

Introduction: Asian Perspectives on Semiotics

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Broadly speaking, semiotics is the study of sign systems and the process of signification. Viewing the world of meaning in terms of systems of signs and attempting to understand the manifold ways in which we interpret those signs has been the concern of philosophers since ancient times. As the study of philosophy became further subdivided in the modern era, the study of semiotics contributed to the establishment of various disciplines, notably anthropology and linguistics, and later, cultural studies and its offshoots. The study of semiotics now spans what we call the humanities and the social sciences and, importantly (though peripherally), has even branched out into the natural sciences in the field that is termed 'biosemiotics'.

Most histories of semiotics follow the currents of European thought, stretching from the philosophers of Ancient Greece, from whose language we inherit the term, to medieval scholars such as Augustine and Abelard, down through the school of Port-Royal, the American theorist Charles Sanders Peirce, and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure (Eshbach and Trabant 1983). However, what is often left out of these histories are the independent semiotic traditions that developed in other parts of the world, most famously in Asia, and the role that these traditions had in shaping the modern field of inquiry that we know today. For instance, in a classic paper, Gerow (1984) analyses the *mīmāṃsā* school in ancient India to draw out a semiotics through the semantic distinction between *guṇa*, *lakṣaṇa*, and *dhvani*. Such studies generated interest and resulted in the shift from interpreting classical Sanskrit philosophy in terms of just philosophical schools to exploring how these modes of thought were generative of systems of interpretation and their theories of signification. Other scholars similarly discovered semiotic traditions in close readings of classical Asian source texts, such as Rambelli's exhaustive delineation of the semiotic system in Japanese Shingon Buddhism (2013) or Netton's study of the semiotics embedded in Islamic cosmology (1989).

Such studies reveal that across Europe and Asia in the ancient and medieval periods, philosophers were attempting to develop a theory of signs that could explain how we interpret the world and generate meaning as we interact dynamically with the world around us. In contrast, classical philosophical and religious traditions developed a robust tradition of semiotics. What we now know as the modern semiotic tradition was developed mostly in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and also had significant Asian influence. It is a well-known fact that Saussure, whose *semiology* is considered to have inaugurated contemporary semiotic study in Europe, was a scholar of Sanskrit. As some have noted, important formulations such as the notion of "arbitrariness" and "differential value" of the sign, as well as his focus on the 'synchronic' appear to have clear parallels in the work of the Sanskrit grammarians whom he had spent most of his life studying (Li 2018). One of the key figures to advance Saussure's work in the cultural domain, Roland Barthes, was heavily influenced by his trip to Japan, culminating in his important work *L'Empire des Signes* (1983[1970]). Those working in the Peircean tradition, such as Roman Jakobson and Michael Silverstein, have acknowledged their debt to predecessors such as William Dwight Whitney, who was a reputed scholar of Sanskrit and drew much of his insight on the relationship between language, culture, and signification from his work with the classical Indian source material (Silverstein 1971).

Modern semiotics as we know it was forged at a particular time in global history when Europe was rocked in turmoil and was passing through a genocide of the kind that the continent had never seen before. A huge flow of intellectual refugees relocated to the United States as a result of the great war, notably among them people like Roman Jakobson and Claude Levi-

Strauss, among others. The gathering of intellectuals from different parts of Europe who were taking refuge in the United States from the great war and Holocaust allowed semiotics to flourish and become established across the different disciplinary divides. It also allowed for new conversations to emerge between European semiological and American pragmatist schools of semiotic inquiry.

However, overlooked by Eurocentric accounts of semiotic theory was that modern semiotics' arrival on the world intellectual scene also coincided with the great wave of decolonisation in Asia and Africa. In the aftermath of the global war which engulfed Europe, North America, and the Asia-Pacific, scholars in various parts of decolonised Asia took to semiotics to inaugurate new ways of understanding collective experience and cultivate theoretical traditions that incorporated yet also moved beyond European thought. Sites where semiotics took hold included the Soviet Union, which was emerging as an alternative pole of influence to the western world after the war; Japan, where semiotics was enrolled in a project of post-war intellectual reconstruction of a unique modernity that was later to become one of the most influential societies of Asia; and the large, extremely diverse, and rapidly modernising societies of China and India.

