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Of marks and meaning : a palaeographic, semiotic-cognitive, and comparative analysis of the identity marks from Deir el-Medina.

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INTRODUCTION TO SEMIOTICS: WHAT AND WHY?

1 DEFINITIONS

There is little consensus as to what semiotics precisely entails and what are the scope, basic principles and concepts of its research. Semiotics involves no widely agreed theoretical assumptions, models or methodological tools. It is neither a science nor an academic discipline. Rather, semiotics has spread in as many directions as there are academic disciplines. It is a vast field of study ranging from ‘a(nthropology) to z(oology)’,³ involving especially linguistics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, biology, mathematics, musicology, architectural, literary and media studies, each discipline adding its own theoretical stances and methodological tools.⁴ While many semioticians have sought to establish coherence, their divergent schools and currents only highlight the lack of a firm theoretical foundation.⁵ In the words of the philosopher and semiotician Pelc, the term ‘semiotics is polysemic and ... depending on which meaning we have in mind, every differently conceived semiotics has something else for its theoretical basis.’⁶

Accordingly, definitions of semiotics are divergent, some being more inclusive than others. Because of a traditional close relationship with linguistics, some have highlighted especially the role and function of marks in human communicative behavior, where signs are first of all interpreted as linguistic signs, but in extension also signs of other forms of visual communication. The semiological linguist De Saussure, for example, conceived of semiology as a study of the role and nature of signs as part of social life, and of the structural laws they obey in generating social communication. Signs for him were ‘manifestations of human language’, especially spoken language. Although he acknowledged that other forms of human expression, among which ‘writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of politeness, military signals’, were semiological phenomena as well, he did not direct himself to their detailed study.⁷ The structuralist linguist Jakobson also focused on linguistic semiotics and on the verbal sign, although he considered it within a somewhat broader frame, defining semiotics as dealing ‘*with those general principles which underlie the structure of all signs whatever and with the character of their utilization within the message, as well as with the specifics of the various sign systems and of the diverse messages using those different kinds of signs.*’ ‘*The subject matter of semiotic[s] is the communication of any messages whatever, whereas the field of linguistics is confined to the communication of verbal messages.*’⁸ Other semioticians shifted the

³ Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 4.

⁴ The status of semiotics is a topic of debate. Assessments run from ‘activity’, ‘movement’, ‘area of interest’ and ‘project’ to ‘field’, ‘approach’, ‘method’, ‘discipline’, ‘doctrine’, ‘meta-discipline’, ‘theory’, and ‘science’. Several of these terms we rule out because of divergence in, and thus plurality of, theories, methods, disciplines, movements and approaches. Because of the lack of consensus and the characteristic of semiotics as being open to multiple disciplines, we have decided to refer to it as a ‘field’ of research or study throughout this dissertation. This is in accordance with Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 8-9. See also Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, ix, 4; Chandler, *Semiotics*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv, 4.

⁶ Pelc, ‘Theoretical foundations of semiotics’, *American Journal of Semiotics* 1 (1981), 15.

⁷ De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 6, 15-17. De Saussure’s theory is discussed in detail in chapter 2, section 1a.

⁸ Jakobson, ‘Towards a Linguistic Classification of Aphasic Impairments’ in Jakobson, *Selected Writings II*, 289; Jakobson, ‘Language in Relation to Other Communication Systems’ in *ibid.*, 698.

realm of semiotics from merely human systems to include animal communication as well. According to the philosopher Morris semiotics '*has for its goal a general theory of signs in all their forms and manifestations, whether in animals or men, whether normal or pathological, whether linguistic or nonlinguistic, whether personal or social. Semiotics is thus an interdisciplinary enterprise.*'⁹ The semiotician Sebeok likewise included sign processing by all organisms, arguing that semiotics has '*as its subject matter all systems of signs irrespective of their substance and without regard to the species of the emitter or receiver involved.*'¹⁰ He advocated extension of semiotics to include the disciplines of biology and zoology (bio- or zoosemiotics), collecting all human and animal communication under the term 'global' or 'universal semiotics'.¹¹ Still other semioticians went even further by proposing a definition of semiotics in accordance with a pansemiotic view of the universe. The American philosopher and logician Peirce argued that a sign is '*something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity*' and that '*the entire universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs*'.¹² With this definition of the sign Peirce followed an ancient tradition, that is the Greek formula of *aliquid pro aliquo*, 'something stands for something else'.¹³ Everything around us (words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, actions, objects, natural phenomena, and so forth) can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as signifying something. One of the broadest interpretations of semiotics that follows Peirce in the notion of a potential omnipresence of signs is outlined by Eco: semiotics is '*concerned with the entire universe ... with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else.*'¹⁴

