

Founding a world biosemiotics institution: The International Society for Biosemiotic Studies

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While, as I continue to insist, all human beings — indeed, all living entities on our planet — modulate their environment by means of signs, only a handful grow up to be professional semioticians (and a good thing too).

Thomas A. Sebeok (1920–2001)²

In the late-life summation of his work in which the above quote appears, semiotician extraordinaire Thomas Sebeok — one of whose dreams was to found an International Biosemiotics Society — explicitly invokes philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to argue that:

Both normal science and [scientific] revolutions are community-based activities. To discover and analyze them, one must first unravel the changing community structure of the sciences over time. [...Because] a *paradigm* governs [...] not a subject matter but rather a group of practitioners [and therefore] any such study of paradigm-directed or paradigm-shattering research must begin by locating the responsible group or groups. (Kuhn 1962: 179–180)

As has been recounted elsewhere (see particularly Sebeok 2001a; Kull 2003; 2005; Favareau 2006), the coming together of enough individual researchers scattered across the sciences and the humanities so as to finally constitute a recognizable domain of “biosemiotic inquiry” has been a gradual and often serendipitous project, and one that has really only begun to take on solid form over the course of the last ten years.

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² Sebeok 2001b: ix.

Indeed, one of the earliest attempts to solidify the efforts of the various individual researchers independently studying the roles of sign processes in life processes was the decision made by Thomas Sebeok and Thure von Uexküll (1908–2004) to found an International Biosemiotics Society in 1990. Proposed towards the end of the series of groundbreaking international conferences on biosemiotics arranged by the two men at the Glotterbad Clinic in Glottertal, Baden-Württemberg during the late 1980's and early 1990's, Sebeok announced proudly in 1991 that: “the foundation of the IBS took place in May 1990 [...] with the new society beginning to function fully in May 1991” (Sebeok 1991: 7).

Biosemiotician Jesper Hoffmeyer — having just initiated his own Danish-language biosemiotic publication, *OMverden* (“a literal translation of the German term *Umwelt*”) — met Sebeok for the first time at this 1990 meeting, and recalls that conference organizers Sebeok and Uexküll had high hopes for the continued growth and success of the Society (Hoffmeyer 2002: 384 and personal correspondence). Unfortunately, however, reports semiotician Jeff Bernard, “the whole thing never became formalized and fell apart [...] most probably [because] there were mainly elderly doctors of medicine involved [and at that time] nearly no biologists [...] except our own Anton Fuerlinger, because he happens to be both” (J. Bernard to J. Hoffmeyer, personal correspondence).

Thus, with modern-day biosemiotics still in its infancy, Sebeok's vision of an International Biosemiotics Society proved to be premature by several years, and remained a dream that never came to full fruition in his time.

The Glotterbad conferences had far-reaching effects, however, eventually bringing together the Copenhagen and the Tartu–Moscow researchers in biosemiotics, and — again, with the direct encouragement and sponsorship of Thomas Sebeok — launching the series of conferences and journal issues in biosemiotics that raised the visibility of biosemiotic inquiry substantially throughout the decade of the 1990s (for an overview see Sebeok 1998 and Kull 1999).

That visibility — and the growing number of researchers it has since attracted — led directly to the founding of the annual *Gatherings in Biosemiotics* series of international conferences in 2001, as well to as the peer-reviewed *Journal of Biosemiotics* in 2005 — and the ongoing success of both these endeavors promises to turn the previously loosely coordinated *domain* of biosemiotic inquiry into a cohesive and legitimate *field*.

The distinction between a “domain” and “field” of course, derives from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work and has a long tradition in biosemiotics, as it acknowledges the triadic interaction between individuals, domains (symbolic structures) and their intermediaries, in the creation of novel understandings, methodology and norms. Thus, in scientific, academic, artistic and professional circles (and probably elsewhere), a *field* is that intermediary “which includes all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain. It is

their job to decide whether a new idea or product should be included in the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi 1996: 28).

