

## **Gatherings in Biosemiotics 24: Bloemfontein, South Africa 2024**

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The 24th Gatherings in Biosemiotics, organized by Xany Jansen Van Vuuren and Kobus Marais, was held in Bloemfontein, South Africa from 17–21 June 2024. Thirty-two presenters from Africa, Europe, North America, South America and Asia presented talks, either online or in person. The presenters came from a variety of scientific backgrounds, including biology, philosophy, translation studies, music, history, microbiology.

### **Biosemiotics in the Global South**

Biosemiotics is the study of communication and sign processes in all living organisms, or in essence – it is about the signs of life (Emmeche *et al.* 2010; Hoffmeyer 2008; Sebeok 2001). Presentations of various directions of biosemiotics were encountered throughout the course of the week's proceedings. Furthermore, the theme of this year's Gatherings, "Biosemiotics in the context of the Global South", opened up our thinking about the possibility of biosemiotics to take on unique dimensions as a result of not only diverse ecosystems but also of cultural practices and indigenous knowledge systems. As such, we believed that the location of this year's conference also inspired some collaborations on, or at the very least interest in, biosemiotics in the Global South. This links up with another foundational characteristic of biosemiotics: its inherent interdisciplinary and integrative approach between several fields of thinking, which ultimately fosters a holistic understanding of life processes, incorporating scientific methods within both local as well as global knowledges. Apart from the focus on biosemiotics in the Global South, interdisciplinarity was a golden thread in the majority of the week's presentations: many presentations intersected with anthropology, photography, ecology, linguistics, history, biology, and environmental science amongst others.

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Additional information about, and recordings of, the event can be found on the Gatherings in Biosemiotics 2024 web page.<sup>3</sup>

### **Pre-conference talk**

On the evening of 17 June, we hosted a pre-conference presentation by Kalevi Kull, who gave a fascinating talk titled “Semaphylls, and other means of interspecies sign relations”, where, using Elmar Leppik’s concepts of ‘semaphylls’, ‘semataxis’, ‘telesemeion’ and ‘trophosemeion’, Kull demonstrated the influence of biosemiotics on understanding the workings of ecosystems and the nature of communities. The event was attended by Gatherings delegates as well as the broader University of the Free State community, both online and in person. The event was followed by an intimate cocktail evening where in-person attendees could get to know one another and catch up with long-time friends.

### **Conference programme**

Due to the hybrid nature of the event (with both online and in-person delegates) the programme had to be structured to allow for presenters in different time-zones to be able to present at a time convenient for them. Consequently, the programme was not organized according to themes. Rather, those who were presenting in-person or were situated in the East or similar time-zones such as South Africa mainly presented in the mornings, while those who were situated in the West (e.g. the Americas) mainly presented in the afternoons.

Day one (Tuesday 18 June) started with a series of in-person presentations. Firstly, we heard a talk by Karel Kleisner on sexual dimorphism in the human face, followed by Emiliano Vargas’ presentation on AI in music and biosemiotics. Filip Jaroš explored animal cultures and/or anthropological difference, after which Eudmila Bennett closed the morning sessions with her online presentation on Umberto Eco’s C-space. The afternoon session started with an online talk on science as biosemiosis by Hugo Alrøe, followed by an in-person discussion on formal cause in biosemiotic processes by Jan-Hendrik Hofmeyr. This was followed by 90 minute in-person panel discussion on biosemiotics in the Global South, which is covered in more detail further in the next section of this report. The last two presenters of the day were Jaime Cárdenas-García (online) on the infoautopoietic resemanticization of anthropology, and Sergey Chebanov, who

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ufs.ac.za/conferences/conference/gatherings-in-biosemiotics-2024>.

presented in-person, answering the question what biosemiotics has given to biology and semiotics.

Day two of the Gatherings (Wednesday 19 June) started with an in-person discussion on invasive species and biosemiotics by Thorolf van Walsum, followed by a series of online presentations: Joshua Bacigalupi's talk on split Innenwelten, Emanuela Bove's presentation on a biosemiotic approach to elucidating contemporary challenges in the identification of edible matter, and Arno Goudsmit's discussion on situating code between proto-writing and proto-reading. Kobus Marais, the only in-person presenter of the afternoon, opened the afternoon session with a discussion on the biosemiotics of art, followed by Oscar Salvador Miyamoto Gómez's discussion on the anthropogenic disruption of episodic memory in animal societies. After this, Victoria Alexander gave a biosemiotic response to Transhumanism, and Camilo José Medina Ramírez discussed butterflies as a model of false head biosemiotic analysis.<sup>4</sup> While Don Favareau was aiming to present his consideration of the role of active inference in biosemiotics, connection problems on his side unfortunately prevented him from doing so. The last talk of the day was presented by Daniel Mayer, who discussed three kinds of wholes.