But no matter how broad or narrow the implications of the definitions are, every semiotic exercise is generally considered to contain:

- a theory of the sign, addressing the questions 'What is a sign?' and 'What are the components it is constituted of?';
- a theory of signification, addressing the questions 'How do the sign-components interact to convey meaning?' and 'What are the possible sign-functions, or manners in which signs generate and convey meaning?';
- and a theory of communication, addressing the questions 'What are the processes that exploit the potential sign-functions?' or 'What is the code within which signs function as communication system and according to which they combine into meaningful messages?'

In other words, semiotics is generally understood as a search for the nature and function of signs as individual entities and as elements being part of a system. It studies the signification underlying the sign and the code underlying the system.¹⁵ As regards the code, Eco points to the role of culture which creates cultural codes that in turn create 'a cultural order which is the way in which a society thinks and speaks'. That brings semiotics into the field of culture and cognitive studies.

A final, essential question that semiotics should address is the question of meaning: 'What sorts of meanings can signs and sign systems produce?'. A famous dichotomy of meaning was

⁹ Morris, *Signification and Significance*, 1.

¹⁰ Sebeok & Umiker-Sebeok (eds.), *Speech Surrogates: Drum and Whistle Systems*, 64. See also Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 37.

¹¹ Sebeok, *Global Semiotics*.

¹² Buchler, *The philosophy of Peirce*, 99 (Peirce §5.448); Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 84-88.

¹⁴ Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 3, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: Semiotic theory 'should be able to explain every case of sign function in terms of underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one or more codes'.

proposed by the literary theorist Barthes, that is denotation versus connotation, but more nuanced perspectives on meaning may be better in line with the nature of signs and sign-functions, as we shall advocate in chapter 2.¹⁶

2 TRADITIONAL TOPICS

This brief outline of how semiotics is understood and which questions it should address relates primarily to a relatively recent interest, that is semiotics as a systematic study from the beginning of the 20th century up to the present day, of which particularly De Saussure and Peirce are seen as the founding fathers. However, questions of semiotic nature go back much earlier. Discussions relating to the nature of the verbal sign are first found in the works of Plato and Aristotle. They addressed the question to what extent names are signs that are correct in that their form represents the true nature of the things or objects they stand for. The relations between the form of a sign, the idea it signifies, and the thing or object to which it refers remains a core topic of semiotics today.¹⁷ The crucial point in Plato's *Cratylus* was the question whether expression could be distinguished from idea. Plato presents two stances:¹⁸

- personified by Hermogenes there was the doctrine that signs are conventional. Expressions are invented and may be applied to things and their notion at pleasure. Language is artificial; convention and agreement are the principles of correctness in signs;
- personified by Cratylus there was the doctrine that signs are the perfect expressions and notions of things. Language is not agreed upon, but is naturally given.

Plato's own view was that verbal signs, whether natural or conventional, are only incomplete representations of the true nature of things, since the realm of ideas exists independently of its representation in the form of words. Knowledge mediated by verbal signs is therefore indirect and inferior to immediate knowledge; and truth about things through verbal signs, even if they are excellent likenesses, is inferior to knowing the truth itself.¹⁹ This view led to a current of realism as opposed to nominalism in the middle ages with regard to the problem of universals; that is, the question whether properties or qualities that two or more entities have in common exist independently of particular objects. For instance, in addition to individual persons, does *humanity* with the property of being human, or *femininity* or *masculinity* with the property of being female respectively male, have independent existence? Where realism assumed the existence of individuals as well as of their shared properties as universals, nominalism argued that universals are only conventional names that refer to nothing; they have no existent referent, merely their individual objects have true existence.²⁰

The idea that names have no existence in that they are purely conventional was expressed by Aristotle in *Peri Hermeneias* (*On Interpretation*). In the opening words he provides a definition of the linguistic sign that contains the roots for a theory of signs:²¹

¹⁶ Sections 1c-d and section 2.

