

THOMAS A. SEBEOK AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD OF SEMIOTICS

ТОМАС СЕБЕОК И ЕГО ВКЛАД В ОБЛАСТЬ СЕМИОТИКИ

Аннотациясы: Бул макала белгилүү венгриялык жана америкалык профессор Томас Себеок (Себеок) тарабынан изилденген семиотиканын кээ бир маселелерине арналат. Тактап айтканда, окумуштуу семиотика илими өз ичине адамзатка таандык болбогон сигналдарды камтыгандыгын чагылдырып, бул сигналдардын өзгөчө баарлашуу системага ээ деген анын көз карашынан жаралган “зоосемиотика” жаңы терминин киргизген жана ошондой эле когнитивдик лингвистика илиминин кээ бир маселелерине кайрылып, аларды көтөрүп чыккан. Буларга кошумчалай, бул доклад профессор Себеоктун биосемиотика тармагынын да негиздөөчүлөрүнүн бири болгондугун ачыктап берүүгө далалат кылат. Себеок, лингвист катары, финн-угор тил тобунун (“черемиси” аты менен белгилүү болгон) мари тилинин ар түрдүү аспектилерин иликтеп, бир канча макала жана китептерди жазып жарыкка чыгарган.

Профессор Себеоктун эмгектери антропология, биология, фольклор, лингвистика, психология жана семиотика тармактарын камтыйт. Бул окумуштуу изилдөөнүн жаңы багыттарына жетүү максатында миф, психолингвистика, стилистика, жаныбарлардын баарлашуусу жана биосемиотика сыяктуу илимдердин ар түрдүү тармактарында эмгектенген окумуштуу жана адистерди биргелешип иштөөсүн камсыз кылуу жөндөмдүүлүгүнө ээ болгон.

Профессор Себеок менин Индиана университетиндеги илимий жетекчилеримдин бири болгон. Ал жерде мен профессордун бир канча курсун алгам. Менин илимий ишимдин темасы семиотика болгондуктан, мен жогоруда аталган мари тили боюнча курсун тандап алгам.

Негизги сөздөр: белги, зоосемиотика, биосемиотика, семиотик (семиотика тармагындагы окумуштуу), семиология, семиозис, тубаса (табигый) гипотеза, когнитивдик илимдер.

Аннотация: Доклад посвящен некоторым вопросам семиотики, которыми занимался известный венгерский и американский профессор Томас А. Себеок. В особенности, в статье рассматривается его точка зрения о том, что семиотика включает в себя сигналы, не принадлежащие человеческому роду и которые имеют свои коммуникационные системы, которые составляют созданный им термин «зоосемиотика», а также поднимает ряд вопросов, рассматриваемые когнитивной лингвистикой. Профессор Себеок также числится в ряду ученых, которые являются основателями биосемиотики. Поэтому в данном докладе мы также предпримем попытку осветить ряд вопросов, касающихся этой области науки семиотики. Как выдающийся лингвист, профессор Себеок опубликовал ряд статей и книг, посвященных анализу различных аспектов финно-угорского языка, точнее языку мари (известного как «черемиси»).

Труды профессора Себеок вбирают в себя такие области науки как антропология, биология, фольклор, лингвистика, психология. Для того чтобы добиться новых вершин в науке, например, в исследованиях по мифологии, психолингвистике, стилистике, коммуникации животных и биосемиотике, профессор Себеок умел сплавивать специалистов из разных смежных областей науки для исследований.

Профессор Себеок был одним из моих академических консультантов в университете Индиана, где я посещал ряд курсов, включая курс по языку мари. Это было связано с тем фактом, что я выбрал этот курс в качестве темы для моей исследовательской работы по семиотике.

Ключевые слова: знак, зоосемиотика, биосемиотика, семиотик, семиология, семиозис, врожденная гипотеза, когнитивные науки.

Abstract: This paper will address some of the semiotic issues with which the well-known Hungarian-American Professor Thomas A. Sebeok (Sebők) was involved, particularly his purview of semiotics to include non-human signaling and communication systems, coining the term “zoosemiotics” and raising

some of the issues addressed by cognitive linguistics. Professor Sebeok was also among the founders of biosemiotics, which this paper will attempt to address. As a linguist, he published several articles and books analyzing aspects of the Finno-Ugic language, Mari (known as “Cheremis”). Professor Sebeok’s work spanned the fields of anthropology, biology, folklore studies, linguistics, psychology, and semiotics, and he had the ability to bring together specialists from neighboring fields of research in order to gain new perspectives on, for example, the study of myth, psycholinguistics, stylistics, animal communication and biosemiotics. .

Professor Sebeok was one of my academic advisors at Indiana University where I attended several of his courses, including the one he taught about the Mari language; it is for this reason that I chose him as the subject of my paper on semiotics.

Keywords: *sign, zoosemiotics, biosemiotics, semiotician, semiology, semiosis, innate hypothesis, cognitive sciences*

On October 4, 1957 the Soviet Union launched sputnik. This Soviet technological achievement caught the U.S. government, military, and scientific community off guard, and their united efforts to catch up with the Soviets heralded the beginning of the “space race” and perhaps the beginning of the cold war. Connected with this was the realization in the US that Americans were not learning foreign languages, especially the languages of the USSR. Hungarian semiotician and linguist Thomas Albert Sebeok (Sebók) (born Nov. 9, 1920 in Budapest, becoming a naturalized citizen of the US in 1943, earning his doctorate at Princeton University) arrived at Indiana University in 1943 to assist the anthropologist Carl Voegelin to manage the country’s largest Army Specialized Training Program in foreign languages. At Indiana Sebeok created the university’s department of Uralic and Altaic Studies, covering the languages of Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia. At the same time he became the chair of the university’s Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies.

