

50 years of *Sign Systems Studies*

From the editors

The journal

In 1964, the first volume of this journal was published in Tartu. As it now turns out, it was to become the first semiotics periodical in the world.¹ Its title *Sign Systems Studies* then appeared in Russian as *Труды по знаковым системам* (*Trudy po znakovym sistemam*), and would stay this way throughout the first 25 volumes which were published in Russian. The English-language title appears as the main one starting from Volume 26 that came out in 1998. From the beginning up to this day the journal has had the same publisher, the University of Tartu Press, the cover design has remained roughly the same ever since Volume 2 and the members of the editorial team have belonged to the semiotics group at the University of Tartu. All in all, 55 separate issues of the journal have appeared during the period 1964–2014 (30 of these in Volumes 26–42).

Similarly to several other periodicals established at the University of Tartu in the 1960s, it had an additional numeration system during the period 1964–1992, which took into account most of the volumes of *Acta et Commentationes Universitatis Tartuensis* across all disciplines published by the University of Tartu.² Volumes 2–7 also bore English and Estonian titles – *Works on Semiotics*; *Tööd semiootika alalt* – on the verso title page.

The first volume of our journal contained Juri Lotman's "Lectures on structural poetics". The introductory words to the volume, which announced the launch of

¹ See the list of periodicals in semiotics in Kull, Maran 2013.

² Thus, vol. 1 of SSS had a parallel number 160 of *Acta et Commentationes Universitatis Tartuensis* (Ученые записки Тартуского университета) (published in 1964); vol. 2 – no. 181 (1965); 3 – 198 (1967); 4 – 236 (1969); 5 – 284 (1971); 6 – 308 (1973); 7 – 365 (1975); 8 – 411 (1977); 9 – 422 (1977); 10 – 463 (1978); 11 – 467 (1979); 12 – 515 (1981); 13 – 546 (1981); 14 – 567 (1981); 15 – 576 (1982); 16 – 635 (1983); 17 – 641 (1984); 18 – 664 (1984); 19 – 720 (1986); 20 – 746 (1987); 21 – 754 (1987); 22 – 831 (1988); 23 – 855 (1989); 24 – 882 (1992); 25 – 936 (1992). (Instead of *Acta...*, the series had the English title, *Transactions of the Tartu State University*, in vols 1–4.) The series was closed in 1995; accordingly, also the double numeration disappeared.

the new periodical, emphasized the importance of focussing on the methodological change taking place in the humanities towards a convergence of methods (e.g., between literary studies and cybernetics) in the context of new sciences such as semiotics.

The second volume included 35 contributions that all in all covered 360 pages. It also had a jacket cover designed by Juri Lotman (see Figure), which has been retained until today.³

From 1965 to the early 1970s, the contributions were largely related to the Summer Schools on Secondary Modelling Systems which took place at Kääriku during those years (Salupere 2012). This was a period of rapid advancement of semiotics internationally. The journal became very popular and the print numbers reached up to 1500 copies per issue.

Starting from Volume 7, when censorship became stronger in the country, the volumes became thinner, yet the publication of the journal persisted and continued.

The editor-in-chief of the journal Juri Lotman, passed away in 1993, soon after Estonia had restored its independence, which had also brought along many organizational changes in the local academic life. In 1992, the Department of Semiotics was established at the University of Tartu as separate from the Department of Russian Literature under the aegis of which the editorial group of *Sign Systems Studies* had been working earlier.

Starting from Volume 26, English became the main language of the journal. This also meant a considerable widening of the circle of authors, now including the leading semioticians from all over the world. Starting from Volume 29 the journal got an international editorial board, and became peer reviewed. The volumes became strictly annual with one volume published per year. Also, the volumes were divided into issues – starting from Vol. 29, there were two issues per volume, and since Vol. 37, there have been four issues per volume, with double (or occasionally triple) issues sometimes used. Since Vol. 40 the journal has been following full open access policy. At present, *Sign Systems Studies* appears to be the only semiotics journal in the world that offers a combination of open access and no author charges, while being simultaneously listed in the major bibliographic databases, including ISI WoS and Scopus. Thus, *Sign Systems Studies* continues to be an attractive venue for international semiotic scholarship.

³ The cover design has undergone but minor changes during all these years. For instance, the third volume added one letter to the Greek word Σημωτική, so it reads Σημειωτική. This Greek word became a hallmark of the publication and has sometimes also been used in bibliographic references. John Deely (see Deely 2012) has made an extensive study about the spelling of the word as the name of the field since John Locke (also proposing a return to the earlier spelling).



Figure. Covers of the journal since 1964 (Vols 1, 2, 3, 26).

