The Institutionalization of Semiotics in North America

Marcel Danesi
The Institutionalization of Semiotics in North America

Marcel Danesi
University of Toronto

Introduction

A quarter of a century has passed since the late American semiotician Thomas A. Sebeok wrote his in-depth overview of the institutionalization of semiotics in the United States (Sebeok 1991) in which he painted a bright picture of the spread within academia of the discipline and the emergence of an “American semiotics” based primarily on Peircean sign theory. Sebeok followed this up in 2001 painting an even rosier picture of the spread of a biologically-based Peircean semiotics throughout the globe, uniting the humanities and the sciences in a seamless fashion, which he often called the “semiotic web” (Sebeok 2001).

Sebeok did more to establish the field of semiotics in the United States than any other single scholar. And in many ways, his assessment, which drew upon his personal experiences, was intended to support his life-long goal of inserting semiotics permanently into the academic and intellectual landscape of North America. Indeed, the abundant amount of published work by North American scholars in semiotics, the many book series dealing with semiotic themes that are located in the United States and Canada, and the prolific use of semiotic theory in areas such as American media, popular culture, and marketing studies, among many others, provide solid evidence that Sebeok’s dream has become a reality.

But in many other ways, Sebeok’s dream remains just that—a dream, since semiotics continues to struggle for acceptance into the mainstream of academic life in universities and professional institutions throughout North America. The purpose of this essay is to provide a schematic overview of the institution of semiotics in North America today, updating Sebeok’s assessment and commenting on current trends, patterns, and achievements in five main areas: the teaching of semiotics, the institutions that exist making it possible for semioticians to interact
professionally with each other, the publication sources located in Canada and the United States, the adoption of semiotics by various professions, and the kind of research that might be seen as distinguishing “American semiotics” from other forms of semiotic inquiry.

The Teaching of Semiotics

Semiotics became institutionalized as a university discipline in the United States at the end of the 1960s mostly thanks to Sebeok, who founded a center for the teaching of semiotics at Indiana University at Bloomington. Ironically, the center no longer exists, having disappeared a few years after Sebeok’s death in 2001. Unfortunately, there are very few universities offering semiotics as an undergraduate program of study, with a major leading to specialization the field, and even less offering semiotics as an area of specialization at the graduate level. However, as a subject within cognate fields, from psychology and linguistics to marketing science, semiotics is flourishing. At the University of Toronto, for example, semiotics plays a large role in the study of anthropology, as it does at the University of Montreal, Laval University, Simon Fraser, and the University of British Columbia. A similar pattern is discernible throughout the United States. Semiotics as a subject can be taken by students at a host of universities coast-to-coast (Purdue, Brown, Colorado, and so on).

Strangely, while semiotics is flourishing as a subject, as a program it has virtually disappeared. Universities in Canada and the United States once had a number of degree-based programs in semiotics which, today, due to funding cutbacks among other obstacles have virtually disappeared. At the University of Toronto, for instance, semiotics was a major program until around 2005, pursued by hundreds of students every year. It now offers only the possibility for minoring in the field, that is, for taking it as part of a broader course of study. The same pattern occurred at Brown University, where semiotics was an extremely popular major in the humanities in the 1980s.

The question of what happened to the virtual demise of semiotics as a major program has been written about prolifically. But in large part, the reason can be traced, in my own view, to the obscurity of the field. Unlike in Europe, where semiotics has name recognition, in North America today, very few students entering university will recognize what semiotics is about and, even more so, be motivated to take it for professional reasons. Another reason is the dense writing by many semioticians and even the often solipsistic stance taken by a number of influential semioticians of the past thirty years. A student once asked me why study Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1976) if the book was against everything, including the fact that books are about things. In North America, deconstruction is highly attractive with literary theorists, but, apparently, not with students and scholars working in other humanistic and scientific fields.
In a post-Derrida era, university departments dealing with psychology, sociology, linguistics, and the like are still skeptical about the goals of semiotics and its cliquish theoretical appeal. This has left its repercussions, with universities abandoning their majors en masse. But with the growth of media, popular culture, and mass communications departments throughout North America, semiotics has made its resurgence, not as a program area of study, but as a major subject area, since it provides a key for deciphering the layers of meanings in media products. Very few departments now teach semiotics as it was taught in the deconstructionist era of the 1980s and the early 1990s. Today, as semioticians play larger and larger roles in the analysis of digital media and in the study of the arts of persuasion, from advertising to political oratory, universities and students are paying attention once again to its power as an analytical tool, as Sebeok (1994a) had himself predicted years ago. With its constant emphasis on textuality, semiotics is seen by larger and larger groups of North American academics and students as providing the keys for understanding our increasingly hypertextual world.

