
伦理符号学专辑 ● ● ● ● ●

Semioethics: An Introduction

Frank Nuessel

Abstract: This essay provides bio-bibliographic information about the two originators (Augusto Ponzio, Susan Petrilli) of semioethics. Next, it discusses the etymology of the composite word “semioethics” and its origin as provided by its creators. Finally, it offers a detailed discussion of its basic tenets and of it as a logical progression in semiotics and global semiotics. Ultimately, semioethics implies the human requirement for critique, i. e., the evaluation of connections, implications, and involvement without self-interest.

Key words: Augusto Ponzio, definition, ethics, etymology, responsibility, semioethics, semiotics, Susan Petrilli

伦理符号学引言

弗兰克·尼赛尔

摘要: 本文对伦理符号学的两位创始人, 奥古斯都·庞齐奥和苏珊·佩特丽莉的学术生平进行了介绍, 从词源学上对“伦理符号学”一词进行了讨论。此外, 本文将伦理符号学视为符号学和整体符号学的一种推进, 对它的基本原则加以探讨。伦理符号学意味着批评的人文需要, 即, 对关系的评估、意涵和无功利性的关涉。

关键词：奥古斯都·庞齐奥，定义，伦理学，词源学，责任，伦理符号学，符号学，苏珊·佩特丽莉

Two Founders of Semioethics

An introduction to the topic of “semioethics” requires a brief biographical note on its two creators: Augusto Ponzio, professor in the Department of Letters, Languages, Arts, Italian Studies and Cultural studies (*Lettere, Lingue, Arti, Italianistica e Culture Comparate*) at the University of Bari (Italy), and Susan Petrilli, associate professor in the same department. Both are major figures in the area of semiotics. It should be noted that this brief introduction to their research cannot do justice to the overall quality and quantity of their remarkable academic productivity. A complete and comprehensive biographical sketch of the research of both scholars is available on the Internet.

1. Augusto Ponzio

Augusto Ponzio’s web site (Ponzio, 2013a) provides a remarkable record of his excellent research. Ponzio’s site offers the following detailed information: (1) A semiotic profile, (2) a bio-bibliography, (3) an album, (4) liaisons, (5) faces and masks, (6) collaborators, (7), covers, (8) translations, (9), selected texts for the visitor to the site, (10) selected reviews of books, (11) events, (12) Athanor annual book series, (13) critical readings, (14) autobiography, and (15) links to related topics. The web site itself is a masterly production, and it provides insights into the magnitude of his scholarly achievements. It reveals an illustrious academic profile in teaching, service and professional activity. The *Festschrift Writing, Voice, Undertaking* is a tribute by Ponzio’s many admiring and appreciative colleagues for his exceptional achievements in semiotic research during his sterling academic career with nearly seventy contributors. It must be noted that all of Ponzio’s scholarship appears in the finest international academic venues. Furthermore, Ponzio and Petrilli’s volume *Semiotica* (2003) is the essential reference, and the *opus magnum*, for research on the topic of semioethics.

2. Susan Petrilli

Susan Petrilli has a complete and comprehensive biographical sketch of her academic achievements, which is available at the following web site: <http://www.susanpetrilli.com>. The presentation of Susan Petrilli's web site is itself a masterpiece of logical organization and careful planning. The home page of this web site features a photograph of Petrilli. More importantly, it contains a series of portals, which feature the following elements: (1) book covers, (2) readings on the web, (3) reading online, (4) translations, (5) narrations, (6) communiqués, (7) university, and (8) links to related work. Moreover, her abbreviated *curriculum vitae* appears at the following web site: http://www.susanpetrilli.com/curriculum_ingl.htm. It is remarkable for its depth and breadth. Her areas of scientific research include major studies on Victoria Welby, Charles Sanders Peirce, Charles Morris, Thomas A. Sebeok, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Emmanuel Levinas, Giovanni Vailati, Giorgio Fano and Ferruccio Rossi-Landi. Her works appear in the finest international academic presses (University of Toronto Press, Legas Press, De Gruyter, Transaction and many other outstanding scholarly presses) and major academic journals [*Athanos Arte, letteratura, semiotica, filosofia* (Bari), *Semiotica, The American Journal of Semiotics*, and so forth]. The enumerative list of her published research is extraordinary. Finally, she has presented professional papers at the most important international scientific venues including those in Italy, Spain, Austria, Germany, France, Estonia, the United States, Canada, China, Brazil, and Australia to name but a few.

