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Anthroposemiotics

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“[...]clearly the import to the natural sciences of concepts developed inside humanistic disciplines like linguistics and semiotics is bound to provoke criticism (for some reason imports the other way round are generally much more easily accepted, e.g. ‘psychological energy’, ‘social homeostasis’).”¹

Jakob von Uexküll, similar to Monsieur Jourdain, invented biosemiotics without knowing it; Tom Sebeok also dabbled in it; but it only came into force with the work of Jesper Hoffmeyer. It seems that Sebeok already used the complementary term anthroposemiotics a couple of times, but it was Hoffmeyer who acquainted me with it, using it for all the things he did not care to study. Like pragmatics, as Yehoshua Bar-Hillel once said, it became as vast waste-basket.

From one day to another, I discovered myself to be an anthroposemiotician, and of course I was embarrassed. My first reaction was to think that, since human beings are animals, anthroposemiotics could only be a part of biosemiotics. But, of course, it must be a particular part. Not only because we, who are in the business of formulating such questions, are human beings ourselves, but, because of being human, we are the only ones able to study other animals – and, as a bonus, ourselves. So I discovered a task for anthroposemiotics: to find out why human beings are such peculiar animals. There is continuity, but there is also discontinuity.

If biosemiotics is understood as zoosemiotics, it is easy to see that there is a great deal of continuity from there to anthroposemiotics. For someone like me, who has, in later years, been involved with the study of other primates, that gap often seems to get ever smaller. Can apes learn to handle signs – even if we define that notion much more strictly than Peirce and biosemiotics i.e. as something analogous to words and pictures? Well, those apes that are taught some substitute for language certainly can, but there are also indications that apes may use signs without having had any language training. Children, in turn, only slowly learn to use signs, and the first ones they master are certainly not linguistic signs. Using the vague notion of sign current in biosemiotics, we unfortunately have no way of stating this.

Taking Sebeok’s idea of endosemiosis much further, Hoffmeyer inaugurated biosemiotics as the study of meaning internal to cells (including, of course, the other side of the membrane). This creates a problem for us anthroposemioticians, for the continuity from cells to that peculiar ape called a human being is very difficult to perceive. No matter how much emergence and degrees of freedom we introduce, it does not seem to add up. Perhaps we could agree that life itself is meaning, but we still have to bridge the distance from meaning to signs.

¹Hoffmeyer, J. and Emmeche C. (1991) ‘Code-duality and the semiotics of nature’ in M. Anderson and F. Merrell (eds.) *On Semiotic Modeling*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 117-166.

Paradoxically, Hoffmeyer claims (though not with these very words) to be using an anthroposemiotic model in order to understand biosemiotics. Indeed, he is very content to reverse the accustomed order of reduction: instead of using a model developed in the natural sciences to study things which are ordinarily the subject of inquiry in the humanities, he employs a model derived from the humanities to study the customary objects of the natural sciences. But is there a difference in reducing signs to cells and cells to signs? We are, of course, more used to the former kind of reduction, such as when signs and/or ideas are called 'memes', so as to become more or less identified with genes. To quote Hoffmeyer quoting Bateson (who may be quoting Gustav Bergmann): what about the difference that makes a difference? Isn't it lost in both kinds of translation?

No doubt models and metaphors are asymmetrical. There is a difference between taking the known properties of a sign and transferring them to a cell, and to take the known properties of a cell and transfer them to a sign. The claim that the butcher is a surgeon is quite different (*pace* Lakoff) from the claim that the surgeon is a butcher. And, yet, in some ways both comparisons amount to the same thing. In both cases we are left wondering what the difference is. That is no problem in the case of the butcher and the surgeon, which are defined for us by our society, but it may be an issue with reference to signs and cells. Metaphors should retain their mysterious ring. But (scientific) models have to account for both the similarity and the difference.

Comparisons are important. But so are distinctions. In this 70th anniversary, what I wish for Jesper is a life beyond signs. Or more precisely: the discovery that life may be meaning, without yet being a sign. In spite of Peirce, ethics of terminology should teach us as much. Only then will the marriage of anthroposemiotics and biosemiotics be truly consummated.