In the erstwhile Soviet Union, one of the most famous and influential schools to emerge was the Moscow-Tartu school in which Soviet semioticians, led by Juri Lotman, formulated responses to Saussure and the Prague School, which subsequently developed into a full-blown cultural theory of semiotics. The Moscow-Tartu school got its name due to two major conferences on semiotics: Conference in Moscow in 1962 and Conference in Tartu in 1964 (Torop 10). The school was connected to and influenced by Russian Formalists and scholars such as Vladimir Propp, V. Zhirmunski, G. Gukovski, O. Friedenberg, and Mikhail Bakhtin (Lotman, as mentioned in Torop 10). One of their major tasks was to connect the threads of Russian scholarly ideas, later called 'Semiotic Historicism' by Segal (as mentioned in Torop 10). The editorial works in this tradition consciously tried to maintain the individuality of the scholars not only in terms of ideas but also in terms of the structure(s) of presentation. One of the major contributions of this school of semiotic thinking was the idea of the *semiosphere*, which sought to combine diachrony and synchronicity, singularity and multiplicity, and linguistics, cultural and historical analysis into a holistic and dynamic field of study. The school, posited as a response to the structuralism of the west, without giving up the semiotic core of study (unlike western 'post'-structuralism), gained some currency in other parts of Asia. Lotman's work was translated into Asian languages such as Japanese as early as 1979 (Kuzovkina 23) and exerted an influence on the development of semiotics in other places such as China (Kull 2011) and India (see Ketkar, this issue).

Unlike the Soviet Union, which had undergone a major revolution in both political economy and thought, other Asian countries were shackled by colonialism to a much greater extent. Yet despite the limitations, scholars attempted to formulate new semiotic models by incorporating relevant western traditions with theories emanating from the study of Asian philosophies, languages, and cultures. Semiotics in India primarily developed in dialogue with Saussure primarily for two reasons. Saussure is taught in all the departments of Linguistics, and hence some basic introduction to the Saussurean idea of the sign is known to all the students, even if they may not have taken a full-length course on Linguistics. Similarly, structuralism is also taught in almost all the departments that are engaged in teaching literary and cultural theories, because of which the students are introduced to the basics of Saussurean concepts. On the other hand, the other schools of semiotics do not have any such direct connections to other disciplines and hence are not directly introduced to academics. One more advantage to Saussurean semiology is the background of Sanskrit that Saussure had. Indian scholars have been tempted to find the connection between Saussure's theory of language and signs and those posited in Sanskrit grammatical texts.

Semiotics or Semiology is normally understood as a study of signs and sign systems. Looking from this narrow perspective, Indian tradition does not talk about the signs and their systems. But, if we look from a broader perspective, i.e., meaning making processes, we can easily notice multiple traditions that talk about assigning, identifying, and interpreting meaning to various linguistic and non-linguistic levels. Matilal (160) refers to the term *liṅga* - 'sign' with reference to the Indian tradition of argumentation, which refers to *liṅgin*. Interestingly, here, the connection is between the sign and signified instead of the signifier and signified. The non-deviating sign, in this tradition, is always present wherever the signified is present. On the one hand, when talking about the process of translation, Matilal (122) refers to the impossibility of the transference of pure *signifieds* with reference to Bhartrhari's view of language and meaning. On the other hand, Nyāya realists clearly distinguish between the word (signifier) and the object (signified). For Bhartrhari, 'signifier-signified duality is more a fiction than a reality (Ibid. 122-3).' In the earliest Sanskrit works, speech is equated with God, and it is referred to as *Śabda-Brahman* (Coward 24). Kapoor (2002) notes that the movement of Indian thought is from concrete to abstract, from materialistic to idealistic. Thus, in spite of no direct commentary on the signs and the sign systems, various views associated with the idea of meaning-making and the connection between the code and objective reality can be found in Indian linguistic and philosophical traditions.

While many contemporary Indian semioticians have tried to establish various kinds of continuity between Saussure and the Sanskrit grammarians, others have tried to draw on heterodox sources both in the European and classical Indian traditions, such as Harjeet Singh Gill, whose interview we have included as part of this volume. Gill was a student of the famous French linguist Andre Martinet and lived in France during the heyday of structuralism and the transition to post-structuralism. However, rather than being swept away by the fashionable intellectual movements of his time, he became increasingly interested in the semiotics of an older era, particularly that of the twelfth century French philosopher Abelard and his discussion of nominalism and realism as a relevant entry point into understanding the "conceptual structures" underlying systems of signification (Gill 2018 [1996]). The work of the Russian scholar Stcherbatsky (1931) led Gill to Buddhism and to undertake a typological comparison between French and Indian Buddhist semiotic traditions through which he suggests a dialectical theory of semiosis that avoids the pitfalls of both "Realism" and "Nominalism" (Gill 2001, also this issue). Other scholars also worked on various aspects of semiotics, placing in dialogue Indian and European theoretical traditions. Franson Manjali, who was also at the Centre for Linguistics along with Gill at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, attempted to engage scholars as diverse as Lacan, Derrida, Nancy, Peirce, Saussure, Bhartrhari and the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna to arrive at a cognitively-grounded notion of semiotics, particularly focused on the concept of iconicity (Manjali 2020). In an important article, Manjali discusses how iconicity is not just associated at the sign level, but it pervades at morphological and syntactic levels. He also looks at the ideas of metaphor and iconicity from a semiotic perspective. Even the image-schema is also compared in terms of iconicity. He concludes that figurative and creative language is neither before nor after the arbitrariness of the sign; rather, it is something 'other' than the conventional; it defies the conventions and brings in new conventions of creativity through the ideas of mimicry and resemblance. The metaphors allow the user infinite creativity (Manjali 2000). In addition to Gill and Manjali, other linguists, such as Ranjit Singh Rangila, based at the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore, explored the "life making processes" which civilisations around the world, including those of Asia, and particularly those of the Indian subcontinent, "create as its systematised wisdom." (Rangila 3). He called this form of semiotic inquiry, focused on the sources of knowledge creation and wisdom negotiation that constitute the notion of civilisation, "c-semiology." Such work has been critiqued, grappled with, and advanced by a subsequent

