

Obituary: Thomas A. Sebeok

November 9, 1920 – December 21, 2001

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Thomas Albert Sebeok, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, of Linguistics, of Semiotics, and of Central Asian Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, was born on November 9, 1920, in Budapest, Hungary, and died peacefully at his home in Bloomington, Indiana, on December 21. The *oeuvre* of Sebeok comprises more than 600 articles and books² and reaches far outside the core discipline of general semiotics, which he himself pioneered.

In the context of the present volume the most overwhelming and epoch-making achievement of Sebeok's work was his creation of the new field of biosemiotics. And, at least according to George Vlahakis, Sebeok was also himself "most proud to having brought into being a group of theoretical biologists and semioticians to pursue this field of investigation [biosemiotics]".³

Sebeok's life was decisively influenced by the second world war. He left Hungary in 1936 to study at Magdalene College, Cambridge University, and his father advised him not to return to Budapest. Instead he immigrated to USA in 1937 and only after the war he learned that his whole family had been destroyed. Sebeok became a citizen of the US in 1944. He earned a bachelor's degree at the University of Chicago in 1941 and a master's degree in 1943 and doctorate in 1945 at Princeton University.

Sebeok's connection to Indiana University started in 1943 when he began work in the Army Specialized Training Program in foreign languages, which after a while he directed himself. He then created Indiana University's renowned Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies. He was offered the

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² Sebeok's bibliography has been published in Deely 1995.

³ In the Obituary, distributed by Indiana University, Bloomington, Dec. 21, 2001.

directorship of the *Research Center for Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics*, which would later (in 1956) be transformed into the famous *Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies* (RCLSS). For 35 years RCLSS remained one of the most influential academic institutions in the world of semiotics, with Thomas A. Sebeok as its Director.

All of this was little known to me when I first met Sebeok at a meeting on psycho-neuro-immunology in 1990 in the little village Tutzing in the neighbourhood of München. As I would later learn Sebeok nourished a lifelong interest in biology, and kept a huge library on subjects related to animal communication. As early as 1963 he had coined the term zoosemiotics signifying that semiotic branch concerned with the study of animal sign use, and in 1976 he observed that ethology is “hardly more than a special case of diachronic semiotics” (Sebeok 1985 [1976]: 156). This interest in life science also brought him to the work of Jakob von Uexküll, whom, as he often told, he had first read in an awful English translation. His suspicion that the translator rather than the author was to blame was confirmed as soon as he got his hands on J. v. Uexküll’s own writings in German language. Sebeok successively spent much effort to reintroduce this “neglected figure in the history of semiotics” (Sebeok 1979: 187) and to produce better English versions of Uexküll’s work (Uexküll 1982, 1992). This also brought him his friendship with Jakob von Uexküll’s son, Thure von Uexküll, then still a professor in medicine at Ulm University.

Shortly before the day I met these two, each in his own way, stately men for the first time, I had managed to start the publication of a new magazine in Danish language by the name *OMverden*, which is a literal translation of the German term Umwelt, meaning simply surroundings. Obviously, this name was meant to allude to the particular sense given to the term Umwelt by Jakob von Uexküll, and I had sent a copy of the first issue of the magazine to T. v. Uexküll. Now, among the hundreds of participants arriving at the reception for the psycho-neuro-immunology conference in Tutzing I easily spotted Sebeok in the company of Uexküll who carried the title page of *OMverden* very visible in his jacket.

I think this meeting signalled the beginning of a new phase in the creation of biosemiotics as a scientific field. And again, as in several other cross-disciplinary endeavours, Sebeok’s skills not only as a creative originator but also as the natural centre for a wide communicative network of people with very different backgrounds, was absolutely essential for the development which followed from this event. Although the meeting in Tutzing was of course in itself very interesting from a semiotic point of view, I guess it was perhaps more or less a pretext for bringing us all to southern Germany. The real formative event for the biosemiotics field was rather the meeting organized by Jörg Hermann in Glotterbad, a psycho-somatic clinic situated in the northern fringes of the Schwarzwald mountains, which took place

immediately after the Tutzing meeting. Present at this occasion was a number of medical doctors, biologists and semioticians. A new meeting was summoned the next year and I think these early Glotterbad meetings were perhaps especially important because they left an impression on everybody that biosemiotics was now for real.

Still, the rapid growth of the biosemiotics field throughout the next decade would not have been possible without Sebeok's relentless support and engagement. As the co-editor (with his wife Jean Umiker-Sebeok) of the yearbook *The Semiotic Web* he was responsible for the first volume dedicated solely to biosemiotics, and as the editor in chief of *Semiotica* he not only was able to assure the publication of high quality biosemiotics papers but he also made it possible to publish a special issue (actually a whole volume) on biosemiotics followed by a volume on the legacy from Jakob von Uexküll (Hoffmeyer, Emmeche 1999; Kull 2001; Sebeok, Umiker-Sebeok 1992). Without Sebeok's enormous influence and prestige to pave the way, the growth of biosemiotics might well have been seriously hampered through the usual territorial defense mechanism released more or less automatically in academia whenever somebody attempts crossing the Cartesian divide.

But perhaps Sebeok's importance for the development of modern biosemiotics was played out most significantly behind the scene. At the occasion of the American Semiotic Society's 25th annual meeting at Purdue University October 2000, titled *Sebeok's Century*, John Deely held the inaugural speech in which he put it very precisely when he said: "Sebeok not only uses the internet, he *is* the internet" (quoted by memory). Sebeok would answer your e-mails, often within a few minutes, and at nearly all times day or night. I remember sending him an e-mail at 10 a.m. in Denmark, which was answered half an hour later, i.e. 3.30 Indiana time. Since everybody I have talked to tell similar stories, the burden of his communicative effort must have been enormous. It's hard to imagine anybody to take over this essential component of Sebeok's heritage, and I am afraid the only thing one can suggest is that we all try to seriously upgrade our communicative efforts.

One could not stay close to Sebeok without becoming impressed by the remarkable force of his intellect, the intensity of his commitment, and his all-embracing knowledge and humour. The spring of anecdotes which spiced his talks seemed inexhaustible. But perhaps most impressive of all was the glimpses of warmth which were never far away. To have known his friendship is one of the dearest things in my life.

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