In 1991 I identified another reason why semiotics has never inserted itself intrinsically into North American academies—the lack of appropriate textbooks for its teaching at the undergraduate level. That situation has changed dramatically, as Nöth (2010) has recently pointed out, with all kinds of user-friendly textbooks being published by major North American academic presses. Because of this, one can see that semiotics is making a comeback as courses in the field are starting up or being solidified across the continent. A perfect example of this is at Ryerson University, a polytechnic university in the city of Toronto, where a single course in the field attracts hundreds of students every year from all backgrounds. Alongside the technical readings (Saussure, Peirce, Barthes, and so on), the new textbooks allow students to grasp basic principles of theory and practice in a way that makes sense to them, primarily through application to popular culture, as I myself did in several books (Danesi 1999, 2007). So, while in the past students had to engage from the outset with the theoretical founders of semiotics, today this has changed drastically, allowing the discipline to keep in step with other technical fields. Given the kinds of backgrounds that typical North American students bring to the classroom, the question of the appropriate textbook to use in concomitance with the usual lecture-discussion instructional format of university-level has obviously been a critical one. The textbook that an instructor selects for the course will determine not only its contents, but also its pedagogical structure and orientation. The ways in which a textbook presents, explains, and illustrates the technical terminology and the conceptual domains that define the perimeter of modern semiotics can easily become a source of frustration, or enlightenment, for even the most motivated of students. Teaching Peirce to beginning students can be absolutely frustrating—a theme taken up recently by Campbell, de Waal, and Hart (2008).
The introductory textbooks published since the mid-1980s by American scholars or by European scholars with North American academic presses is truly impressive. I will cite just a handful here—Berger 1984, 2012, Solomon 1988, Deely 1990, Nöth 1990, Sebeok 1994b, Crow 2003—which are now used to complement introductory texts written and published in Europe and elsewhere. The aim of these textbooks has been to introduce semiotics in a way that its objectives can be seen to be relevant to understanding contemporary American culture, especially advertising, media, and the Internet. Such treatments typically present and illustrate the subject matter of semiotics by considering its implications for the study of thought, cultural behavior, and aesthetics. The idea of anthologies is to expose students to the original writings of those who have helped to shape the field (e.g. Blonsky 1985 and Innis 1985). It has also helped somewhat spread interest since the compilers have selected texts, or parts thereof, and introduced them with commentaries to make them more understandable.

Compared to Europe and especially Estonia and Finland, where semiotics programs are thriving at both undergraduate and graduate levels where they are institutionalized within the academies, in North America programs and courses are still sporadic and largely based on the personal objectives of individual instructors. The climate is, as mentioned, changing, and within the next few years it would not come as a surprise to see semiotics programs sprouting up across the continent, as the digital universe becomes more and more dominant and thus more in need of semioticians to provide an understanding of this universe. Despite a period of early growth and spread during Sebeok’s prime years, American semiotics is now catching up to Europe, Asia, and other continents in the area of academic institutionalization.

**The Institutions of Semiotics**

Centers of semiotic research have been established throughout the world. But, again, it was Sebeok who led the way with the summer institute at Bloomington and its research center. The center has now disappeared and, like the pedagogical situation described above, funding and the issue of the relevance of semiotics has hounded the founding of new centers. In America, scholars have to convince politicians and administrators that their field of inquiry has social relevance. In the post-deconstructionist era this is becoming easier to do, but it is still an uphill battle. Among the centers that are thriving the Peirce Project in Indianapolis stands out. It continues to receive university and governmental support for its work on Peirce. This is due, in large part, to the surge in interest in Peirce as a philosopher and logician, rather than as Peirce as a semiotician, although the latter has certainly been gaining more and more ground.

