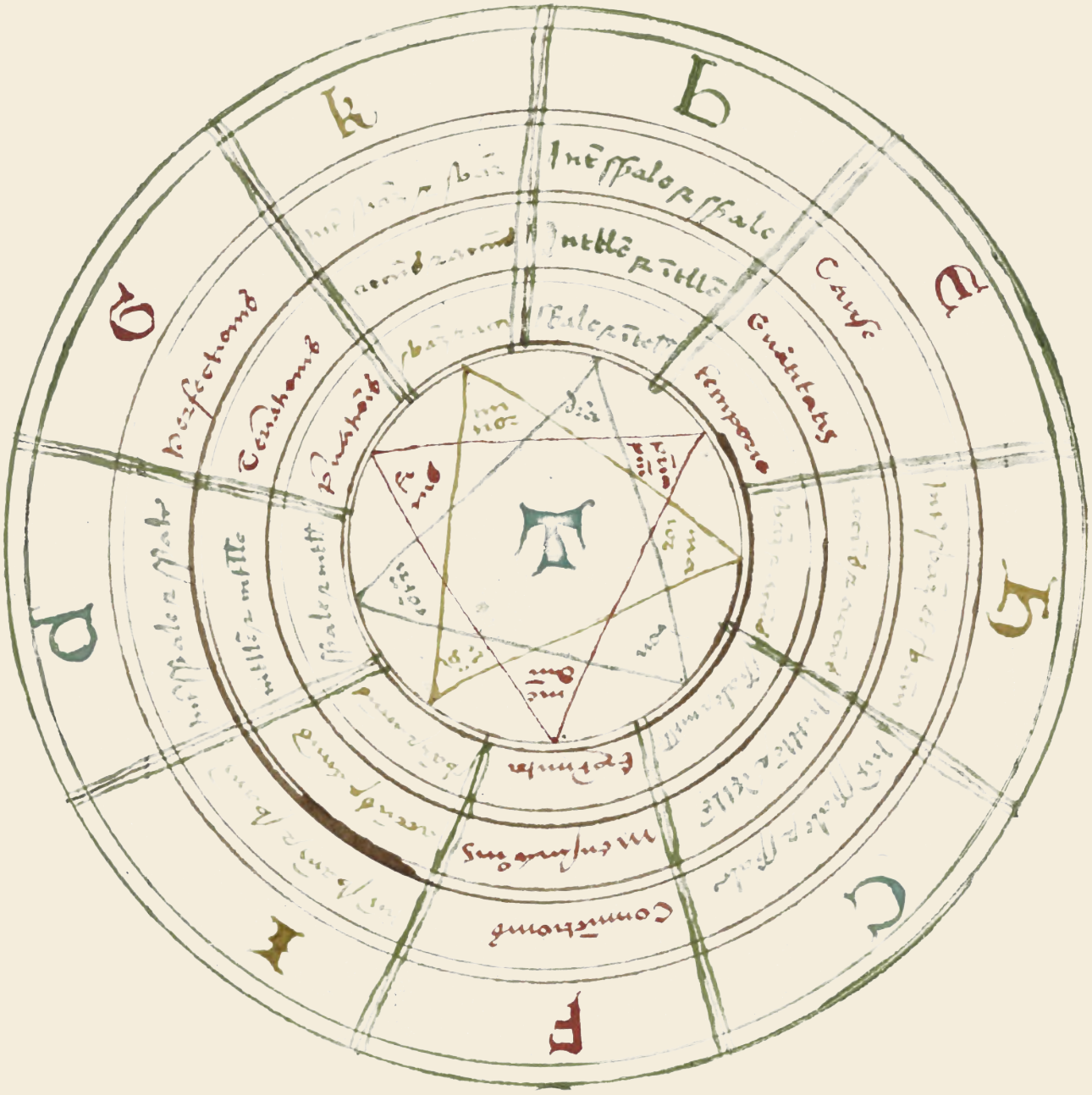
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INTO SEMIOTICS

