

Hongbing Yu*

Editorial: What is semiotics but a series of modeling

Introduction to the special issue *Thomas A. Sebeok for the 21st century*

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Abstract: The present issue of *Chinese Semiotic Studies* is published in memory of Thomas A. Sebeok. Sebeok was not only a master semiotician, but more importantly a grand artist in semiotics. As one of the most important contemporary figures in semiotics, linguistics, ethnology, and cultural studies, Sebeok made profound contributions to the progress of global semiotics through his distinguished theoretical achievements and promotional activities. His works have proven to be so relevant that they continue to exert a determinative influence and provide directions for the development of semiotics and its many subdivisions, especially biosemiotics, beyond the 20th century. Now, 21 years into the present century, during which semiotic studies around the world have made remarkable progress, it is about time to highlight some specific ways in which his contributions will continue to shape and guide semiotic studies, demonstrating the relevance of these contributions to the 21st century challenges. To this end, this special issue presents some up-to-date and informed studies that explore Sebeok's contributions to semiotics and their vital implications for fundamental problems relevant to humanity as a semiotic animal in the present day and in the rest of this century and beyond.

Keywords: biosemiotics; *Chinese Semiotic Studies*; Sebeok; semiotic animal; semiotics

The present issue of *Chinese Semiotic Studies* is published in memory of Thomas A. Sebeok, the grand master of contemporary semiotics, who has been regarded as “the third major figure in semiotics with Saussure and Peirce, although aligned most closely with the latter” (Randviir and Copley 2010: 120). The history of semiotics over the past decades has certainly shown that Sebeok is completely worthy of the title, but I would like to introduce another angle, which has come as a

*Corresponding author: Hongbing Yu, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada,
E-mail: hongbing@ryerson.ca

result of my own study in semiotics since 2007 when I first laid eyes on Sebeok and Danesi's classic book *The forms of meaning: Modeling systems theory and semiotic analysis* (2000).

To me, Sebeok was not only a master semiotician, but more importantly a grand artist in semiotics. In fact, quite a few masters have been identified, some by Sebeok himself, in the history of semiotics, and all semioticians in a manner of speaking are artists, but not many of them could be called grand artists in semiotics. I say this for a good reason. In all these years of reading Sebeok, it has always occurred to me that a salient feature of his writings is that they almost invariably exhibit a personal touch, in which scholarly insights, eye-opening anecdotes, witty commentaries, on-target observations are often mixed with his peculiar habit of using less commonly seen English vocabulary. It seems that Sebeok never shied away from this fascinating writing style that reflects a kind of naturally released vitality, a precious form of unaffectedness, which is now almost extinct in academic writing. Here as a Zen practitioner, I dare to intuit (or deduct, in the Peircean sense of the word) that there must have been a Zenist side to Sebeok that had enabled him to be so confident and calm, particularly in his later ruminations and writings, as to proudly declare that "I am a solipsist and proud of it" (Sebeok et al. 1988: 12; cf. Deely 2002: 477). For this reason and to pay homage to Sebeok the grand artist in semiotics, I will make this present introduction appear as personal as possible in a Sebeokian fashion.

It has been scientifically proven, and attested by common human experience, that nostalgia is good for us. Indeed, in my case alone, being able to recall the bittersweet experience of delivering this special issue has certainly had the positive psychological effects of nostalgia. It all started with the exciting moment when Marcel Danesi commissioned me to edit a special issue of *Semiotica* for Thomas A. Sebeok during a coffee break at the 41st Semiotic Society of America Annual Meeting, Delray Beach, Florida, in 2016. While we were discussing the plan for this project, Dr. Stephanie Walsh Matthews, who was then the French editor of *Semiotica*, joined our conversation and, upon hearing the plan, recommended Dr. Jamin Pelkey for the co-editorship of the special issue. It was evidently a brilliant idea, especially considering Dr. Pelkey's detailed familiarity with North American semiotics. To our great delight, Dr. Pelkey graciously accepted the recommendation.