At the University of Toronto the International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies, under the tutelage of Paul Bouissac of that university had
become a major meeting ground for semioticians and scholars in cognate disciplines in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. The leading semioticians, psychologists, linguists, culture theorists, and others met on the campus to teach graduate courses and to participate in workshops and seminars. As with the Bloomington situation, the Institute started lacking the funds and the organizational structure to keep going, disappearing in the early 2000s.

The Semiotic Society of America was founded in the early 1980s, becoming a major intellectual locus for scholars to meet and exchange ideas at a yearly conference held in cities across North America. The Canadian Semiotic Association plays a similar role in Canada, with annual meetings in the context of the Canadian Learned Societies organization which holds meetings every year in a different Canadian university. At Laval University in Quebec, centers and summer institutes emerge occasionally to complement the slate of courses in semiotics offered by that university, which has become a leader in the promotion of semiotics in the French-speaking part of Canada. Other academic societies in education, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, and the like often provide special sessions in semiotics in their regular meetings. It is in the latter context that semiotics has started to grow and become more and more accepted as a major theoretical tool in intellectual endeavors of all kinds.

Publication Sources

In the area of American and Canadian semiotic publication venues, one must again turn to Sebeok as the founder in this domain with his establishment of Indiana Press’ Semiotics Series, under his editorship, which over the years had become the main outlet for original writing in semiotics. The series no longer exists, although the press continues to put out books in semiotics or related to it.

Another major book series was founded a few years ago by the present writer with Palgrave-Macmillan in New York, titled “Semiotic and Popular Culture Studies”, which publishes studies related to the interface between popular culture and pure semiotic study. At the University of Toronto the “Toronto Monograph Series in Semiotics”, which put out monographic studies in the 1980s and 1990s, had become a primary source of research for many semioticians. It no longer exists, having conceded its territory to a University of Toronto Press series in semiotics edited initially by Thomas Sebeok, Marcel Danesi, and Umberto Eco. The series continues to publish books in the field. At the University of Ottawa, another series with Legas Press was founded in the late 1990s. Legas Press has also become the publisher of the annual proceedings of the Semiotic Society of America. Many university and academic presses throughout North America frequently put out books in semiotic analysis as applied to culture and various other domains of the modern world, although very few series as such exist, other than the ones mentioned here.
There are two main journals published in North America—the Canadian journal *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* and the *American Journal of Semiotics*. The former is published by the Canadian Semiotic Association, and was founded in 1973 at the University of Alberta; the latter was founded in 1981 by the Semiotic Society of America. Both journals publish articles and critical reviews in semiotic theory and practice, as well as works in culture studies that utilize semiotic method. *The Semiotic Review of Books*, established by Paul Bouissac, published review articles by leading semioticians mainly during the 1990s. It has been replaced by *Semiotix*, also edited by Bouissac, an online journal that publishes work in progress as well as critical essays and reviews of work in the field and cognate disciplines.

**Semiotics in the Professions**

The two professions that have made particular use of semiotics in North America are marketing and the legal professions. The former interest can be witnessed in the many new books that are produced by American-Canadian semioticians for marketers and advertisers—I mention just two recent ones here: Danesi 2008 and Oswald 2011. This is due to the fact that consumer product marketing and advertising have become the modern world’s most ubiquitous means of mass communication and discourse. The messages, styles of presentation, and visual images of advertisers have become integral categories of the grammar of modern-day society, and these require the expertise of semioticians to understand and produce. Of course, the semioticians do not pander only to the professional marketers, but are also *de facto* critics of the whole consumerist system, since they raise the question of how advertising indelibly shapes the thoughts, personalities, and lifestyle behaviors of countless individuals, by tapping into the one need that distinguishes the human species from all others—the need for meaning.