UNDERSTANDING SIGNS, MEANING, AND COMMUNICATION



Ignasi Ribó

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Preface

This book originates from the lecture notes that I prepared a few years ago, when I was planning to teach an introductory course in semiotics to postgraduate students at the School of Liberal Arts of Mae Fah Luang University. While linguistics is a familiar discipline in Thailand, not many people know much about semiotics. Ever since I started working here, I have thought that a well-designed course or seminar on semiotics would not only be of interest to students but would greatly benefit their academic and professional prospects across many different fields. Busy with other projects and obligations, I had to park that idea, while I continued with my research, which largely focuses on narrative semiotics, zoosemiotics, and ecosemiotics. However, I never abandoned my belief that such a course would fill a gap in the curriculum and could find a keen and receptive audience, if it were offered. When the opportunity arose, therefore, I decided to pick up my notes and turn them into this book, which I might use one day as the main textbook in a postgraduate, or even undergraduate, course in semiotics. In the meantime, thanks to the publication program of the MFU Learning Innovation Institute (MLii), this introduction to semiotics might benefit other students and readers with an interest in the discipline, not just in Thailand but anywhere in the world.

My aim has been to write a concise, clear, and engaging primer that would appeal to students in linguistics, literature, and other areas of the humanities, but also to students in scientific disciplines and professionals working in various fields. As this book will show, semiotics is a highly interdisciplinary endeavor, which attempts to understand how signs function across all activities that involve meaning and communication. Needless to say, this is an extremely vast field, which includes the whole of human culture but also interactions between nonhuman animals, plants, machines, and even inanimate matter. Semiotics has often been criticized for its boundless and eclectic ambition, which is something that has undoubtedly hindered its capacity to establish itself as a major discipline in an academic context where specialization and concentration have compartmentalized knowledge into narrowing fields of research. And yet, this interdisciplinary and transversal character remains one of the core strengths of semiotics. Within academia, it has allowed semioticians to explore increasingly complex and challenging questions about meaning processes in many different areas. At the same time, semiotics has a large number of practical applications outside of research and education, for example in marketing, medicine, agriculture, web design, or artificial intelligence. It is this extraordinary vitality of contemporary semiotics, as well as its multiple connections to language, culture, society, technology, and life, that I have tried to bring to this book.

The book's approach is highly pedagogical, with short and focused chapters that progress from the very basics to more advanced topics and applications. I did not want to write a long and dense book, but a very short introduction that would allow students to understand the fundamental concepts and tools of the discipline without getting lost or becoming overwhelmed by the details. At the end of each chapter, in the further reading sections, I provide references that will allow interested readers to explore in more depth the topics discussed. I have to say that there are already many good introductions to semiotics. I particularly recommend the books by Thomas Sebeok and Daniel Chandler, which are included in the bibliography. Although introductory, both go into quite a lot of detail. Also, they sometimes assume prior knowledge and familiarity with concepts that, in my experience, students in Thailand and other Asian countries do not always have, mostly due to differences in cultural context. This is the reason why I think my book can complement these existing resources and be useful to students, particularly those who want to gain a solid understanding of this complex discipline without having to walk through all the steps.

Although the aim of brevity has meant leaving out many details and treating some topics more superficially than I would have liked, I have done my best to present the material in a theoretically precise manner, without popularizing or artificially simplifying the ideas discussed. In order to make the book rigorous and yet accessible, I have tried to explain the key concepts of semiotics in the clearest and most direct way possible. I am not sure if I have always succeeded, but I hope that the many examples and illustrations provided in the book will help the reader to understand these concepts, even the most difficult ones, while seeking additional and more in-depth knowledge elsewhere. To help students navigate the book and make the most of it as a learning resource, I have included a glossary and an index at the end. I have also created an online companion guide that provides practical exercises and interactive materials for every chapter, so that instructors and students can effectively incorporate the book into a classroom setting or use it as a tool for independent study. All these resources, which have been designed with Thai learners in mind but can easily be adapted to any other context, are freely accessible on my personal website: https://www.ignasiribo.com/into-semiotics/.