The original plan that we had in mind back in 2016 was to publish this special issue in 2020 as the Thomas A. Sebeok centennial issue. The call for papers for this issue was sent out in late 2016, but the ensuing years saw so many unexpected changes in our lives as well as in publication scheduling that the original plan to publish the issue with *Semiotica* still had not come to fruition by the end of 2020. In addition, due to his enormous editorial workload in a major semiotics book series

project with Bloomsbury, Dr. Pelkey had to withdraw from the Sebeok special issue. After careful deliberation and consultation with the contributors as well as with the editorial offices of *Semiotica* and *Chinese Semiotic Studies* earlier this year, a joint decision was made to shift the special issue to *Chinese Semiotic Studies* as a memorial issue to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Sebeok's passing.

Sebeok would have enjoyed a closer Chinese connection, for instance, a special issue of *Chinese Semiotic Studies* dedicated to him. At Sebeok's final resting place, there stands a signboard on which are inscribed two Chinese characters, 美花, meaning "beautiful blossom." Not only did he have good relationships with some Chinese semioticians both inside and outside of mainland China, but he was also invited to come to mainland China for lectures in 1988–1989 (see Yu 2013). In this light, the aforementioned situation of unexpected disruptions in the publication of the special issue has turned out to be a blessing in disguise. *Chinese Semiotic Studies* can publish an issue for Sebeok, as with a previous special issue for the late John Deely (see Cogley 2016), perfectly within its purview: affording a platform for modern semiotics both in the West and the East. In fact, it is fitting to produce this issue to celebrate the Thomas A. Sebeok centennial (1920–2020), albeit belatedly, and to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of his passing (2001–2021).

As one of the most important contemporary figures in semiotics, linguistics, ethnology, and cultural studies, Sebeok made profound contributions to the progress of global semiotics through his distinguished theoretical achievements and promotional activities. His works have proven to be so relevant that they continue to exert a determinative influence and provide directions for the development of semiotics and its many subdivisions, especially biosemiotics, beyond the 20th century. Now, 21 years into the present century, during which semiotic studies around the world have made remarkable progress, it is about time to highlight some specific ways in which his contributions will continue to shape and guide semiotic studies, demonstrating the relevance of these contributions to the 21st century challenges.

Culminating with modeling systems theory (MST), Sebeok's transdisciplinary vision is extraordinarily large in scope, affording crucial insights into the unprecedented challenges faced by the entire world, in which all semiotic animals, human and non-human, exist in witting or unwitting symbiosis. The current pandemic that has claimed millions of lives in the world is a tragic yet pertinent case in point. Apart from its power and usefulness in addressing existential crises, MST actually has the potential for deeper illuminations than what has been discovered and interpreted so far in contemporary semiotics.

This special issue presents some up-to-date and informed studies that explore Sebeok's contributions to semiotics and their vital implications for fundamental

problems relevant to humanity as a semiotic animal in the present day and in the rest of this century and beyond. Of particular interest are the human psyche, cognition, communication, culture, and society in their capacity as sites where cultural semiospheres and natural biospheres blend and merge. The papers presented in this volume include current theoretical developments that build on connections between semiotics and cognition, language, communication, biology, society, and philosophy. They emphasize critical applications that are directly and thoroughly engaged with Sebeok's work and life. In a proper Sebeokian sense, they are all models that the authors have each built, bearing various degrees of relevance to Sebeok and exemplifying what semiotics truly is. Semiotics, as both subject matter and praxis, is self-referentially consistent (Kordig 1983: 207). It is an exemplary system of philosophy, or of ways of knowing, that takes a position on the nature of theories, which is precisely what Sebeok and Danesi refer to as an example of modeling, that is, composite modeling (Sebeok and Danesi 2000: 28). In short, what is semiotics but a series of modeling?

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Bionote

Hongbing Yu

Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada

hongbing@ryerson.ca

Hongbing Yu (b. 1984), PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Arts at Ryerson University. His current research interests include philosophy of language, semiotics, sociolinguistics, communication, and cognition. His publications include “Redefining cultural memory and cultural oblivion” (2020), *On semiotic modeling* (2019), and “Semiotic modeling and education” (2017).