

批判性符号学：从符号到意识形态

Critical Semiotics: From Sign to Ideology



Graduate Seminar, Shanghai University

Massimo LEONE & Friends, University of Turin / Shanghai
University

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Course Contents

“It makes sense”; “it does not make sense”; “it is meaningful”; “it is meaningless”: when individuals or whole societies find meaning through language in reality, they are guided by invisible schemes called “language ideologies”. Language ideologies have been variously defined, but a common description designates them as “sets of ideas a community holds about the role of language”. They have become a key object of investigation for linguistic anthropology, that is, the branch of ethnology that concentrates on the role of language in human communities. Language, however, is not only verbal. It does not manifest itself only through words, but also through other patterned articulations, involving mental representations and non-verbal systems of signs. That is why linguistic anthropology must give rise to a semiotic anthropology in order to fully grasp the place of language in human groups. It must expand the study of language ideologies into that of semiotic ideologies. These can be defined as implicit guidelines that pattern meaning-making in societies. Using language to give value to space and time, perceive reality, interpret it, keep memory of it: these activities seem spontaneous exactly like speaking one’s ‘mother tongue’. Yet, exactly like ‘natural languages’, non-verbal meaning-making too follows rules, which together compose a mysterious ‘grammar of signification’. Building on linguistic anthropology, semiotics, and semiotic anthropology, the course will help participants understand why they conceive of verbal and non-verbal meaning as they do, and how different cultures develop alternative understandings of meaningfulness and meaninglessness through both verbal language and other systems of signs.

Lesson 1 (10 September 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):

Introduction. The lesson spells out the overall rationale of the course and provides a roadmap through it, describing the main content of the subsequent lessons. It lays down the big questions to which the course sets about to answer. The lesson, moreover, surveys the existing literature on the concept of “language ideology”. Scholars agree on defining it as a set of ideas a community holds about the role of language. Scholars disagree, however, on whether these ideas are explicit or implicit. Alternative views on the matter imply different methodologies: the analysis of explicit considerations on language in the former case, the analysis of more multifarious materials in the latter.

Lesson 2 (17 September 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):

Research Methodologies. The lesson expounds on the methodological challenge of gathering evidence



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on such abstract and omnipresent phenomena as “semiotic ideologies”. It points out that the current expansion of the semiotic focus from signs and texts to whole cultures needs the development of a coherent method. Therefore, it proposes to establish it through applying the topological theory of fractals to the analysis of different kinds of symmetries in the semiosphere.

Special guest: Prof. Jenny PONZO: “Ideology and the Semiotic Analysis of Literary Characters”

Lesson 3 (24 September 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):

Semiotic Ideologies of Agency. The lesson deals with the origins of textual agency and inertia. Texts predominantly work as either indexes, icons, or symbols, according to Charles S. Peirce’s typology of signs. These three types exert agency to an increasing extent. The lesson seeks to determine the origin of this gradient in the dialectics between motivation and arbitrariness. The more a text is received as motivated, the likelier it is that it will exert a strong agency. This hypothesis leads to an articulation of the rhetoric of motivation and de-motivation through which communities of interpreters promote or demote the agentive force of texts.

Special guest: Prof. Gabriele MARINO: “The Ideologies of Authenticity and Newness in Music.”

Lesson 4 (1 October 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):

Semiotic Ideologies of Time. The lesson suggests that cultures can be categorized depending on whether they concentrate their attention on the past, the present, or the future, and depending on whether this attention is euphoric, dysphoric, or neutral. Such articulation is further complexified with reference to the linguistic concept of aspectuality and the three semiotic dimensions of the indexical reference to the ontology of time, its iconic representation, and the symbolical evocation of it. The lesson shows that cultures do not diverge only in terms of ‘when’ in time they focus their attention on, but also in terms of ‘how’ in time they do so, according to the specific quality they attribute to the temporal dimension.

Special guest: Prof. Bruno SURACE: “The Semiotic Ideologies of Cinema”

Lesson 5 (8 October 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):

Semiotic Ideologies of Space. The lesson enquires about ‘invisible frontiers’. Looking at the map of many contemporary western cities, for example through “Google Maps”, no fences, barriers, or walls are visible. Yet, invisible urban frontiers exist, and divide ethnic groups, socio-economic classes, and cultural communities. These frontiers are not virtual: they bring about the physical separation of



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different groups of people as effectively as visible frontiers do. They are not neutral either: more often than not, they express the weakness of social cohesion within contemporary cities. A thorough analysis of these invisible frontiers and a competent elaboration of ways they could be bridged, are, therefore, both urgent. But how is it possible to study something that is invisible, that does not show on the map of cities? The lesson advocates the adoption, for this purpose, of the ethno-semiotic method, combining ethnographic observation with semiotics.

Special guest: Prof. **Mattia THIBAUT**: "The Semiotic Ideologies of the Urban Space"

Lesson 6 (15 October 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):

Semiotic Ideologies of Perception. The lesson takes as its point of departure two limit phenomena of perception and sign theory: *déjà vu* and hallucinations; both represent an opportunity to question the fundamental principles of cognition and unveil their underlying processes. The lesson describes the cognitive nature of *déjà vu* and hallucinations, briefly reviews the literature about them, and reads them as cognitive perturbations in the light of a semiotics of mental simulacra related to perception, apperception, awareness, memory, and imagination. The lesson, then, expands such cognitive and semiotic modelling into a critique of the present-day digital culture: the uncritical adoption of a mnemonic ideal based on digital archives jeopardizes one of the key features of embodied memory: imperfection and, as a consequence, the possibility of accessing aesthetic and temporal singularity. A collective memory prone to *déjà vu* and hallucinations ensues, the lesson contends.