The concepts, tools, and ideas that are discussed in the following pages constitute the fundamentals of the discipline and are widely known and shared by all semioticians, regardless of their specialty or interests. This does not mean, of course, that everyone will agree with my treatment of these ideas. To keep the exposition as pedagogical and clear as possible, I have tried not to impose my own views or opinions, particularly on controversial or debated topics. At the same time, however, the book is informed by research that I have been conducting in the past few years, including my reconceptualization of dialogic interactions across species as processes of semiotic alignment (Ribó 2019a, 2019c) and the theoretical modeling of oral traditions within an ecosemiotic framework that I have called poetics of cohabitation (Ribó et al. 2021; Ribó 2022a, 2022b). These ideas and perspectives are incorporated into my discussion

of semiosis and communicative processes throughout most of the chapters, even if they are not always explicitly acknowledged.

One feature that may set this book apart is the inclusion of an entire chapter on semiotics beyond the human. In Chapter 8, I discuss fairly recent advances in zoosemiotics, biosemiotics, phytosemiotics, ecosemiotics, artificial semiotics, astrosemiotics, and related fields, where the tools and concepts of semiotics are used to understand processes of communication and meaning-making in other species or domains where human consciousness and agency are no longer the center of attention. I have added this chapter not only because this is my own field of research but also because it is one of the most exciting and promising areas for the future of semiotics, as we continue to explore our relations and entanglements with other beings on this planet, and perhaps one day beyond our planet, in the hope of finding more sustainable forms of cohabitation.

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I would like to thank the students, lecturers, administrators, and staff at the School of Liberal Arts, and Mae Fah Luang University in general, for their continued support and dedication to making this young institution a wonderful environment to work, learn, and grow. Recently, I celebrated ten years since joining MFU. As is always the case, there have been good and bad times. But even the bad ones have been filled with smiles and conviviality, thanks to the generosity and warmth of the people around me. Without them, I would not have been able to pursue my research in semiotics or my teaching of literature, and this book would most likely not have seen the light of day. I am also grateful to the MFU Learning Innovation Institute (MLii) for supporting this book through its publication program. Given the technological changes we are currently experiencing, I should also acknowledge my use of artificial intelligence. During the writing of this book, I relied on Anthropic's Claude as a peer reviewer, asking it to identify gaps, inconsistencies, mistakes, redundancies, and other weaknesses in my text. While its recommendations helped me to improve the wording and sharpen my argument, the text is entirely mine and I take full responsibility for it.

A note on transliteration and dates

Terms from languages that do not use the Latin alphabet are given in transliteration, in italics, following standard scholarly conventions: Greek and Arabic with the usual diacritics, Sanskrit and Pali in IAST, Chinese in Hanyu Pinyin without tone marks, Japanese in modified Hepburn with macrons for long vowels, Korean in Revised Romanization, and Russian in the Library of Congress system, except for names with established English spellings (e.g., Lotman, Bakhtin, Vološinov). Thai terms are given throughout both in transliteration, following the Royal Thai General System, and in Thai script. Pali Buddhist terms familiar to Thai readers are also accompanied by their Thai form.

Where a word is discussed as a linguistic sign in its own right, as in the examples of Chapter 3, it is given in single quotes rather than italics. If the language does not use the Latin alphabet, the word is transliterated and followed by its original script in parentheses. Single quotes are also used for glosses, sample sentences, and terms with a special sense, while double quotes are reserved for direct quotations and titles of short works. Phonemic transcriptions between slashes follow the IPA.

Titles of works are cited in their most widely used English or transliterated forms. Where the original date of publication of a work differs from that of the edition cited in the bibliography, it is given in square brackets, for example (Saussure [1916] 2011). Peirce's *Collected Papers* are cited as *CP* followed by volume and paragraph number, for example (*CP* 2.228).