¹⁷ See the dyadic and triadic traditions discussed in chapter 2: sections 1a-d respectively section 2.

¹⁸ Plato, *Cratylus*. Translated by Jowett: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/cratylus.html>. See also King, *Semantics and Mental Representation in Aristotle's Peri Hermeneias*, 1-41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

²¹ Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, sections 1-2. Translated by Edghill: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/interpretation/>.

‘Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images. ... By a noun we mean a sound significant by convention The limitation ‘by convention’ was introduced because nothing is by nature a noun or name – it is only so when it becomes a symbol.’

Some followers recognized in these words at least three sign-components: 1) spoken sounds and their written marks, 2) mental images, and 3) the actual things. They founded a theory on the idea that a sign consists of an expressive form (1) that denotes a referent (3) which evokes an idea or notion in the minds of men (2).²² However, other followers focused more on the realist idea that signs have independent existence of the actual things and objects they refer to. They therefore only recognized the first two elements as form and mental image, or expression and content of a sign, arguing that differences between signs and sign systems only find expression in these two elements, because the actual things and objects remain the same for all.²³

After Plato and Aristotle, Stoic logic upheld a tradition of a tripartite sign which consisted of a *sēmaínon* (expressive form), an object or referent it referred to and a sense (*lektón*) made of the sign. Especially the *lektón* was concerned with meaning, and this was intentional meaning. By observing the *sēmaínon* and through mediation of the referent one could infer this intentional meaning by a process of logical induction.²⁴ The Epicureans rejected the intentional meaning, and therewith the complete element of the Stoic *lektón*. They pursued a model of a dualistic sign in which logic induction of intentional meaning was exchanged for a more natural and self-evident process of signification between form and sense impression of a sign. They therewith also rejected the idea of a purely conventional nature of signs. Rather, they were especially open to what Peirce later denoted as ‘indexical relations’: form and sense impression were linked by a direct connection found in nature. Consequently, their theory was not only open to human linguistic signs, but also especially to animal and gestural signs.²⁵

The currents of realism and nominalism to which the discussions from antiquity gave rise, and their questionings on whether the thing or object referred to was or was not a sign-component in addition to form and mental image or sense, and whether the relation between the components of these dyadic or triadic signs was conventional or naturally based, remained core topics during the middle ages. In addition, medieval semiotics (also called scholastic semiotics after the schools of medieval universities in which semiotic topics regarding theology, grammar, dialectic, logic and rhetoric were taught) also contributed to the theories of supposition and signification. The first explained the production of meaning within the context of other signs: supposition is the contextual meaning of a sign. The second, to which it was opposed, argued for a context-independent production of meaning: it argued

²² Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 89-90. See also chapter 2, section 2.

²³ They furthermore found inspiration in Aristotle’s theory on form, substance and matter in *Metaphysics* and argued that differences between signs are only differences in formed matter, while substance and unformed matter remained the same for all. The most elaborately worked out theory on form, substance and matter within the dyadic tradition is the theory by Hjelmslev. This is discussed in chapter 2, section 1b. Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 67-70, 83.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-6, 90. The Encyclopædia Britannica explains the Stoic *lektón*: ‘It recognized... that such sentences as ‘John Smith is a boy’, ‘Johnny Smith is a lad’, and ‘Jean Smith est un garçon’ could have an identical meaning (*lekton* 2013. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Retrieved 22 August, 2013 (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1580320/lekton>)).

²⁵ Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 16.

that meaning was only generated within the sign itself by the components of which it is constituted.²⁶ One group concerned with the theory of signification called themselves the Modistae, or Modist grammarians (13th-14th centuries). They were convinced of an essential iconicity between things and language; language was iconically dependent upon the nature of things (Cratylus' view).²⁷ The Modistae explained the production of meaning as an interaction between a *vox* (vocal noise), *res* (thing) and *intellectus* (understanding). This, and their focus on iconicity, made them forerunners of Peirce's well-known triadic sign theory, which is discussed in chapter 2 section 2. However, their focus on vocal sounds as sign expressions and on a mental understanding of these expressions, resulting in mental entities as the products of signification rather than in actual things or objects referred to, were direct sources of inspiration for De Saussure's well-known dyadic sign theory and his mental definition of the immaterial sign, discussed in chapter 2 section 1a.²⁸