generation of semioticians in India working at the interface of language, literature, communication theory, and culture (see Khanwalkar 2014; Khatri, this issue, Shaikh, this issue).

While other countries in Asia, such as Japan, did not undergo the same type of direct colonialism like India, there was still deep anxiety, especially during the period of American occupation and post-war reconstruction, of establishing a distinctly “Japanese” tradition vis-a-vis Euro-American thought. One of the early attempts to consolidate the various currents of post-war Japanese semiotic thoughts in English was the collection of works in the volume edited by Yoshihiko Ikegami of Tokyo University entitled *The Empire of Signs: Semiotic Essays in Japanese Culture*, an explicit reference to Roland Barthes’ classic study of the same name. In the introduction to the set of essays, Ikegami posits that at its root, semiotics is the study of signification where something stands for something else, and the most elementary form of semiosis is linguistic practice. However, he suggests that Eurocentric notions of the sign cannot account for context-dependence, which should be at the center of any semiotic theory. The “prototypical semiosis in the linguistic behavior of human beings,” Ikegami writes, “is to be found in heavily context-dependent languages [...] this consideration places a language like Japanese in a uniquely interesting position” (Ikegami 5-6). Interestingly in Japan, unlike in post-colonial India, most academic production does not take place in English, and noting the conceptual translation of the notion of “sign” and “signification” both within the history of Japanese intellectual tradition as well as the ways non-Japanese ideas were incorporated into Japanese language texts also become an important exercise.

This is evident in one of the essays in the volume written by Tomonori Toyama, which charts how while what in English we call *sign* is usually translated into Japanese as *kigo*, there are actually other equivalents that yield a slightly different notion of semiosis. He cites the example of the Japanese word *shirushi*, usually translated as ‘mark’ but which Toyama says is actually a highly polysemous word within the language, broadly meaning “something that functions as a manifestation of something else,” a notion that underlay an emerging of the semiotics of language developed by Japanese linguistic philosophers in 1960s and 1970s such as Ichiro Yamamoto (Toyama 28). The word *kigo*, on the other hand, was brought in from Chinese via Buddhism as late as the twelfth century, which originally meant “putting to mind, memorising” but later it became applied to drawings, heralds, insignia, and other similar items, with the meaning of “an artifact with a specific intention of communicating something” (29). As European modernity entered Japan, Toyama charts how *kigo* became used as a technical word for sign, such as the chemical or mathematical sign, and then it entered into literature and linguistic philosophy, becoming the major concept for translating the “semiotic” from European languages. By revealing the multiple genealogies of the concept of ‘sign’ in Japanese history, philosophy, and literature, Toyama provides avenues for a polysemous semiotic theory that is not simply a derivative of Euro-American theories.

Another concept from modern Japanese philosophy that Japanese scholars have placed into dialogue with semiotics is that of *ba* (or *basho*), which means ‘field’ or ‘place.’ This concept was developed by the philosopher Kitaro Nishida who was part of the famous “Kyoto School” of Japanese philosophy and who stresses that the contextual location (‘ba’) where social action occurs is perhaps more important than the action itself, imposing constraints and possibilities on the actors. Thus, in Nishida’s philosophy, what many would consider the ‘background’ is actually the ‘foreground’, and social actors are in constant dialectical engagement with their *ba* as semiotic action occurs (Nishida 2012). This attention to contextual cues is something that Ikegami also discusses in his comparison between English as a ‘do’ language and Japanese as a ‘become’ language.

