Editorial Preface

The original inspiration for the present issue of *Cognitive Semiotics* derives from a workshop organized by Göran Sonesson that took place at the 9th Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in Helsinki and Imatra in 2007. However, about half of the authors invited at the time could not attend, and since all who were present (except for Frederik Stjernfelt) have participated in this issue, along with one “newcomer”, Stephen Cowley, the real colloquium takes place here. This issue, just as the workshop, was designed to reflect on the present “creative fusion” of semiotics and the cognitive sciences into the new paradigm of cognitive semiotics, with particular regard to the part played by biosemiotics.

It is our belief that if cognitive semiotics is indeed to represent a dialectical synthesis, the relationship between consciousness and meaning, on one hand, and biology, on the other, will need to be at centre-stage (though not necessarily as the sole actor). In cognitive science, the brain, instead of the computer, has already become the leading metaphor (though usually not perceived as such) for the mind. Biosemiotics, in its several different varieties, claims to be operating the reverse reduction: of biology to meaning. However, as long as differences as well as similarities between consciousness/meaning and biology are not accounted for, the two reductions appear to be equally problematic.

In recent decades, biosemiotics, largely based on the inspiration of the *Bedeutungslehre* elaborated by Jakob von Uexküll, in conjunction with Peircean semiotic theory, has appeared to be one of the most vital parts of semiotics, as manifested also by the new journal *Biosemiotics*. The biosemiotic conception of meaning has been projected onto the level of cells as well as manifesting itself on a more traditional ethological, “zoosemiotic”, level. However, if signs appear already in the interaction between cells, then it is not clear in what sense entire organisms differ, or how primates are different from other species, and human beings from other primates. One of the most valuable contributions of biosemiotics to these questions has been the concept of “semiotic threshold”. However, we would claim that for this concept to be conceptually and empirically useful, it has to be made more precise, and to be explicitly related to evolution and ontogenetic development.

Within biosemiotics, classical semiotics has often been described as “anthroposemiotics” and given rather short shrift. From a developmental and evolutionary perspective, however, anthroposemiotics is clearly not completely discontinuous with biosemiotics. This does not only mean that classical issues of anthroposemiotics must be reconsidered from the point of view of biosemiotics, but also that “the difference which makes a difference” in the human species has to be accounted for – which means that biosemiotics itself must be reconceived from a broader cognitive semiotic viewpoint. A central task for cognitive semiotics, as we see it, is therefore to provide a more satisfactory description of (the evolution of) specifically human semiotic activities than those to be found in the currently fashionable “memetics” and Neo-Darwinism.

Interestingly, “the semiotic turn” in the cognitive sciences, taken by scholars such as Merlin Donald, Terrence Deacon and Michael Tomasello, has taken place precisely within the framework of the study of human evolution and development. Both traditions suggest a stage-like unfolding of the human semiotic potential, retaining the capacities of earlier stages. (Bodily) mimesis has been suggested to be a uniquely human capacity, independently of language. It has also been argued that new abilities accrue to the human species once biological change has come to an end, with the emergence of pictures, writing, and theoretical thinking. In these transitions, the specificity of human culture appears to be crucial, first through imitation, leading on to the sign function, and then through external, relatively permanent representations, a kind of “third embodiment”, beyond those of the biological and the phenomenal body. In the end, therefore, it may well be that also classical semiotics could contribute an important perspective to the empirical findings of developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and other cognitive sciences.

In the original invitation to this issue, we suggested that the interrelations of the semiotic study of human beings, on the one hand, and living matter, and more specifically animals, on the other, could be discussed, using, for instance, the concept of semiotic threshold. We also welcomed attempts to account for the specificity, from a cognitive semiotic point of view, of human beings, in relation to other animals, conceived both on the level of evolution and within history in the strict sense, i.e. within culture. All contributions to this issue can be related, to different degrees, to these two lines of inquiry.

With some simplification, there might be said to be three groups of articles in the present issue: (1) those that defend some version of contemporary

biosemiotics; (2) those that take a more classical semiotic stand; and (3) those that try to go beyond biosemiotics as we know it to a more diversified approach, which integrates findings from the cognitive sciences and all branches of semiotics. The order of the articles in this issue corresponds to this division.

The most “prototypical” representative of biosemiotics present here is Kalevi Kull. In his essay, he tries to make up for the inevitable reductionism resulting from calling everything a sign by characterising different semiotic thresholds between the vegetative, animal, and cultural realms. At the same time, however, he claims that these limits are not absolute, but rather constitute transitory zones. In a parallel fashion, Søren Brier argues for the existence of different levels of signification, going from the processes internal to the body, those that occur at the psychic level, and finally those characterizing the communication between several individuals. Unlike Brier and Kull, who derive much of their biosemiotic inspiration from Jesper Hoffmeyer, and ultimately from Peirce, Stephen Cowley claims adherence to M. Barbieri. Although more exclusively concerned with language, Cowley interprets the latter very broadly, maintaining that language consists in a series of “organic codings” and of their “interactional counterparts”.

In his contribution, Alf Hornborg argues for the necessity of retaining a clear (analytical) distinction between Culture and Nature, against attempts to reduce the former to the latter. Although in a rather different vein, Barend van Heusden also claims that meaning as found in human beings, although based on Darwinean evolution, is of a quite different order.

In his paper, Göran Sonesson proposes a detailed analysis of a number of different manifestations of meaning, from features, percepts, and affordances, towards one end, to markers, surrogates, true signs, and sign systems, towards the other, each time pondering to which extent these kinds of meaning can be expected to be present in animals other than human beings. The analysis proposed by Jordan Zlatev overlaps somewhat with that of Sonesson, to the extent that it centres on the sign function, but it is broader in scope. Zlatev’s “semiotic hierarchy” attempts to relate, on the evolutionary scale, the organism, the minimal self, the enculturated self, and the linguistic self to their respective value systems, which are claimed to be fundamentally biological, phenomenal, significative, and normative, respectively.

We wish to thank the main editors for the opportunity to organize this issue, and the authors for their interesting contributions, not to forget their

patient work with all the comments on multiple drafts, from us and from the reviewers. We also wish to express our gratitude to Kalevi Kull, Søren Brier, and Barend van Heusden, as well as to Chris Sinha and Peer Bundgaard for their valuable assistance in preparing this issue.

Lund, April 2009

Göran Sonesson and Jordan Zlatev