During the Renaissance The School of Port Royal had at the basis of its theory also a mentalist and dyadic model in which the sign comprised two ideas: 'representer' and 'represented'. Both are conceptual elements and exist only in the mind as perceived and interpreted by the sender and receiver of a sign. The philosopher Hobbes (1588-1679) explored this mentalist definition, arguing that 'names ... are signs of our conceptions, ... they are not signs of the things themselves'.²⁹ The School of Port Royal furthermore introduced a classification of four different kinds of signs based on the manner in which they convey meaning:

- Natural iconic signs consists of 'representers' that resemble in detail what they represent; they are mirror images;
- Iconically and indexically motivated signs consist of 'representers' that resemble or refer to what they represent only in certain aspects, qualities or characteristics;
- Natural indexical signs consist of 'representers' that demonstrate either a certain or a probable link to what they represented. 'Breathing', for example, is a certain 'representer' of 'life';
- And arbitrary signs consist of 'representers' that are only linked to what they represent on the basis of agreement and convention, such as linguistic names.

This classification was a direct source of inspiration for Peirce's famous sign-classification which included icon, index and symbol (cf. chapter 2, section 2), while in the first two kinds of signs one may find the seeds for a theory of multiple layers of meaning with different degrees of iconicity or similarity, especially emphasized by Jakobson (chapter 2, section 1d).

Another great mind of the Renaissance was the German polymath and philosopher Leibniz (1646-1716), who was a source of inspiration especially for Peirce. Leibniz proposed a theory in which tripartite signs stand for things of which they create an idea in the mind. He argued that 'semiosis' (i.e. another term for signification that came to be especially connected to the triadic sign tradition as proposed by Peirce) was based on the association of perceptions as an instrument of

²⁶ Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 18.

²⁷ This view led, in combination with Aristotle's idea that mental experiences and actual things are the same for all, to the idea that languages must have an underlying structure which is the same for all. Descartes (1596-1650) elaborated upon it and concluded that, since thought is prior to language, diversity of languages is only a surface-structural phenomenon. In other words, the structure of thought and reason was common to all men. His philosophy laid the foundation for a search for universal language – the universal language project. The Modistae in fact already developed a universal grammar called *grammatical speculative et universalis*. Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 19, 21, 267-278.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

human cognition to make sense of the world. Signs, Leibniz explained, function as necessary tools to abbreviate and communicate in an efficient manner more complex semantic concepts. Similar to the pansemiotic definitions of Peirce and Eco, Leibniz acknowledged not only linguistic signs such as words and letters, but also ‘chemical, astronomical, Chinese and hieroglyphic figures; musical, stenographic, arithmetic and algebraic marks; and all the others we use for things when thinking’.³⁰

A topic of semiotic nature that gained interest especially in the French Enlightenment from the 17th century onwards was the connection of signs to the idea of an evolutionary development of language, discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation. On the basis of the Greek distinction between natural and conventional signs, the French philosopher and epistemologist Bonnot de Condillac (1715-1780) distinguished a pre-linguistic developmental stage of human communication through natural signs from a fully developed conventional language proper.³¹ The French mathematician and philosopher De Maupertuis (1698-1759) advocated a more holistic genesis of language, according to which language originated in global messages only after which simple linguistic signs such as words and letters and linguistic structure in general were developed.³² This idea contradicts, however, to results from modern psycholinguistic experimental research on early language development in children, who begin with letters and words and via telegraphic speech end up with more global messages.³³ Notably, there was also a theory that objected to the evolutionary ideas from nonlinguistic towards linguistic signs. The French philosopher Diderot (1713-1784) argued that the nonlinguistic signs of nonverbal communication were superior to linguistic signs because the linearity of spoken and written language led to a distortion of reality.³⁴ This view can be related to the function ascribed to signs by Leibniz: when signs act as economic and abbreviated tools to convey concepts, then translation and description of these concepts into words may lead to loss and distortion.