The contextual orientation of *ba* found favor among a transnational group of anthropologists and linguists, such as in the work of Sachiko Ide, a linguist working at Japan Women's University specialising in the study of honorifics, who drew on Nishida's work and brought the study of *ba* into the pragmatic study of politeness. Ide's work was noticed by semioticians working in the Peircean framework, such as American linguistic anthropologist William Hanks to draw connections between *ba* and Peircean semiotic notions. Hanks, Ide, and a team of Japanese and American linguists collaborated to place the concept of *ba* in dialogue with Peirce to develop an "emancipatory pragmatics" which considers signification from the starting point of "non-separation" between subject and object or signifier and signified, "reformulating the sharing between participants, and the co-dependency between objects and participants in an interactive field" (Hanks et al. 2019). Such work provided the basis for the development of a more context-sensitive anthropology stemming from a *ba*-centered semiotic approach (Kajimaru et al. 2021, Kajimaru this issue).

As can be seen from the cursory survey above, there has been significant work in the development of modern semiotics in different parts of Asia. However, there has been very little dialogue across traditions due to the impact of colonialism and the continuing legacy of what the Malaysian scholar Hussain Alatas (2000) has called "intellectual imperialism" of Euro-American thought. This has ensured that the developments in Asia continue to remain ensnared within the discourse of a 'national' or 'regional' tradition, as opposed to the 'universal' theories posited from the standpoint of those working in Europe or North America. Our goal is not to replace 'western' with 'eastern' universality, a project which we believe is already doomed from the start. Instead, we seek to draw out the commonalities between how scholars from different parts of Asia have incorporated semiotics into their research to provide exposure and create further platforms for dialogue. The history of ancient and modern semiotics in various regions of Asia bears many resemblances that have still to be further developed. For example, emphases on multiplicity, holism, context-dependency, the dynamics of structures, immanence, and transcendence provide various pathways through which the study of semiotics as a whole could be further advanced. While there are dedicated journals and associations in places like China, Japan, and Korea, and even an initiative between partner institutions in these countries to establish an Asian Semiotics International Association (ASIA), the scene in other regions, such as South Asia and the Middle East remain more fragmented.

The goal of this issue is in line with initiatives such as ASIA to bring a sample of how Asian semioticians from South Asia, East Asia, and West Asia are working through different theories to understand the material from their regions and their languages to promote and advance cross-regional dialogue. The articles cover a diverse range of semiotic frameworks, applying them to topics ranging from literature, both in vernacular and translation, language, and rituals, demonstrating the utility of semiotics for proposing truly interdisciplinary methods of scholarly inquiry. Khatri refers to Saussure and Peirce but argues that the distinction that Bhartrhari makes between identification (*prakāś*) and differentiation (*vimarś*) may perhaps be more amenable to understanding the uptake of words in Indian languages that appear to have the same core meaning but different pragmatic usages. Using Bhartrhari's semiotic framework, Khatri discusses the differences between two Gujarati words for water, *paNi* and *jaL*, in his paper. In his paper, Shaikh looks at how one may bridge semiotic, linguistic, and cognitive theory to understand the "psycho-semiotics" involved in the production of Urdu language news stories, with a particular focus on reportage in the Kashmir valley, one of the most militarised areas in the world. Kajimaru examines the reciprocal sung poetry of Han'ge sung in southwest China which involves several points of repetition between participants. Drawing on the discussion of semiotic agency in Neo-Peircean frameworks to explain the aspect of creativity within this genre, Kajimaru suggests that an adequate account of Han'ge may be arrived at if these Neo-Peircean insights are placed in

dialogue with the theory of *ba* developed within Japanese semiotic theory, which allows the question of ontology to be foregrounded. The last two papers are focused on literary domains, showing how surveying a group of texts semiotically may lead to patterned interpretations, which can provide social and cultural insight. Al-Muttairi and Khatri look at the female subject, 'woman,' and how it emerges in the body of select Arabic-language stories written by women authors and translated into English. They combine ideas of semiotic and cognitive metaphors to show the possibilities and limitations in the portrayal of women characters by women authors writing in Arabic. Ketkar provides an interesting and exhaustive portrayal of Marathi literature from pre-colonial times through modernism. Expanding on Lotman and the Moscow-Tartu School's concept of 'semiosphere,' he proposes a history of translation that takes into account the multiple levels of multilingual expression, borrowing, and adaptation, as well as the social hierarchies present in literary production to propose a new kind of literary historiography for Indian languages. In addition to the papers, we provide an interview with one of the leading semioticians of India, Harjeet Singh Gill, so that readers may gain a sense of the historicity and development of semiotics of Asia by examining Gill's thoughts in conjunction with that of scholars from a younger generation. We believe this issue is a new beginning and look forward to engaging with those interested in pursuing semiotic study in the form of conferences, workshops, and future writings, wherever they may be located.

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