

Discussing the “extended semiotics” in various academic cultures

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“Extended semiotics”/“*Sémiotique étendue*” – an international conference bearing this title was held in Paris on 27–28 January, 2025. More precisely, the full title of the conference was “*La sémiotique étendue: Indices, signes, représentation*” (“Extended semiotics: Indices, signs, representation”); the academic event was organized jointly by two French learned societies, *Société d’histoire et d’épistémologie des sciences du langage* (Society for History and Epistemology of Language Sciences, SHESL) and *Société française de zoosémiotique* (French Society for Zoosemiotics, SfZ). Participants from several countries – in particular, France, Switzerland, Estonia, Italy, Czech Republic – presented their papers and took part in the discussions. While the working languages of the event were French and English, during breaks discussions were also conducted in Italian, Russian, Czech, Estonian, etc. – a vivid illustration of the international nature of the meeting that united scholars from various academic cultures and traditions.

Already the very first part of the conference title – “Extended semiotics” – seems indicative, since it implies that there also exists some “ordinary”, that is, “non-extended” semiotics. It also alludes to ‘extended evolutionary synthesis’ – a paradigmatic shift in contemporary biology that tends to move towards semiotics (Kull 2022). The explanations of the objectives of the event by its organizers in their call for papers,³ as well as the picture of a (playful and seemingly very happy ☺ – see Fig. 1) cat on the cover of the booklet of the conference abstracts showed clearly that, according to this logic, the “extended semiotics” must not be limited to semiotics associated exclusively with human activity (most probably, in contrast with the “ordinary” and “non-extended” one). However, as the organizers of the

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³ See the “Argument(s)” (*Argumentaire*) with its list of references: <https://shesl.org/colloque-shesl-2025/>.

conference Astrid Guillaume (French Society for Zoosemiotics, STIH, Sorbonne University) and Didier Samain (SHESL, HTL, Sorbonne University) emphasized when opening the event, the conference aimed at better understanding of both the past and the current situations in the academic world, in particular by documenting the extension of semiotic, even linguistic, conceptions beyond the language [*langue*] field.

The two days of the academic event were divided into four parts in accordance with the topics of papers presented. Each part was opened by a plenary paper, which, in a way, determined the scholarly “tone” for the subsequent presentations.

The first plenary paper, “*Le signe à toutes les sauces ... Regards sur le Moyen Âge*” (“The sign in all its forms... A look at the Middle Ages”), was delivered by Costantino Marmo (University of Bologna) and Irène Rosier-Catach (CNRS/EPHE). The scholars compared the semiotics of Classical Antiquity, Late Antiquity, and the Middle Ages. The comparison was conducted from the perspective of observing the separation between linguistic semiotics and the semiotics of the “natural world”. In this regard, particular attention was paid to Roger Bacon’s classification of signs from 1267. The plenary paper was followed by a presentation of Claudia Stancati (University of Calabria), which focused on epistemological reflections on the relationship between ‘extended semiotics’ and what is currently called ‘general semiotics’. Later in this session, Ivan Fomin (Charles University, Prague) spoke about the extended classification of interpretants, presenting a nomenclature of interpretants and discussing its applications in ‘extended semiotics’. The approach he proposed was founded on Charles Peirce’s idea that the interpretant is itself a sign produced by another sign.

In his plenary paper, Jacques François (University of Caen Normandy) offered a historical and epistemological analysis of modern biosemiotics, the main centres of which the scientist considers to be the University of Tartu (associated, in particular, with the names of Jakob von Uexküll and Juri Lotman) and the University of Copenhagen (associated with the research of Jesper Hoffmeyer). As an “alternative version of biosemiotics” (code-based *vs.* interpretative), François examined the research of Marcello Barbieri from the University of Ferrara. As François spoke about the biosemiotic research conducted at the University of Tartu, it was certainly not by chance that, following his presentation, two papers were given whose authors have fruitful academic contacts with modern Tartu biosemioticians. Pauline Suzanne Delahaye (University of Tartu/French Society for Zoosemiotics) distinguished two “very distinct” paths that the semiotics of the living has recently taken, identifying in this respect the concepts of “close concrete use” (concerning this, the researcher referred to zoosemiotics) and that of