As committed adherents of self-organization through sign exchange, however, biosemioticians intend their gates to be open ones and the “field” provided to be a community locale where *all* possible semiotic approaches to biology can be explored. Only in this way can biosemiotic inquiry have a field proper to the underlying principles of its domain. And it is in that understanding that the International Society for Biosemiotic Studies has been founded and is hereby being officially announced.

Arising out of discussions that have been taking place intermittently — yet consistently — since Sebeok’s original proposal in 1990, the revitalized effort to found an International Society wherein researchers from all areas of living sign study can co-inform each other by sharing research data and analysis was resurrected at the Eighth International Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies that was held in Lyon, France from July 7–12, 2004.

Representing the biosemiotic perspective with a Special Session on Neurosemiotics, the author and co-panelists Jesper Hoffmeyer and Kalevi Kull were approached by IASS organizers with the proposal to found an International Society for Biosemiotics under the auspices of IASS. The suggestion was made again at a seminar organized by semiotician Paul Copley in London the next spring,³ after which Jesper Hoffmeyer initiated a series of e-mails with current Administrative Vice-President of IASS Jeff Bernard, who enthusiastically supported the idea.

Several months of back and forth e-mailing later,⁴ the following proposal was filed with the Executive Committee of the International Association for Semiotic Studies:

³ The symposium “Biosemiotics: The New Challenge” that was held in the London Metropolitan University on March 23, 2005, featuring papers by Kalevi Kull, Søren Brier, and Jesper Hoffmeyer.

⁴ Including an online “Skype-conference” linking biosemioticians from Copenhagen, Tartu, and Singapore that took place on June 12, 2005 and that could be considered to be the founding “cyber-meeting” of the ISBS.

**Proposal for the formation of
*International Society for Biosemiotic Studies***

The undersigned group of scholars, who are all engaged in studies of biosemiotics, hereby propose the formation of the "International Society for Biosemiotic Studies" (ISBS).

The purpose of the ISBS is to constitute an organizational framework for the collaboration among scholars dedicated to biosemiotic studies, and to propagate knowledge of this field of study to researchers in related areas, as well as to the public in general. Specifically, the ISBS should assure the organization of regular meetings on research into the semiotics of nature as well as to promote all kinds of publication of scholarly work on the semiotics of life processes.

ISBS sees it as one of its important objectives to engage in cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas and welcomes the eventual membership of scholars from neighboring disciplines (e.g. biology, physics, chemistry, computer science, cognitive science, philosophy, anthropology, semiotics, etc).

With this mail I request the acceptance from IASS of the ISBS as an associated society.

The proposal has now been agreed upon by the undersigned 12 scholars engaged in biosemiotic studies:

Myrdene Anderson, Purdue University, USA
Marcello Barbieri, University of Ferrara, Italy
Søren Brier, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark
Luis Emilio Bruni, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
Charbel El-Hani, Federal University of Bahia, Brazil
Claus Emmeche, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
Don Favareau, National University of Singapore, Singapore
Jesper Hoffmeyer, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
Kaie Kotov, University of Tartu, Estonia
Kalevi Kull, University of Tartu, Estonia
Anton Markoš, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
Frederik Stjernfelt, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

The International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS) was founded in 1969 by (among others) Algirdas Julien Greimas, Roman Jakobson, Julia Kristeva, Émile Benveniste, Thomas A. Sebeok, and Juri Lotman. It remains the premiere organization for the study of semiotics worldwide, and their eager acceptance to include the International Society for Biosemiotic Studies under their auspices — an acceptance formalized on June 26, 2005⁵ — speaks well of “biosemiotics’ roots, proliferation and prospects” (to borrow a phrase of Sebeok’s).

“Both Tom and Thure would have embraced this initiative” writes Hoffmeyer (personal correspondence) — but, of course, it is up to we living practitioners of biosemiotics to ensure that this time our International Society not only survives, but thrives.

Further information about, as well as an online form for membership in, the International Society for Biosemiotic Studies is available at the website www.biosemiotics.org.

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⁵ Following the first full in-person meeting of the founding members of the ISBS in July 23, in Urbino, Italy, during the 5th Gatherings in Biosemiotics, wherein the initial operating principles were ratified, and the first slate of official positions within the organization were elected.