The third day of the Gatherings (Thursday 20 June) started with a series of in-person presentations. The first of these was a talk on allopatric speciation as a result of mutual evolution of interpretant and interpretation by Nikolai Skipin, followed by Jana Švorcová's discussion of F. W. J. Schelling's view on organism and autopoiesis. Innocent Dande presented on canine biosemiotic history of the city of Harare, after which Kalevi Kull and Frederik Stjernfelt co-presented a paper on co-presence and co-localization in the *umwelt*. The last talk of the morning on Pierre Hadot and eco-phenomenology was co-presented by Wiida Fourie-Basson and Louise du Toit. The afternoon session was mainly online, with a presentation on the concept of *umwelt* between Uexküll and Husserl, and a talk by Luiz Fernando on anthropology and biosemiotics. This was followed by the second panel discussion of the week, on biosemiotics, culture and agency, the details of which are discussed in the subsequent section of this report.

The day's proceedings ended with the conference dinner at a local restaurant, Jewers Nice, in Bloemfontein.

The last day of the conference (Friday 21 June) started with two in-person presentations. The first of these was an ecosemiotic approach to translating animals into human thinking by Xany Jansen van Vuuren, followed by Helen-Mary Cawood's presentation on photography in the semiosphere. Morten Tønnessen

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<sup>4</sup> For this talk, Camilo José Medina Ramírez received The Jesper Hoffmeyer Award for promising young scholars in biosemiotics.

provided an online discussion on applied umwelt theory in the context of descriptive phenomenology and phenomenological triangulation, after which Kalevi Kull gave an in-person talk on natural contradictions. The last two presenters of the Gatherings were Ekaterina Velmezova who made an online presentation on the “humanization” of language in the categories of biosemiotics, and Tim Ireland with his in-person contribution on bio-semiotic logic.

Before closing the event, the organizers of the 25th Gatherings (Yogi Hendlin and Constantijn Kusters) addressed the delegates and invited them to the Gatherings in Rotterdam in 2025. The Biosemiotics Achievement Award 2023 for the best paper published in the journal *Biosemiotics* was awarded to Heidi Campana Piva for her article titled “Semiotically mediated human–bee communication in the practice of Brazilian meliponiculture” (Campana Piva 2023). The award was presented by Kalevi Kull on behalf of the International Society for Biosemiotics Studies. The word of closing came from one of the organizers, Kobus Marais.

## Panel discussions

The programme lent itself to the organization of two panel discussions: one on Biosemiotics in the Global South, led by Kobus Marais (in keeping with the theme of the conference) and one on biosemiotics, culture and agency. The former had a number of presenters from the Global South, in particular Africa, with panellists from South Africa and Zimbabwe. Each speaker was awarded ten minutes to talk about the possibilities of doing biosemiotic work in an African context, with the aim of evoking a discussion on biosemiotics in this context. The talks contained topics such as the purpose of science communication within the framework of Pierre Hadot’s theme of *Phusis* by Wiida Fourie-Basson, ecofascism in the Global South presented by Helen-Mary Cawood and Xany Jansen van Vuuren, the history of the so-called African “mongrel dogs” and their relationship with freedom fighters in colonial Zimbabwe by Innocent Dande, and the Global South as a constraint by Kobus Marais.

The second panel consisted of a series of fruitful discussions on Kalevi Kull’s essay “Choosing and learning: Semiosis means choice” (Kull 2018) by seven panellists. Paul Cobley started the discussion by touching on choice, plurality and biosemiotics. His contribution was followed by Victoria Alexander’s discussion on living systems, semiosis and choice between various options in living systems, after which Joshua Bacigalupi approached the topic from the starting point of biosemiotics and novel options in choice that can exist simultaneously. Emanuela Bove explored agency, constraints and choice in biosemiotics within the space of

food choices, followed by Frederik Stjernfelt's talk on culture, agency and biosemiotics and the danger of viewing cultures as closed systems. Ludmila Bennett contributed to the discussion by examining elementary choice in structural linguistics within the framework of "newness". Kobus Marais closed the discussion by talking about agency and culture in Biosemiotics in terms of relevance and judgment in semiosis. Both panel discussions were followed by fruitful deliberations between all participants.

### **Post-conference excursion**

The gatherings ended on a high note with an afternoon excursion in the form of a city tour, which included a visit to our local Anglo-Boer War Museum and Women's Memorial, a tour of the Bloemfontein city centre, and ended with a visit to one of the few game reserves in the middle of a city centre in the world – Naval Hill, where the delegates were able to see some South African fauna and flora.

### **Conclusion**

We believe that the 24th Gatherings in Biosemiotics, with contributions from both Global South and Global North, not only incorporated a diverse array of interactions, but also brought about new semiotic, cultural and sociological understandings of nature and natural systems and epistemologies. We further believe that the importance of the interdisciplinary approaches in addressing life's communicational practices was duly emphasized during the week's discussions and presentations.

### **References**

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