One of her numerous noteworthy national and international achievements occurred when she was named the seventh Thomas A. Sebeok Fellow of the Semiotic Society of America at the annual meeting of that organization on 17 October. *The American Journal of Semiotics* entitled *Sign Crossroads in Global Perspective: Essays by Susan Petrilli, 7th SSA Sebeok Fellow 2008* in Houston, Texas. Moreover, an entire special issue of was dedicated to her writings. This volume contains 8 original essays authored by Petrilli specifically for this issue of the Semiotic Society of America's journal.

A selected account of Susan Petrilli's many noteworthy achievements

through 2008 appears in *Sign System Studies*. In the five years that have passed since the publication of that essay, Susan Petrilli has authored an extraordinary number of books and essays in the area of semiotics, a partial list of which may be found in the reference section of this essay.

At this juncture, it is worth noting several of Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli's collaborative and single-authored key works concerning semioethics, which is the topic of this essay. All of these works address partially or completely the emergent discipline of semioethics.

Semioethics and Its Etymology

This essay addresses one aspect of Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli's remarkably extensive and outstanding body of scholarship on semioethics, a neologism that they coined after considerable deliberation in an effort to find the *mot juste* for a concept that permeates much of their research either directly or indirectly. This composite word consists of two elements "semio", a reduced version of "semiotics" and "ethics" to create the hybrid lexical item that encompasses an entirely new and central perspective on semiotics. Danesi (2013, p. 590) defines "semiotics" as "[...] the study of the meanings of human intellectual and artistic products, from words, symbols, narratives, symphonies, and comic books, to scientific theories and mathematical theorems". *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Morris, 1979, p. 450) defines "ethics" as "[t]he study of the general nature of morals and of the specific choices to be made by the individual in his relationship with others". Thus the expression "semioethics" signifies the meaningful study of individual moral behavior and its signification with respect to others. The etymological origin of "semiotics" comes from the Greek "*semeioun*" ("to mark", "give signals", "to note") from *semieion* ("sign"). Ethics derives from the Greek word *ethos* ("moral custom").

In his paper "The Ethics of Terminology", Peirce himself (1903, pp. 130–131; CP 2. 222) states that:

Science is continually gaining new conceptions; and every new *scientific* conception should receive a new word, or better, a new family of cognate words. The duty of supplying this word naturally falls upon the person who

introduces the new conception; but is a duty not to be undertaken without a thorough knowledge of the principles and a large acquaintance with the details and history of the special terminology in which it is to take place, no without sufficient comprehension of the principles of word formation of the national language, nor without a proper study of the laws of symbols in general.

In this sense, Ponzio and Petrilli have followed Peirce's wise counsel to create a new term for a new domain of scientific inquiry. In this instance, they have introduced the expression "semioethics" to address a new and necessary and significant area of semiotic research.

In *Expression and Interpretation in Language*, Petrilli cites an email exchange between Augusto Ponzio and John Deely, which discusses the origin and development of the term "semioethics", and it is reproduced here.

Responding to John Deely's (Deely, 2010, p. 49, note 66) query *à propos* the term "semioethics", in an email exchange between 4 and 5 January 2010, Ponzio explains as follows:

Semioethics was born in the early 1980s in connection with the introductions (written by Susan Petrilli) to the Italian translations of works by Thomas Sebeok, Charles Morris, Victoria Welby and my own introduction and interpretation of works by Mikhail Bakhtin, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, Giovanni Vailati, and Peirce [...]. The problem was to find, with Susan, a term which indicates the study of the relation between signs and values, ancient semeiotics and semiotics, meaning and significance, and which somehow translates Welby's "Significs" into Italian; we coined terms and expressions such as "teleosemiotica" "etosemiotica", "semiotica etica" in contrast with "semiotica cognitiva" (see the Italian edition by Massimo Bonfantini of Peirce, *La semiotica cognitiva*, 1980, Einaudi, Torino).