the “distant theoretical use” (assuming research on ‘*lyfe*’⁴ and reflections on the necessity of semiosis as a primary condition of the living). Speaking via video-link, Suren Zolyan (Armenian-Russian University in Yerevan/Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University in Kaliningrad) tried to clarify in his paper the relations between semiotics and molecular genetics, in particular answering the question of what molecular genetics could “teach” semioticians at present.

The second day of the Paris conference began with a plenary lecture presented by Kalevi Kull (University of Tartu) and Ekaterina Velmezova (University of Lausanne/University of Tartu) who spoke about biosemiotics in the context of general semiotics, dwelling particularly on the ‘animal semiotics’ as it was perceived by Juri Lotman. In particular, they discussed the following paradox of Lotman’s later works: recognizing animal communication as part of the semiosphere, Lotman at the same time was not very consistent on this issue, sometimes denying animals the “right” to semiosis. Continuing to talk about the history of biosemiotics and discussing primarily zoosemiotics, Anne-Gaëlle Toutain (University of Bern) emphasized that the formation of zoosemiotics as a scientific discipline fits into the so-called Peircean semiotic tradition. In biosemiotics, the latter was “preferred” to the Saussurean tradition not only because of the triadic model of the sign that underlays it, but also because the central place in zoosemiotics was given to the concept of semiosis, which led to a “liberation” from the logocentrism characteristic of the Saussurean tradition.

The fourth plenary paper presented at the conference, that by Michel Kreutzer (Laboratory Ethology Cognition Development, Paris Nanterre University), raised the question of ‘zoolanguage’ (*zoolangue*) in connection with birds vocalizations, while presenting the results of his own observations conducted during many years. The last talk of the conference, by Laurent Gillette (*Hôpital de Jour Yser* [Yser Day Hospital], PHUPEA, CHGR, Rennes), discussed Eduardo Kohn’s “Amazonian ethnography” in the light of extended semiotics.

The conference ended with a roundtable discussion, during which some results of the two days of intensive academic work were summed up and several new questions were raised which concerned historical, epistemological as well as contemporary issues; it was the first time for the two French academic societies, Society for History and Epistemology of Language Sciences and French Society for Zoosemiotics, to collaborate in such a way. In the future, their cooperation could certainly continue; the papers presented at the conference are planned to be published in Paris.

⁴ ‘*Lyfe*’ is defined as any system that fulfills all four main processes of the living state, namely: dissipation, autocatalysis, homeostasis, and learning (Bartlett, Wong 2020).



Figure 1. The conference poster.

To return to the “extension” in the title of this academic meeting, we can specify that it refers in particular to the French semiotic tradition, which for a long time would limit semiotics to human culture and language; also, Peircean studies did not used to be very popular in France. A remarkable change can be noticed to have occurred in recent years, marked, for instance, by the founding of the French Society for Zoosemiotics in 2018 (Delahaye 2018; see also Guillaume 2021). The Congress of the French Association of Semiotics, held in Bordeaux in August 2024 and entitled “*Le vivant comme effet de sens*” [‘Living as an effect of meaning’], also paid a noteworthy share of attention to biosemiotics. Among other things, the influence of Philippe Descola’s work (*Par-delà nature et culture* [Beyond Nature and Culture], Descola 2005) has been mentioned as a factor in these shifts. Moreover, recent developments in theory of biological evolution – the extended evolutionary synthesis – reevaluate the role of the Lamarckian tradition.

In this way, we can observe the approaches towards a “formulation” of general semiotics which is taking into account all meaning-making beings. Nevertheless, the extension should certainly retain its limit – the lower (and upper) semiotic thresholds.

References

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