On December 5–6, 2014, the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu hosted a conference dedicated to the journal – “Creative Continuity: 50 years of *Sign Systems Studies*”. In addition to the presentations by the students and staff members of the Department, the programme included the first *Juri Lotman Lecture* titled as “The importance of Lotmanian semiotics to sign theory and the cognitive neurosciences” that was given by Edna Andrews (USA) on December 5, as well as talks by Jesper Hoffmeyer (Denmark) and Frederico Bellucci (Italy). The conference was preceded by a series of public talks “Lectures on the Study of Sign Systems” that were delivered throughout Autumn Term 2014. The series, that was organized by Katre Pärn, invited researchers from various fields to enrich our understanding of contemporary interdisciplinary developments in semiotics. Lectures were given by Mihhail Lotman, Igor Pilshchikov, Carlo Ginzburg, Märt Läänemets, Peeter Tulviste, Marina Grišakova, Marek Tamm, Ülle Pärli, Indrek Ibrus, Berk Vaher, Daniele Monticelli, Ljubov Kisseljova, Valdur Mikita, and Peeter Torop.

Trends in semiotics

While *Sign Systems Studies* is the journal of the Tartu School of semiotics in its core, it nevertheless reflects quite well the major changes and tendencies in semiotics worldwide.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, under the predominance of the structuralist paradigm, the leaders in the field of semiotics worked towards the aim of making it a science with a formalized theory. This was the golden age of the Tartu–Moscow School of semiotics, the journal being its main venue in print. As a result, the whole field of semiotics of culture was established, which peaked in the collective manifesto *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures* in 1973 (see Salupere *et al.* 2013).

In the 1980s, it became increasingly more accepted that the formalization programme of semiotics was not feasible. This could be seen both as a certain broadening as well as a specification of methodological pursuits that occurred side by side with important theoretical achievements (for instance, Juri Lotman’s introduction of the concept of semiosphere in an article of 1984). This coincided with noticeable growth in Peircean studies in Western semiotics.

The 1990s showed a considerable low in semiotics internationally. Already since the 1980s, with poststructuralism undermining the structuralist approaches, earlier work in semiotics had become a target for criticism. For instance, John Stewart (1995) even introduced the term ‘post-semiotics’, arguing that the view of language as a symbolic sign system was narrow, and proposing the development of a dialogic approach instead. Yet as Scott Simpkins (1996) mentioned at that point, this change in understanding the phenomenon of language did not mean abandoning semiotics,

rather to the contrary, considering that semiotics has taken a major turn towards establishing a broader framework since the 1980s.

For *Sign Systems Studies*, the 1990s meant remarkable growth from the earlier Tartu–Moscow School towards the inclusion of many other approaches and application fields. In particular, cooperation between Tartu and Copenhagen scholars provided a still growing corpus of studies on biosemiotics and Jakob von Uexküll's legacy. American, German and French semiotics appear side by side with Russian and Estonian research, with an attempt to continue engaging with the main topics of the Tartu–Moscow School such as modelling systems and the semiotics of culture in the forefront, just proceeding from a broader view on various areas of semiosphere.

In the 2000s, the variability among theoretical schools of semiotics in the world became even more explicit. The differences between the Saussurean and the Peircean approaches were often seen as insurmountable. The exegetic strategy of Peirce studies has separated itself from the attempts at creative developing of Peirce-based models. Greimasian semiotics as an outgrowth of Saussure's approach has been developing separately, with little overlap with Peircean semiotics. Some other branches that stemmed from semiotics in the 1980s, often even dropped the term of 'semiotics', being labelled critical studies, media studies, etc, instead. In this sense, for instance, Umberto Eco's attempts to combine concepts deriving from different schools have not found many successful followers as yet.

However, several new branches in semiotics (besides biosemiotics, also semiotics of cognition, semiotics of education, etc.) attempt to contribute to the improvement of the metalanguage of semiotics, as well as to the methodology of general semiotics. We do believe that sign processes as real ones can be described by a set of models that together form the field of semiotics. Here, an approach based on Lotman's legacy can be productive. A special feature of this could be described as joining the study of codes with the view on semiotic systems as modelling systems – a point emphatically made already at the Kääriku Summer Schools on secondary modelling systems in the 1960s, while other schools of structuralism did not emphasize the modelling role of codes.

As Eco (1990: x) has pointed out, referring to Lotman's (1967) work, "semiotic systems are *models* which explain the world in which we live (obviously, in explaining the world, they also construct it, and in this sense, even at this early stage, Lotman saw semiotics as a cognitive science)".

Lotman's approach, if integrated with Uexküll's approach, and also with lessons taught by most of the other schools of semiotics, can serve as a source of ideas to develop semiotics into a fundamental field and apparatus that provides methodological and theoretical basis to the studies of meaning making of any kind. This is largely what we have in mind and attempt to contribute to, as we are continuing with the publication of *Sign Systems Studies*.

The current issue contains four articles that can be brought together using the general key phrase ‘semiotics of culture extended’, thus proceeding from the main line of thought that has been characteristic of the journal. In addition, we are publishing a self-reflective review of contemporary semiotics in the form of a collective interview conducted with forty semioticians from twenty countries in connection with the 11th World Congress of Semiotics that took place in Sofia in autumn 2014.

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