A Theory of Semiotics by Umberto Eco; Coup d'oeil sur le développement de la sémiotique by
Roman Jakobson
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UMBERTO ECO, *A Theory of semiotics.* (Advances in Semiotics.) Bloomington and
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ROMAN JAKOBSON, *Coup d'oeil sur le développement de la sémiotique.* (Studies in
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'During these six days we have spoken about semiotics. Therefore semiotics
exists.' Thus said Umberto Eco in his concluding statement to the 1st Inter-
national Semiotics congress held in Milan in June 1974.[1] And indeed, in Milan,
semiotics did exist and was represented by many scholars from many different
countries, as well as by such diverse disciplines as architecture, painting, music,
literature, linguistics, philosophy, non-verbal communication, anthropology,
and mass-media. The two works under review here attest to the existence of
semiotics in that one traces its historical development while the other proposes a
theory of semiotics.

Roman Jakobson's *Coup d'oeil sur le développement de la sémiotique* is the written
version of the opening statement which he delivered to the Milan Semiotics
congress. It is a very useful little book in that it places modern semiotics in a
historical perspective while at the same time presenting Jakobson's personal
conception of semiotics. Jakobson points out that the question of the sign and of
signs is an ancient one and that semiotic problems have been taken up by thinkers
from antiquity, through the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance. He discusses
briefly the conceptions of the founding fathers of semiotics, indicating similarities
and differences in their views: Locke, Lambert, Hoene-Wroñski, Bolzano,
Husserl, Peirce, and Saussure. It is striking to notice that scholars such as
Lambert already had a very modern conception of the scope of semiotics, in
that they advocated the study of non-verbal communication. Similarly it is
interesting to read the following remarks that Peirce made to his epistolary
friend Lady Welby: 'Perhaps you are in danger of falling into some error in
consequence of limiting your studies so much to Language' (quoted by Jakob-
son: 7). After this historical sketch, Jakobson proceeds by calling for a semiotics
which would study all the different systems of signs and cautions against making
semiotics a synonym of linguistics and against making language the model for

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[1] Now published as Eco (1974).

the study of other semiotic systems. He notes that even within language itself, each level: phoneme, morpheme, sentence, sequence of sentences, text, dialogue is governed by its own specific properties and that for each system there must be a specific method. As far as art is concerned, be it temporal (music, poetry), spatial (painting, sculpture), or spatio-temporal (theater, circus, mime), it can be iconic, indexical, or symbolic; but it has a particular characteristic: *parallelism*, which has to be added to Peirce's triadic model. In fact, according to Jakobson, abstract painting and modern music cannot be understood without the concept of parallelism. This concept of parallelism, which is recurrent in Jakobson's work, is of utmost semiotic significance in that esthetic productions involving systems of distinct types of signs can be understood in terms of principles of parallelism, principles which cut across and relate these systems. This concept has not yet been fully exploited and thus Jakobson is quite right to keep calling attention to it.

Jakobson summarizes his work with the following goal for semiotics: 'La sémiotique ou, autrement dit, la science du signe et des signes, *Science of signs, Zeichenlehre*, a le droit et le devoir d'étudier la structure de tous les types et systèmes de signes et d'éclaircir leurs divers rapports hiérarchiques, le réseau de leurs fonctions et les propriétés communes ou divergentes de *tous* les systèmes en question' (18–19). This is precisely the task that Umberto Eco undertakes in his proposed theory of semiotics.

Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* is an impressive work, which, in its present form, is the rewriting and reworking of previously published work and the result of reflections that go back to 1967. Eco's project is to study the whole of culture and to view an immense range of objects and events as signs. Through such an endeavor, he aims at tracing the limits of future semiotic research and at suggesting a unified method for approaching seemingly quite disparate phenomena. One of the major hypotheses governing his research is that semiotics studies all cultural processes as processes of communication. He lists as constituting the field of semiotics, disciplines ranging in study from 'natural' phenomena to more 'culturally' elaborated systems: zoosemiotics, olfactory signs, tactile communication, codes of taste, paralinguistics, medical semiotics, kinesics and proxemics, musical codes, formalized languages, written languages, unknown alphabets, secret codes, natural languages, visual communication, systems of object, plot structure, text theory, cultural codes, aesthetic texts, mass communication, and rhetoric.

According to Eco's semiotic view of culture, every cultural entity becomes a semiotic sign. But Eco insists that these signs should not be studied in the abstract, that one cannot conceive of the pure competence of an ideal sign-producer. Rather social phenomena must be considered as elements subject to change and restructuring. He argues that a semiotic approach should be governed by an indeterminacy principle.

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In the context of his semiotic approach to culture Eco deals with crucial questions such as: what is a sign, what is the relation between signs and codes, and how are signs produced, decoded, and interpreted? Eco proposes that instead of saying that it is codes which organize signs, it is more correct to view codes as providing the rules which generate signs as concrete occurrences in communicative intercourse. Furthermore, a sign-vehicle conveys many intertwined contents and what is commonly called a message is in fact a text whose content is a multilevelled discourse. What is the referent of a sign? According to Eco it is an abstract entity, an interpretant, which is only a cultural convention, a cultural unit. And culture proposes to its members an uninterrupted chain of cultural units encompassing other cultural units, for culture continuously translates signs into other signs.

Eco postulates the following methodological assumptions:

(1) meanings are cultural units;

(2) these units can be isolated thanks to the chain of their interpretants as revealed in a given culture;

(3) the study of the signs in a culture enables us to define the values of the interpretants by viewing them in a system of positions and oppositions;

(4) semantic fields are useful tools for explaining significant oppositions.

