

Entrevista com PER AAGE BRANDT

por Ana Maria Guimarães Jorge

1. Could you tell us about your path towards the studies on semiotics and Cognitive Semiotics? How did the Cognitive Semiotics turn into an area of study?

Well, let me just tell you my own story. Many other stories are possible affluences to this river. I began my studies at the University of Copenhagen in 1963 and chose Romance Philology, since philosophy was too anglo-saxon and pedantic for my taste; linguistics and psychology were in my scope, and I followed many lectures in these departments. So I had the opportunity to hear Louis Hjelmslev in his last years (Language, in Danish, came out in 1963, and we all read it eagerly. Roman Jakobson was a great source of inspiration for all of us – and a friend of Hjelmslev. With a group of students (now all professors), I founded a journal of formalist studies of text and language, Poetik, and became interested in structuralism on many levels of study – language, literature, anthropology, psychoanalysis, philosophy – , since the 60ies were great years for structural research: Greimas (Sémantique structurale, 1966) visited Copenhagen and spoke in Cercle de linguistique; Derrida's books came out in 1967, Foucault, Lacan, Barthes... a true festival, which was connected to the student revolt in 1968, when we were on the barricades asking for an updating of the old professoral teaching of dead philology (so we thought). My Ph.D. 1971 (L'analyse phrastique, published in 73) was on sentence syntax, against Chomsky and developing Tesnière's ideas further into a non-linear view of grammar, closer to semantics, and thus in contact with Greimas' models. After an early habilitation dissertation in Danish on structural semantics in narratology and enthnopological myth analysis (Sætningen Sandheden Døden, published 1983), I started working with Greimas directly on a French Thèse d'Etat in semio-linguistics, using semantic models of early cognitive semantics and René Thom's catastrophe theory (which I had essentially learned from W. Wildgen and J. Petitot) with regards to a dynamic semantics of modality, in both Greimas' sense and in the sense of standard modal verb grammar (La charpente modale du sens, 1987, published in 1992). I found that the Californian scholar of those years had reached almost the same results and started communicating with them. In Aarhus, my colleagues and I founded a Center for Semiotics and launched a research and curricular program in Dynamic Semiotics. We had a Danish national basic research contract for five years (1993-1998) and began to interact regularly with cognitive linguists worldwide. We published a monumental reader,

Kognitiv Semiotik (ed. P. Bundgaard et al.) in 2003. In the U.S., whereto I had moved in 2005, we then founded the journal Cognitive Semiotics (2007). The title is a term suggested by Elmar Holenstein in the 1990ies, in our Jakobson centenary conference in Copenhagen. It describes what is happening, namely that two scholarly traditions overlap and partially fusion.

2. What is Cognitive Semiotics?

In an abstract for the Chinese Semiotics Association, I wrote the following to answer the same question: Classical semiotics has evolved as either an extension of the linguistic paradigm (from F. de Saussure to R. Barthes and E. Benveniste) or an extension of the behavioristic paradigm (from C. S. Peirce to T. Sebeok and U. Eco), and exceptionally, as both (R. Jakobson). While important ideas and findings have been made in these frameworks, they also implied an important limitation to further growth: the belief in the autonomy of language and discourse as origins of meaning. However, linguistic communication is but one of many expressive manifestations, besides music, gesture, imagery, of the semiotic underpinnings of the human mind, and cannot be understood as meaning production without a deeper study of these underlying semiotic properties of the human mind as such, which are inseparable from the properties of human cognition. This is the core endeavor of cognitive semiotics. To find the principles that make signs and sign use possible and sign types necessary; to find the representational laws of the mind that allow human imagination and meaning creation to develop and differentiate into the manifold discourses and practices that characterize our cultures and genres; to find the basic principles that lets us make sense (or nonsense) of the world we live in – these are the challenging open questions that motivate what we call cognitive semiotics.

3. Which universities, research groups and scientific journals around the world are developing studies on Cognitive Semiotics?

I do not have a representative list, but let me mention at least one luminous example: the Center for Cognitive Semiotics of the University of Lund, Sweden (G. Sonesson, J. Zlatev). Of course, the Center for Semiotics of the University of Aarhus is still a hub of the same activities, now with extensions to neuroscience.

Let me add that some cognitive research groups do not understand the importance of meaning and semiotic functions, and concentrate on neural correlations – mainly for philosophical reasons (no phenomenology). Many groups of semioticians, on the other

hand, do not understand why we should bother about the properties of the human mind (because they think that Cultures can do the job all by themselves).

- 4. Over the years, the worldwide scientific community is assigning different meanings to different conceptual principles. Currently, how can we understand the relation between “consciousness”, “mind”, and “self- consciousness” according to the different points of view on Cognitive Semiotics?**

Firstly, we would have to be Cartesians. I agree with J. Fodor on this point. Dualism is necessary – in order to study the causal connections between mind and body, as Descartes started to do (in his *Traité des passions*). Monistic reductionism does not work, and its consequence behaviorism, which plagues cognitive science, has to be avoided. Consciousness has to be studied phenomenologically and then correlated with neuroscientific findings – which many research teams, including ours, are currently doing in the field of music, for example. Art and other expressions of human affectivity have to be fields of semio-cognitive study. Since postcolonial and similar deconstructive attempts are failing to produce valid knowledge, these fields – and cultural studies in general – will invite cognitive semioticians open to and sensitive both to cultural differentiations, differences, specificities, historicities... and to underlying properties of the mind, including the fact of having a ‘self’, namely a stratified representation of its owner (me).