The beginning of semioethics is in the introductions by myself and Susan to the Italian editions (translation by Susan) of Sebeok, *Il segno e i suoi maestri*, Bari, Adriatica, 1985, of Welby, *Significato, metafora e interpretazione*, Adriatica, 1985, in the essays by Susan and myself published in H. Walter Schmitz (ed.), *Essays in Significs*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1990, in Susan's books of the 1980s, such as *Significs, semiotica, significazione*, Pref. by Thomas Sebeok, Adriatica, 1988, and

Ponzo's, such as *Filosofia del linguaggio*, Adriatica, 1985.

In a private note written in the context of the International Colloquium, “Refractions. Literary Criticism, Philosophy and the Human Sciences in Contemporary Italy in the 1970s and the 1980s”, held at the Department of Comparative Literature, Carleton University, Ottawa, 27–29 September 1990 (in the discussion following delivery of my paper “Rossi-Landi tra *Ideologie e Scienze umane*”), I used the Italian term “Semioetica” playing on the displacement of “e” in the Italian word “semeiotica”: indicating in Semiotics the ancient vocation of Semeiotics (as conceived by Hippocrates and Galenus) for improving life, bettering it.

But in the title of 3 lessons delivered with Susan at Curtin University of Technology, Perth in Australia, we still used the term “teleosemiotica”: “Teleosemiotics and global semiotics” (July–September, 1999, Australian lecture tour; Adelaide University, Monash University, in Melbourne, Sydney University, Curtin University, in Perth, Northern Territory University, Darwin).

The book *Semioetica*, co-authored by Susan and myself, was published in 2003 and is the landing achievement of this long crossing of texts, conceptions, and words, as results from our bibliographic references [...].

It is very difficult to say exactly when an idea is born with its name: “universal gravitation” was born when an apple fell from a tree on Newton's head; is that so?

Semioethics as a Logical Developmental Progression in the Study of Semiotics

In her essay entitled “On communication: Contributions to the Human Sciences and to Humanism from Semiotics Understood as Semioethics” in the special issue of *The Journal of American Semiotics* (2008, p. 196), Petrilli provides a particularly thoughtful discussion of semioethics. For this reason, in this essay, I am using her own words to portray her vision and her theory of semioethics. In particular, Petrilli states:

We can analyze communication as exteriorization, and yet not question either the processes or the beings involved; or we can interrogate either one of

these beings, analyzing the interior being externalized in communication, on the one hand, and the being of the receiver, on the other. In other words, two beings enter into communication with respect to which either we can limit our analysis to their behavior in communication, or we can interrogate their being in the effort to understand their constitution, their coming into existence, their sense. This is the orientation developed by what Augusto Ponzio and I [Ponzio and Petrilli, 2003, p. 7] have designated, with a neologism, *semioethics*.

With respect to semioethics, Petrilli (2008, p. 207) further observes that:

In a globalized world tending toward its own destruction, semiotics must diagnose symptoms, make a prognosis and indicate possible therapies to improve the future of globalization and the health of semiosis generally. This program is part of an orientation in semiotics called semioethics.

In truth, semioethics does not have a decalogue to propose with special aims and practices, a formula to develop more or less sincerely, more or less hypocritically. From this point of view, semioethics is alien to stereotypes as much as to norms and ideology. Semioethics proposes a critique of stereotypes, norms and ideology, of different types of value as described, for example, by Charles Morris in his various writings. Semioethics presupposes the human capacity for critique. Its special vocation is to evidence sign networks where it seemed that there were none, therefore connections and implications from which escape is impossible where, instead, it seemed there were only net separations, boundaries and distances with relative alibis which serve to safeguard responsibility understood as limited responsibility (therefore, consciousness in the form of a “clean conscience”).

The critical work of semioethics shows how the condition of mutually indifferent differences is delusory, and how the whole planet's destiny is ultimately implied in the choices made by each and every one of us, and vice versa.

Semioethics offers an overview that is as global as is the semiotic animal. Today more than ever, we must become aware of our semioethic capacity and live up to it, to our capacity for dialogue, otherness, listening, hospitality, critique and responsibility. But, even more urgent, we must realize that full comprehension of the semioethic dimension of semiosis is of vital importance for

life, if life on this planet, human and nonhuman, is to survive.