It was Professor Sebeok who both facilitated my acceptance in the doctoral program at Indiana in 1963 and who recommended me for an NDEA (National Defense Education Act, Title IV) fellowship to pursue my studies in Hungarian language and literature, and Finno-Ugic and Turkic languages and area studies. (The NDEA program had been established by the US Defense Department after the launch of sputnik for the study of the so-called critical languages – the languages of the Soviet Union and the East Bloc.)

As a founding member of the Department of Uralic and Altaic Languages, Professor Sebeok became interested in the preservation of the endangered languages, including the Mari language (Cheremis), a Finno-Ugic language spoken by a relatively small number of people in the Republic of Mari-El a bit west of the city of Kazan’. His interest

in this language led him to write a grammar of Mari which he published in the Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series that he edited. I had the privilege to have been one of his students in a course he taught on the Mari language as well as in several of his other courses on linguistics. He then served on my Ph.D. committee several years later.

However, Professor Sebeok will be remembered for his pioneering work in the field of semiotics. He continued in the footsteps of Ferdinand de Saussure in investigating the study of the sign that had been the major focus of the work of de Saussure and other scholars beginning in the mid 20th century. Known as ‘semiology’, this study has been pursued by scholars since the mid 20th century. However, Sebeok expanded this study known as ‘semiology’ beyond the cultural world of the human being on which de Saussure had focused, to include non-human signaling and communication systems. He was one of the founders of biosemiotics, coining the term ‘zoosemiotics’ in contrast to ‘anthroposemiotics’ to emphasize that animals too depend on the actions of signs within experience.

Thus, Sebeok transformed semiotics back into a life science, placing it into a larger biological domain. Much like Chomsky posited with respect to grammar, Sebeok showed how all animals are endowed genetically with the capacity to use their basic signals and signs for survival.

Sebeok rejected the experiments on the linguistic abilities of apes, assuming the existence of a deeper, more universal and more meaningful underlying substratum: the “semiotic function”.

In his article “The Sign Science and the Life Science” Sebeok views semiotics to be at least as richly diffused with content as what is today practiced under the label of ‘cognitive sciences’. He frames sign science in with life science – all sciences that have to do with the structures, performances,

and interactions of living things. Sebeok referred to St. Thomas Aquinas who already in the 13th century recognized that animals make use of signs both natural and those founded on second nature and custom. He argued that language emerged as an evolutionary adaption of over two million years ago in the guise of a mute semiotic modeling system. Animals, he writes, have become ‘incomparable virtuosi’ at semiosis – the phenomenon that distinguishes life forms from inanimate objects as they interact among members of their own species and with members of all other life forms in their Umwelt, including the plant world. Semiosis can be defined as the instinctive capacity of all living things to produce and understand signs.

In his scientific work, Tom Sebeok, as he was known, provides many examples of the use of signs in animals, and classifies them on the basis of sign types. He tends toward the view that the decisive role in animal behavior belongs to indexical signs. He then enters into a discussion of language in animals which he claims is nothing more than a system of indexical signs, especially with respect to the ‘language of bees.’

In turning from zoosemiotics to biosemiotics, Sebeok argued for introducing semiotics into all forms of biology, all living creatures serving as objects of semiotics analysis. He emphasized the existence of semiotic phenomena in non-human organisms, and attempted to analyze the biological basis of various sign processes. That is, protists, plants, fungi, plants, and animals all represent different basic communication strategies. He thus divided the study of biosemiotics into phyto- cyto- and zoosemiotics, to include the plant world with which animals have learned to communicate through the use of signs. He emphasized that nature itself has a certain hierarchy, a universal characteristic which life shares with the rest of the cosmos, and within this totality there is interaction through the use of signs.

But there are no syntactic structures in animal sign systems, argued Sebeok. This is in accordance

with Chomsky’s innate hypothesis, where he argues that only humans have the ability to create novel utterances.

Sebeok was renowned for his ability to bring together specialists from different fields in order to generate perspectives on the study of myth, psycholinguistics, stylistics, animal communication, and biosemiotics, among others. It was mainly Sebeok who promoted the use of the term “semiotics” rather than semiology to name the general study of signs.

In 1975-76, Sebeok founded the Semiotic Society of America (SSA), having already been one of the founding members of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS) in 1969 and editor of its journal, *Semiotica*, from 1969 until his death in 2001. Sebeok was also the editor of several book series and encyclopedias, including *Approaches to Semiotics*, *Current Trends in Linguistics*, and the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*.

In 1991 the Sebeok Fellow Award was introduced “to honor his substantial career or lifetime contributions to semiotics and service to the semiotic community” through publications developing the recognition that anthroposemiosis is no more than a part of the still larger semiosis within the world of nature itself.

The title of “Sebeok Fellow” is the highest honor to be given by the Semiotic Society of America. It is presented only at two- to four-year intervals followed by the Sebeok Fellow Address at the SSA Annual Meeting and carries with it life membership in the SSA.

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