The profession in which semiotics is growing in leaps and bounds is the legal one. Apart from the many studies on the part of experts on legal semiotics (for example, Wagner and Broekman 2011), semiotics is making its way, incredibly, into the criminology domain. For example, the Center for Homicide Research in New Orleans has adopted semiotic techniques to investigate crime scenes and to decode the symbolism used by criminals and gangs. Using various research methodologies, the rituals of criminal organizations can be understood through the process of semiotic deconstruction (interpretation by decoding the signs and symbols of the gangs). The courts are also beginning to use semiotic evidence in criminal proceedings. In the city of Edmonton, Canada, for example, the Court may look at whether or not an accused person uses a name, word, symbol, or other form that identifies, or is associated with, a criminal organization, in order to determine whether the accused participates in the criminal organization.
Research

Arguably, the starting work for an American research paradigm in semiotics is the 1938 book by American semiotician Charles Morris (1938), in which he divided semiotic method into the study of sign assemblages, which he called syntactics, the analysis of the relations that are established between signs and their meanings, which he called semantics, and the investigation of the relations that are formed between signs and their users, which he called pragmatics. The Russian-born American semiotician Roman Jakobson studied various facets of sign construction, but is probably best known for his model of communication, which suggests that sign exchanges are hardly ever neutral, but involve subjectivity and goal-attainment of some kind. As mentioned, Sebeok was influential in expanding the semiotic paradigm to include the comparative study of animal signaling systems, which he termed zoosemiotics, and the study of semiosis in all living things, which has come to be called biosemiotics (for example, Sebeok 1994b, Sebeok and Danesi 2000).

In the area of theory, Peirce emerges as the major topic of interest and application among North American semioticians (for example, Merrell 1997, Deely 2001, to mention but two). Ogden and Richards’ 1923 text on the nature of meaning, although not strictly a work in semiotics, is an in-depth study of the psychology of linguistic meaning and how it shapes human understanding—an orientation that continues to be typical of North American semiotics. Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum’s 1957 work introduces the concept of the semantic differential, which has become a standard tool in some areas of psychology and semiotics.

Deconstruction was, as mentioned, a mainstay of American approaches to semiotics for at least two decades, starting in the 1970s (Culler 1982). Many American-Canadian literary semioticians paid intense attention to the deconstruction movement that swept over the English-speaking literary world, tracing its popularity to a dissatisfaction with traditional modes of literary study. The fundamental idea in deconstruction is the contention that the meaning of a literary text cannot be established by simply studying the words used in the text and then relating them to the purported intentions of the author. It produced a wake-up call among traditional literary theorists about the many implicit assumptions they held on the meanings of texts. The assumption has always been that language is a knowledge tool that encodes ideas about reality without distortion.

In America and Canada, as elsewhere, over the last fifty years, semiotics has been used to analyze all kinds of human behaviors and expressive products, from body language to cinematic texts. Work in areas entailing visual perception, verbal and nonverbal communication, advertising, popular culture, biosemiotics, education, mathematics, computation, and digital media abounds. As such, American-Canadian semiotics is no different than semiotics elsewhere. It is perhaps in the study of the relation between communication and semiosis that it might stand out. This is due, no doubt, to the influence of Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan in intellectual thought in North America (McLuhan 1951, 1962, 1964).
Strictly defined, communication is the exchange of messages among members of the same species. Of course, some interspecies communication can occur, but the signals exchanged in such cases will not have the same function, impact, and content as they do within the same species. In the human species, communication can be interpersonal (between human beings), group-based (between some individual or media outlet and audiences), and mass-based (involving communication systems that encompass entire societies). The study of communication has become important in biosemiotics, which sees communication systems as basic formats for studying semiosis and sign differentiation among species. McLuhan investigated the question of why and how communication systems change over time and why the change coincides with larger social changes. He was among the first to emphasize this fact, showing how the “meaning structures” that the media produced shaped human cognition. The interesting thing for a semiotician is that he did so in a way that is consistent with semiotic ideas and, above all else, semiotic method. Was McLuhan a semiotician? This has been investigated by several semioticians (see on this point Danesi 2002).