Special guest: Prof. **Gianmarco GIULIANA**: "The Semiotic Ideologies of Gaming"

Lesson 7 (22 October 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):

Semiotic Ideologies of Relation. The lesson revolves around the concept of reasonability. On the one hand, this is a key idea in Umberto Eco's interpretive semiotics, for it enables the formation of a community of interpreters and avoids both extremes of fundamentalism and anarchy. On the other hand, reasonability is not immune from the technological infrastructure where interpretations take place. In the digital sphere, the notion itself of community is deeply altered as a consequence of fundamental change in the very nature of connectedness. Whereas in the pre-digital world, a semantic kind of communality would ground connectedness and the ensuing communities, in digital social networks, instead, syntactic communities prevail: clusters of members emerge more out of contagion and memetic force than through sharing actual semantic content.

Special guest: Prof. **Simona STANO**: "Ideology and the Semiotic Analysis of Food"

Lesson 8 (29 October 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):



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Semiotic Ideologies of Generation. The lesson dwells on causation (semiotic ideologies through which human beings reconstruct or imagine the genesis of phenomena) and concentrates, in particular, on the human difficulty at accepting randomness. First, it defines three types of it: ontological, phenomenological, and epistemological randomness. It introduces, then, a fourth, semiotic definition of randomness, as something that does not arise from intrinsic ontological characteristics, or from the imperfect perceptibility and, therefore, phenomenological unfathomability of a subjacent regularity, or from the unsuitability of the formula that is supposed to grasp and, possibly, control it, but from the way in which a metalanguage is created in order to describe and make sense of irregularity

Special guest: Prof. Antonio SANTANGELO and Prof. Elsa SORO: "The Semiotic Ideologies of Fiction and Travel"

Lesson 9 (5 November 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):

Semiotic Ideologies of Interpretation. The lesson seeks to establish a dialogue, from a semiotic point of view, with the grand cartography of methods in literary criticism proposed by Prof. Zhang Jiang in his famous essay "Imposed Interpretation". While acknowledging that Prof. Zhang Jiang identifies the most crucial weak points of the semiotic methodology, the lesson nevertheless takes these criticisms as occasions to improve the approach of semiotics, as regards especially the following oppositions: diagrammatic over-schematization versus quest for a more judicious application of the method; overenthusiastic adoption of mathematical formulas versus cautious cross-fertilization between humanities and scientific thought; frantic pursuance of theoretical uniformity versus humble acceptance of literary idiosyncrasies; fundamentalist proclamation of the self-reliance of the text versus thoughtful consideration of the evident links between the text and its contexts.

Special guests: Dr Federico BIGGIO and Dr Victoria DOS SANTOS: "The Semiotic Ideologies of Augmented Reality"

Lesson 10 (12 November 2020, 14:10-17:40, Beijing Time):

Semiotic Ideologies of Observation. The lesson takes as a point of departure the domain of law and normativity, broadly conceived; it points out that the sensorial access to law that a society grants to its members is underpinned by a logic of exhibition and disclosure; this, in turn, results from a more abstract cultural dialectics between transparency and opacity. Investigating the systems of signs by which the inner functioning of the law is either concealed to external audiences or manifested to them leads to a deeper understanding of the juridical aesthetics of society. This approach entails two advantages: on the one hand, the possibility to compare and contrast different regimes of disclosure and secrecy in the synchronic dimension, connecting the discourse of the law with other – apparently distant – types of discourse, which adopt the same aesthetics of transparency or opaqueness in other



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domains of social life and discursive production; on the other hand, the opportunity for a more insightful intelligence of the diachronic development of such aesthetics, so that it may be interpreted as the long-term by-product of historical watersheds in cultural history.

Special guests: Prof. Silvia BARBOTTO and Prof. Cristina VOTO: "The Semiotic Ideologies of Contemporary Art"

Prerequisites:

The course is primarily aimed at advanced students at the master's and doctoral level; the spectrum of potentially concerned students is, however, very broad, for the approach of the course is interdisciplinary and its contents do not require much prior specialist knowledge; technical notions and terms will indeed be systematically introduced in plain terms throughout the course

Text Books and Reference Books:

LEONE, M. (2019) 论无意味—后物质时代的意义消减 [The Significance of Insignificance; in Chinese; series "Semiotics & Media"]. Chengdu, Sichuan: Sichuan University Press, 250 pp.; ISBN: 978-7-5690-3001-3

English version (slightly different): LEONE, M. 2019. On Insignificance: The Loss of Meaning in the Post-Material Age. London and New York: Routledge; 226 pp.; ISBN: Hb: 978-1-138-61831-2; Pb: 978-1-138-61830-5; eBook: 978-0-429-46127-9

Performance Evaluation and Score Assessment:

Students will have to write a short paper of five pages maximum on the topics of the course.

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