In addition to describing and defining semioethics, Petrilli (2008, p. 208) also enumerates the tasks for semioethics. The first one is:

A task for semioethics is the critique of genres, that is, of the processes of hypostatization operated through genres, by referring the manifestations of life to genres. The term “genre” is understood here in the broad sense of the Latin “genus”, “generis”, Italian “genere”, in English translated with an array of different terms indicating a type, kind, style, assemblage, group, role, class, category—an association of some sort founded in the logic of identity: in literature or music, “genre”, in biology “genus”, in grammar “gender”, etc. The term “genre” in the broad sense is an abstraction that determines another abstraction: the “individual”. Genre and individual are concrete abstractions: abstractions that form the reality we live in. Specifically, politics and logic, which are based on the logic of identity, consider singularities as individuals, as belonging to a genre, as equals. The relation of alterity between one singularity and another is pre-political and pre-logical. Politics and logic arise because of my exclusive responsibility toward every other, such that I am obliged to keep faith to this responsibility and relate to every other indifferently. This means that I must not only relate to a singularity, but to a singularity according to a genre. I am obliged to relate to the individual of a given assemblage, who is interchangeable as such with every other, indifferent as regards the other in that same assemblage. Translation processes are continuous from singularities to individuals and genres, from alterities to identities, from difference among signs to signs of difference that identify a genre. Individual identity and community identity are fixed in genres.

Petrilli (2008, p. 209) continues her discussion of semioethics by stating that:

The categories of “identity” and “genre” are intimately interrelated and play a central role in today’s communication society, whether we are dealing with the identity of the individual subject or the collective subject—social class, ethnic group, nation, European Union, “Western world”, etc. Individuals belong to genres—sexual genders, social classes, professional roles, race, ethnic group or national assemblages, to communities of some sort, etc. Relations among singularities are

translated into relations among individuals, which are relations among genres. We have proposed a semioethics of translation as the doctrine of inter-genre and trans-genre communication, with the aim of inverting this process by following the opposite translation trajectory: translation into the signs of the relationship among singularities, what Levinas (1961) calls the “face-to-face” relationship

Finally, Petrilli (2008, p. 219) states that:

Global semiotics must be adequately founded in cognitive semiotics, but it must also open to a third dimension beyond the quantitative and the theoretical, namely, the ethical—or better, what we are designating as the “semioethical”. Semioethics is related to our proposal of a new form of humanism. In fact, recalling Levinas, but also the other authors mentioned in this paper, semioethics summons us to authenticity of commitment at a pragmatic level, the level of action, beyond the purely theoretical; semioethics summons us to participation and involvement with the other beyond individual separatisms and interests, to care and love for the other. Art, talent, is more important than wisdom and self-possession, says Levinas; beyond reason, says Peirce, we must develop in the direction of reasonableness. Semioethics aims to transcend separatism among the sciences and among the objects of their research, and to relate the natural sciences to the logico-mathematical and the human sciences.

Concluding Remarks

Within the past decade, Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli have developed and crystallized an important and logical evolutionary progression in semiotics—one that bodes well for the interdiscipline of semiotics and for the future of humanity and civilization. Their ability to articulate in a clear and comprehensive fashion the notion of semioethics as a major innovation in semiotics is one that will hold sway for the foreseeable future. To be sure, a complete understanding of Ponzio and Petrilli’s deft articulation of semioethics requires a careful and close reading of their single-authored works and their collaborative works enumerated in the reference section.

As a final note, in the last paragraph of one of their collaborative statements on semioethics, Petrilli and Ponzio (2010, p. 162) capture the

essence of semioethics when they state that:

Semioethics implies the exquisitely human capacity for critique. Its special vocation is to evidence sign networks where it seemed that there were none [...], bringing to light and evaluating connections, implications and involvement which cannot be escaped, where it seemed that there were only net separations and distances with their relative alibis. Alibis serve to safeguard responsibility in a limited sense, therefore they safeguard the individual conscience, which readily represents itself as a “clean conscience”.

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Author:

Frank Nuessel, Professor in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages at the University of Louisville, President of the Semiotic Society of America (2011). His research interests include Italian studies, Hispanic linguistics, gerontology, onomastics, and semiotics.

作者简介:

弗兰克·尼赛尔, 路易斯威尔大学古典与现代语言系教授, 美国符号学协会主席 (2011)。主要研究方向为意大利研究、西班牙语系语言学、老年学、专有名词学和符号学。

Email: fhnues01@louisville.edu