For Eco, every aspect of culture becomes a semantic unit which is inserted into a system. A most important question for his semiotic theory then is: what kind of semantic theory should be utilized for the analysis of such systems? Eco examines and rejects the Katz and Fodor model with a series of *doleances*, significantly borrowing the term from the *Tiers Etats*, who wrote their complaints to the king just before the 1789 revolution. Instead, he proposes a revised semantic model which would account for both verbal and non-verbal signs. This revised semantic model proposes to insert into the semantic representation all coded connotations depending on corresponding denotations as well as contextual and circumstantial selections. Anticipating the objections that might be raised against such a broad model, Eco insists that not all connotations be taken into account, but only coded connotations and that not all possible occurrences of a given sign be considered, but only those which are culturally and conventionally recognizable as the more statistically probable. The methodological principle of semantic research that Eco proposes is the following: the description of semantic fields and semantic structures can only be achieved by studying the conditions of signification of a given message, and therefore a semiotics of the code is in the service of a semiotics of sign production.

Eco, like Jakobson, feels that one of the most disturbing features of semiotic studies, past and present, has been the interpretation of various sign systems on the basis of linguistic models, using principles of double articulation, binarism, and phonological parameters. Eco insists that it is wrong to conceive of every sign system as being based on a code similar to the verbal one. As an example,

he notes, as have other scholars, that color systems and olfactory signs are not organized by discrete but by gradated entities. He argues that there exist many sign systems that do not function according to the principle of double articulation. In fact, he proposes using semiotics as a means of providing a typology of sign systems; according to such a typology, language is related to other sign systems, rather than being an *a priori* model for them.

Eco is concerned with the problem of decoding. Reflecting on the process of apprehending or interpreting signs, he distinguishes two activities: overcoding and undercoding. Overcoding is either an over-analysis from within the system, or a mis-analysis from outside the system; undercoding is an assumption that signs are pertinent units of a code in absence of pre-established rules, that is, it is an imprecise, and still rough coding. Eco's examples deal with individuals decoding both familiar and unfamiliar sign systems, and demonstrate that the two processes go on at the same time and that in fact it is often difficult to judge whether one is overcoding or undercoding. These notions seem worthy of reflection by semioticians and more precisely by anthropologists, both for cross-cultural studies and comparisons and for analyzing the misunderstandings and conflicts that occur in communication within modern complex societies, societies in which various and overlapping sign systems exist. Thus Eco warns us that the same message can be decoded from different points of view and in reference to diverse systems of conventions.

In all of his remarks, Eco militates against a static conception of signs; not only is a sign the product of many intertwined contexts, but it is itself not a fixed entity. Works of art suggest that the semantics of a sign system can be ordered in different ways; works of art thus change or manipulate the ways in which culture perceives the world and indeed can modify individuals' concrete approach to states of the world. Even in everyday, non-artistic occurrences of signs, there are examples of what Eco labels ideological code-switching[2] which modify our semantic universe. Thus he analyzes in semiotic terms the displacing of emotional connotations associated with cyclamates – from positive and health-ful sugar substitutes to dangerous and cancer-producing ones. Eco argues that the labor of sign production releases social forces and itself represents a social force. For him, semiotics is a form of social criticism and one of the forms of social practice.

Readers of *Language in Society* will be familiar with many of Eco's proposals, but will know them under other rubrics and other terminologies, those of such disciplines and approaches to linguistic and communicative behavior as seman-tics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and social interaction. And indeed, Eco quite

[2] The term code-switching here has to be understood as a historical change in the signifi-cance of a sign, brought about by a variety of causes. Eco thus uses code-switching differently from the way this notion has come to be used in the sociolinguistic literature, i.e. the alternation of languages, dialects or registers by members of a speech community.

consciously draws on all of these. What is newer for the American reader is that Eco views all manifestations of culture as semiosis, and that for him semiotics is a unified method which can deal with phenomena which, at first glance, might seem very different from one another. He is quite aware of this imperialistic character of semiotics, but deems it necessary, as does Jakobson. At the same time, however, he placed limits on semiotics: he refuses to indulge in psychoanalysis and notices rightly that Julia Kristeva, who tries to account for the unconscious, does *sémanalyse* but not semiotics.

Eco can also be placed within a trend that opposes itself to the abstract formalism which manifested itself in certain schools of language philosophy, in much of structural linguistics and early stages of generative grammar, and in structuralism generally. Such abstract formalism is now being criticized in many quarters, often independent of each other, and is being replaced by approaches which insist on pragmatics, on social contexts, on conditions of sign formation and sign production, on speech and communicative acts, on text and discourse, and on emergent structures rather than on static ones. As a strong proponent of the new trend, Eco is very much aware of the complexities of communication and refuses to simplify or reduce for the purposes of seeming formal elegance. Eco's very erudite and provocative book draws on philosophy, linguistics, sociology, anthropology and aesthetics and refers to a wide range of scholarship, both European and American. It raises many fascinating questions which merit considerable probing. The field is ready for further research.[3]

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MELVIN J. FOX WITH BETTY P. SKOLNICK. *Language in education: Problems and prospects in research and training*. New York: The Ford Foundation, 1975. Pp. 36. $2.

This brief report serves two purposes and serves them both excellently. On the one hand, it represents an internal stock-taking, reviewing and interpreting some

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[3] In addition to his own writing on semiotics, Eco edits a journal of Semiotics: *VS*, the first issue of which appeared in 1974. *VS* includes not only articles dealing with particular semiotic analyses, but also very useful bibliographies presenting the research of Eastern and Western Europe as well as Brazil and Israel in the various subdisciplines within semiotics.

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