- 5. Many authors conceived the notion of agency as one of the most important aspects to human experience. Could you make a comment about the relation between the concepts of agency and consciousness?**

The first issue of Cognitive Semiotics was on Agency! (The second on Consciousness and Semiosis). My view of agency is that it is born in a dynamic schema of intentional causation. So what is a dynamic schema? I hope to publish a long article on narrativity and schematism in *Poetics Today* – but you never know, people don’t necessarily find these things worthy of a classically trained scholar’s attention. Nevertheless, there are various schemas of causation and change, and their study helps us find out how our minds ‘think’ and represent what happens to us in life.

- 6. What are the most important ideas developed on the concepts of diagram and abduction by scholars of the Cognitive Sciences or Cognitive Semiotics?**

As concerns abduction, my experience is that Peircean scholars waste their time trying to find out what the old man was saying; his problem in this framework is that he was a convinced monist and did not think of logic as cognitive at all; instead, the World was a logical process. Which is nonsense.

As to the semiotics of diagrams, it is a totally different story. There is, in the human mind, a basic set of ‘graphic’ procedures, which come out in the shape of the diagrams that we spontaneously draw on blackboards etc. in order to make ourselves understood. Lines of channeling, for dividing, for dependency, mapping and binding, for direction; arrows for causation, containers, and metric units for scale. Things like that; they work smoothly and elegantly with symbols and icons, without any explicit formalization needed. A formalized diagram is a ‘model’, and by contrast, an artefact. In cognitively related philosophy, Nancy Nersessian has written a beautiful book on diagramming in scientific creativity (Creating scientific concepts, 2008). I have a modest chapter on diagrams in my 2004 book, no comparison.

7. Could you talk about any premise on the concept of diagram linked to the studies of self-organizing systems?

Look, diagrams express the basic ways in which the human mind thinks. We do not think in pure symbols, and iconic representations cannot think at all. Diagrams can. They do seldom form systems, and they are not self-organizing, since they depend directly on communication and experience. Our minds are interactive, so in fact there is only a thin distinction between thinking and communication. Taking away diagramming from scientific work would be like taking away music from social life.

The only self-organizing systems I know of are: organisms. The trick seems to be what René Thom called circular causation: the effects in an organism causes its own causes to change, etc. But even organisms need an Umwelt, a natural niche, to exist. Self-organization appears to be a weird notion issued by a certain sociologist (Luhmann); meaning emerges when experience meets mental representation and thus is schematized and hit by categorization. Midway between ‘perception’ and ‘conceptualization’.

8. Can you comment on the idea of the spatiality and non-spatiality of the “mental thing” versus the tendency of thought localism?

Well, res cogitans is spatial, but not physically spatial; space is a mental format. The elementary domains of experience in the human lifeworld are not only physical, but also

social, emotional, and internal-mental (aesthetical, ethical, epistemical)! Dreams have spatial properties, as diagrams have. To derive all abstract concepts from ‘concrete’ physical phenomena and sensory percepts is common, wrong, and a bad empiricist habit. All animals do abstraction – namely when we categorize food, enemies, conspecifics, mating partners, etc.

There are dimensional unfoldings in all mental spaces. The mind holds objects of attention, categorization, and schematiation, if these objects appear in contexts that form scenarios; these scenarios are mental spaces. The mind is really a theater – and we are both on stage and in the audience. Theatricality is a basic property of meaning production, I think.

9. In your opinion, what is the future direction of Cognitive Semiotics studies?

Academia is in bad shape these days, so it is not easy to tell what will happen. But I have to hope that the negative influence that analytic philosophy has had on the study of both cognition and semiosis will decrease, and that the next generation will be able to see where the philosophical hurdle is: modernist and logico-mystical (Wittgensteinian) resistance to Cartesian reason, to representational theory of mind. The present generation does rarely emit signs of such critical unrest; contemporary academia is mainly a list of chapels and sects you can enroll in, and there is not sufficient space for critical debate in the doctored minds; I have to believe that younger, pre-professional students still are motivated by a desire to know (not only to survive, in the all-consuming nastiness of the institutional world). I remember my formalist youth with excitement each time I cross the streets in Copenhagen or Paris where Hjelmslev, Jakobson, Greimas, Lévi-Strauss and my local masters used to walk and talk. The streets do not remember anything.

Per Aage Brandt, born 1944, Ph.D. from University of Copenhagen 1971 (L'analyse phrastique, 1973), Doctorat d'Etat from Sorbonne Paris I in 1987 (La charpente modale du sens, 1992). Grand Prix de Philosophie de l'Académie française 2002. Founder of the Center for Semiotics at the University of Aarhus. Professor of Cognitive Science at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland. Recent publication: Spaces, Domains, and Meaning, 2004. Founding (2007-) editor of Cognitive Semiotics. Multidisciplinary Journal on Meaning and Mind.