The form of the sign and what it refers to are dynamically intertwined, one suggesting the other. This implies that the signifying resources and elements used to make representations are tools in the McLuhanian sense, namely extensions of the biology and psychology of the human organism making them. In effect, our signs are derivatives of ourselves. An ax extends the power of the human hand to break wood; the wheel of the human foot to cover great distances; and so on and so forth. McLuhan claimed that the type of actual tools developed to record and transmit messages determines how people process and remember them. This is so because they are themselves signs based on the senses. Human beings are endowed by Nature to decipher information with all the senses. Our sense ratios, as he called them, are equally calibrated at birth to receive information. However, in social settings, it is unlikely that all the senses will operate at the same ratio. One sense ratio or the other increases according to the modality employed to record and transmit a message. In an oral culture, the auditory sense ratio is the one that largely shapes information processing and message interpretation; in a print culture, on the other hand, the visual sense ratio is the crucial one. This raising or lowering of sense ratios is not, however, preclusive. Indeed, we can have various sense ratios activated in tandem.

Because of the fact that media are tools extending bodily and cognitive processes they have brought about several paradigm shifts over the course of human history. The first one was a consequence of the invention of writing and the spread of literacy. Reading and writing activate linear thinking processes in the brain, because printed ideas are laid out one at a time and can thus be connected to each other sequentially and analyzed logically in relation to each other. Orality, on the other hand, is not conducive to such precise thinking, because spoken ideas are transmitted through the emotional qualities of the human voice and are, thus,
inextricable from the “subject” who transmits them. Literacy engenders the sense that knowledge and information are disconnected from their human sources and thus that they have “objectivity”; orality does not. This perception is bolstered by the fact that printed information can be easily categorized and preserved in some durable material form such as books. Simply put, without the advent and institutionalization of literacy, the spread of philosophy, science, jurisprudence, and the many other human intellectual activities that we now hold as critical to the progress of human civilization would simply not have been possible in the first place.

But orality has not, of course, disappeared from human life. The spoken word comes naturally; literacy does not. Through simple exposure to everyday dialogue, children develop the ability to speak with little or no effort and without any training or prompting whatsoever. Literacy, on the other hand, does not emerge through simple exposure to printed texts. It is learned through instruction, practice, and constant rehearsal. Schools were established, in fact, to impart literacy and print-based knowledge.

Finally, as elsewhere, the semiotics of advertising and of popular culture has been a central area of interest in North American scholarship. The underlying theme in all the relevant semiotic work is that the constructed code is imbued with connotative power, or a second-order level of meaning, as Barthes put it in his *Mythologies* (1957). This implies, in effect, that we associate a brand with lifestyle or with psychological needs once it is “codified” through signifiers such as a name and through a recognizable textuality such as a slogan or an ad campaign (or both). The semiotic purview has thus been extended to encompass marketing, which manages brand image and promotes the brand code through various media. It is probably Umiker-Sebeok’s 1987 collection of studies which constitutes one of the first volumes to approach the study of ads and the whole business of marketing semiotically in the United States.

**Concluding Remarks**

It is accurate to say that the institution of American-Canadian semiotics today is no different than the institutions of semiotics elsewhere in the world. Using a blend of Saussurean and Peircean concepts and techniques at various stages of analysis and for diverse purposes, it tends to focus on topics of relevance to the contemporary world, from marketing and advertising to the study of hypertextuality. Although it does not have a substantive presence on North American campuses as a discipline, there are many indications, discussed here, that its mode of inquiry is becoming more and more a two-way street, since many ideas developed within semiotics proper are now found scattered in cognate fields across North American research paradigms.
The *raison d’être* of semiotics is, arguably, to investigate whether or not reality can exist independently of the signs that human beings create to represent and think about it. This awareness is gaining ground as semiotics is starting to attract a whole new generation of North American students. As elsewhere, it is correct to say that American-Canadian semiotics is a dynamic, vibrant, and constantly growing field, even with a paucity of institutional and governmental funding support. Perhaps its greatest allure is that with barely a handful of notions and concepts, it can be used so insightfully to describe and understand such things as art, advertising, language, clothing, buildings, and, indeed, anything that is “interesting” in human life. As a consequence, the future in North American semiotics, as Sebeok anticipated, is becoming constantly brighter.

**Bibliographical References**


— (2012), *Understanding American Icons: An Introduction to Semiotics*, Walnut Creek, Left Coast.


