signs, properly speaking do not exist as such outside of cognition, and, within cognition, signs as such stand outside the order of efficient causality – as genes emphatically do not” (ibid.).

It is clear that Deely's broad view of semiosis as co-extensive with life was borne not from an empty contemplation but from a rather strong and audacious self-critique. “What had started out as a dialogue with Deely vs. Sebeok, turned now into Deely vs. Deely” (B.W. Deely, 2011: 406). It is rarely seen that a scholar abandons a critical standpoint he/she has previously defended in complete earnest.

Having stated its unique import and value for present-day Chinese semiotics, as much as for global semiotics, it is now necessary to address an inescapable fact about this book, which is reflected most clearly by the feedback from its readership. The minimization, if not total absence, of textbook-like features in Deely's introduction to semiotics does seem to have brought differing, sometimes critical and even unfavorable responses from its readers who are mostly beginners of semiotics, as is indicated by the Amazon customer reviews that can be found for the 1st and the 5th editions of *Basics* as well as the Douban rating (a Chinese open-source online rating venue for books, movies, etc.) for the 6th edition. There are those who clearly support the claim that this

book is precisely what the readers need for a panorama of the historical position of semiotics; but also there is no shortage of concerns, which mainly revolve around the “challenging”, “obscure”, and “confusing” way the book has been written, or, in the case of the Chinese translation, the wording that is all but unreadable.

Indeed, “taken as an introduction, *Basics* is a rather elaborate theoretical discussion, without including textbook-like features” (Kull et al., 2015: 297). However, as Cobley has aptly commented, “while Charles Sanders Peirce is acknowledged as the greatest American philosopher, John Deely, in his wake, is arguably the most important living American philosopher” (2009: 3). What Deely has presented with *Basics* may well be one of the most important philosophical works that have ever been written. In more than one way, this is a work that has gone far beyond “textbook”. Perhaps it is the philosophical tone enriching the whole book that has somehow “thrown off” the novices at semiotics, including those with a casual interest in the process of meaning generation, code deciphering, textual interpretation, or anything that is merely remotely associated with culture and symbol, all of which lead us to nothing but the *pars pro toto* fallacy, the very thing that is condemned by this book. What it now comes down to is either the book could have been written in a simpler way or whatever insights that can be gained from reading this book as it is will be worth the efforts that a serious reader puts into reading it. The answer reflected by the readership feedback is apparently positive, even from some of those purchasers who lament the occasional obscurities in the text of *Basics* in particular comparison to another popular introductory work on the study of signs, Daniel Chandler’s *Semiotics: The Basics*, the scope of which obviously needs further expansion despite its appeal of misleading simplicity to many beginners in the field of inquiry (cf. Kull et al., 2015: 302–303).

When it comes to introducing semiotics to beginners or anyone who has even the slightest interest in the answers to such questions as “what is semiotics” and “what is (in) a sign”, Deely’s *Basics*, bearing a title that is shared by a number of competing works (cf. Kull et al., 2015), cannot stay free of comparison, which comes not only from the general readership but also from scholars with the requisite critical expertise. Indeed, Deely’s criticism of the *pars pro toto* fallacy uses Chandler’s book as a case in point. It is hard to argue with the criticism, even in the light of the comparatively widespread distribution of Chandler’s book among readers, a fact further enhanced by a PDF edition that has made it even more readily accessible than the book version which was itself based on a very dated website.

The developmental history of contemporary semiotic inquiries since the earliest days of the groundbreaking scholars, including Charles Sanders Peirce,

Lady Victoria Welby and their largely neglected Chinese counterpart Yuen-Ren Chao, has already proven to have taken detours in much of what has long been practiced in the name of semiotics but actually has appeared under the *pars pro toto* fallacy. European semiology, under the earliest and strongest influence of Ferdinand de Saussure, is significantly different and narrower than what is studied under the rubric of semiotics. In Deely's own words:

In the United States, in contrast with the predominantly literary and linguistic development semiotics has undergone in the more typically European contexts, the development of semiotics has taken a rather different turn, influenced especially perhaps by Thomas A. Sebeok and the many projects associated with the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies which he chaired at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University. This development shows promise of providing for the semiotics movement as a whole a new and larger framework for the conduct of research, one that is, to tell the truth, more in keeping with the possibilities contained in Locke's original adumbration of the place of semiotics among the sciences, natural and human alike. (Deely, 2012: 1)

With *Basics*, one of John Deely's most important contributions to semiotics is that he has placed sign study in its rightful context of philosophy, without any exclusive focus on sign structures or sign functions, which are often seen as the most salient features in many other introductory works on the study of the sign, both in English and in Chinese. What makes *Basics* really unique is that it starts with the crucial distinction between the European and the American traditions of sign studies and offers a rather comprehensive framework that has risen above the dichotomy of realism vs. idealism and combined nature and culture, society, and individuals. Within this framework, we see a clear yet intricate classification of semiosis, which is the epicentral topic in contemporary semiotic studies, in its fullest display from physiosemosis to phytosemosis, zoosemosis, and anthroposemosis. This anti-anthropocentrism upheld by Deely, in the wake of Charles Morris and Thomas Sebeok, is of particular significance for semiotic studies in present-day China.

What is implied by the word "remedy" in the title of this review is by no means a debasement, but rather a reminder of a relevant part in the past, when Yuen-Ren Chao, the one true founding father of contemporary Chinese semiotics and an equivalent figure of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce in terms of the study of the sign, wrote of language as an inseparable part of life and, in allusion to Sebeok, how "we are already oversimplifying by applying our anthropocentric idea of the morpheme to animal communication" (Chao, 1968: 116). In 1959, Chao made a crystal clear claim that the study of the sign involves such problems as messages being communicated from one place to another and signs influencing various sorts of

organic and inorganic movements as well as mechanic control (Chao, 1980[1959]: 195).

Alas, Chao's visionary anti-anthropocentric groundwork in this respect went ignored for more than half a century. Many a study on the sign has remained on human language, or human culture at most. This pars pro toto fallacy could have been avoided had Yuen-Ren Chao's words of about 50 years ago been duly heeded. In addition, the limited availability of comprehensive primers on semiotics in China has long degraded the study of the sign, narrowing it down to a carnival play of logocentric and anthropocentric themes that are often seen in applied semiotics. It is in this light that I believe that Deely's *Basics*, of all introductory works of its kind, is one, if not the only, fine remedy for what I have called the carnival pilgrimage of Chinese semiotics (Yu, 2013).

A practical suggestion for most beginners of semiotics: for a general appreciation and enjoyment of semiotics, there are a good number of textbooks and primers available; but if someone aspires to have as full a vision as possible of what semiotics really is, I would say Deely's *Basics* is definitely a must-read. As with most philosophical works, it deserves and demands reading more than once. For the Chinese readership specifically, I would also strongly suggest obtaining a copy of the latest English edition.

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Bionote

Hongbing Yu

Hongbing Yu (b. 1984) is Managing Editor of Chinese Semiotic Studies and Lecturer in semiotics, linguistics, and translation in the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures at Nanjing Normal University. Research interests include semiotics, language and cognition, communication, narrative, and translation studies. Recent publications include "A carnival pilgrimage: Cultural semiotics in China" (2013), "Enter the dragon: Sebeok's Chinese connection" (2013), "Human brains function culturally: Semiosis under the culture-driven view" (2013), "The study of linguistic sign systems in the 21st century" (2016), and "A semiotic analysis of anti-identity construction in fictional narratives from the viewpoint of modeling systems theory" (2016).