A product of the German Enlightenment was the theory of phenomenology of the philosopher Husserl (1859-1938). Although usually not considered a semiotic tradition, but rather one of philosophy and psychology, its focus on meaning is relevant to Peirce’s theory especially. Phenomenology may be defined as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. It is the study of phenomena as appearances of things, of things as they appear in our experience; in other words, of the ways in which we experience things, thus of the meanings things have in our experience. The structure of experience typically involves ‘intentionality’; that is, the directedness of experience toward things in the world, and the property of consciousness that it is a consciousness of or about something. According to Husserl’s phenomenology, our experience is directed toward things only through particular concepts, thoughts, ideas, images, and so forth. These make up the meaning or content of a given experience and are distinct from the things they represent or mean. In our experience we gain a temporary awareness, for instance of linguistic activity in a certain context (involving meaning, communication, understanding others), or of social interaction. Phenomenology allows not only to see the experience of a sign, or the sense made of it, as a separate meaningful sign-component in addition to form and the thing it refers to; it also connects the semiotic enterprise to a cognitive and neural substrate of experience. Nowadays, phenomenology has evolved into

³⁰ Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

³² *Ibid.*, 26.

³³ Harley, *The Psychology of Language*, 103-152.

³⁴ Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 26-27.

‘neurophenomenology’, a branch of cognitive neuroscience, which assumes that conscious experience is grounded in neural activity. It involves experiments that tend to confirm or refute aspects of experience on the basis of brain scans that show electrochemical activity in a specific region of the brain thought to subserve a type of vision or emotion, or motor control. As such it shares common questions and experiments with cognitive semiotics into which traditional semiotics is nowadays evolving.³⁵

In sum, although this historical outline of semiotic inquiry is by no means complete, it does reveal several major questions with which it has been involved since antiquity and that we will encounter again in some form or another when we discuss leading theories and models of the sign in the following two chapters. They concern:

- How do the forms in which signs occur relate to how they can be interpreted? Is there a conventional, a natural or an iconic relation?
- Do signs exist in the real world? Are they related to something in the real world, or do they only exist in the mind?
- (How) Does the individual sign in its generation of meaning relate to a context of other signs?
- How do signs relate to the development of linguistic scripts?
- How is the production and interpretation of signs accommodated in the cognition and neurology of the human brain?

3 WHY SHOULD WE BOTHER?

At this point, the reader may wonder why it is profitable to busy ourselves with semiotic inquiry at all. The semiotician Daniel Chandler notes that the difficulty for most beginners in the field lies in the fact that we are normally unaware of the signs and sign systems we use, and particularly of how we use them. Consequently, we normally take the world around us for granted as something which is independent of human interpretation, while in fact meaning is not *contained* within that world. ‘Meaning is not transmitted to us – we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware.’ ‘... our sign systems ... play a major part in the social construction of reality’ (or at least ‘the construction of social reality’) ‘... realities cannot be separated from the sign-systems in which they are experienced.’³⁶ This entails that signs have an ideological function; they can be used to construct and maintain the specific representations of reality by particular social groups. By becoming aware of, and making more explicit, the codes and conventions that are assigned to signs in order to generate and convey meaning we become aware of how particular social groups represent and experience their reality. As such, Roland Barthes wanted to break through the ideology of the ruling bourgeoisie and the mass media in mid-20th century France, who enforce their will and opinions by making them seem natural in a reality taken for granted. It is also precisely the question of how ideology is constructed which Egyptologist Goldwasser poses for ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script. She argues that we must ‘ask how the script represents the

³⁵ Smith, D.W., ‘Phenomenology’ in Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2013); Sonesson, ‘The View from Husserl’s Lectern’, *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 16 nos. 3-4 (2009), 107-148; Sonesson, ‘The Foundation of Cognitive Semiotics in the Phenomenology of Signs and Meaning’, *Intellectica* 58/2 (2012), 207-239. See also this Part, chapter 3.

³⁶ Chandler, *Semiotics*, xv, 11.

ideology of its inventors and what part the given pictures play in the reader's mind'.³⁷ Only then can we discover the multiple layers of meaning generated by hieroglyphic signs and the ancient Egyptian conceptual world view which they represent. As regards the marks from Deir el-Medina, we should not be satisfied with an identification between marks and workmen. We should direct ourselves to semiotic inquiry to find answers to questions concerning the nature of the system and of the individual marks in relation to hieroglyphic writing, the sorts of meaning they convey and the manners in which they do that, as well as the reason(s) why marks were used instead of writing while the latter was practiced at least in dynasties 19 and 20 by trained scribes. Only then can we grasp the full meaning of the system and the reality it created in Deir el-Medina in the first half of the second millennium BC.

³⁷ Goldwasser, *From Icon to Metaphor*, 29.