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Unfolding the Semiotic Web in Urban Discourse

In Scientific Cooperation with Daina Teters

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Introduction

Unfolding the semiotic web in urban discourse

The idea to formulate the investigative framework for the following collective volume, which encompasses a number of papers devoted to the semiotics on the city and the semiotics in the city, has originated from the editor's interest in the visual communication pertaining to the expressions of interpersonal distance in the urban environment during the last twelve years. As for today, this interest domain has borne fruits in some thematic proposals of doctoral dissertation research opportunities.

The initiative to organize a workshop devoted to the semiotics of the city had been undertaken in Riga at the Metamind 2008 conference. I had discussed this possibility with Daina Teters (Head of International Research and Art Project: Metamind, Latvian Academy of Culture, Riga, Latvia) and Roland Posner (Head of Research Center for Semiotics, Berlin University of Technology). Subsequently, I had submitted a summarized proposal of the workshop to the Director of the International Communicology Institute Richard L. Lanigan (from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale) at the *International Symposium on Cultural Semiotics*, in Nanjing, China, 15–17 November 2008.

To begin with working activities, an idea had been launched to convoke the Consultant Assembly for Discussing the Idea of Urban Discourse in Semiotic Terms, which was organized in Wrocław between Feb. 27 and March 01, 2009 by the Committee of Philological Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Wrocław Branch, and the Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław in co-operation with the Research Center for Semiotics of Berlin University of Technology and the Metamind-Project of the Latvian Academy of Culture in Riga. The Program of this Assembly included the following presentations and exhibitions: "On the textual beginnings of pre-urban societies in the Viking age (An anthroposemiotic study of runic inscriptions in North-Central Jutland against the background of selected civilization models)" by Piotr Paweł

Chruszczewski (University of Wrocław, and Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław); "Beyond corporate social responsibility: The semiotic act of renaming urban streets in Bucharest by Camelia-Mihaela Cmeciu ("Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău); "City furniture and its role in the organization of human behavior: A system-theoretical approach" by Roland Posner; "How urban discourse is patterned through the performing arts: A poster session presenting drawings of performers on the stage created during their interaction with their audiences" by Vessela Posner (Atelier in Berlin); "The city as a text" by Grażyna Sawicka (Casimir the Great University in Bydgoszcz); "Urban environment, metropolitan discourse and verbal proxemics: Searching for the meanings in the city" by Mikołaj Sobociński (Casimir the Great University in Bydgoszcz); "Semiotic aspects of the city as a space and the space in the city (with special reference to Riga)" by Daina Teters; "WELL, WELL…" by Małgorzata Tyc-Klekot (Atelier in Wrocław); "Linguistic functionalism and the principle of abstractive relevance in the metaurbanist discourse on art and architecture" by Elżbieta Wąsik (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań); and "Means-and-purpose-oriented functionalism in architecture and urbanist art and the sources of the conceptions of linguistic functions" by Zdzisław Wąsik.

Some papers published in this volume come from the participants of the planned workshop, named afterwards as "Round Table", consisting of a plenary meeting and a thematic session with the title: "Unfolding the Semiotic Web in Urban Discourse" organized at the 10th World Congress of Semiotics, La Coruña, Spain, September 22–26, 2009: Culture of Communication, Communication of Culture. Among the invited contributors, the following authors had given their papers: Sung-Do Kim (Korea University, Seoul), "Some semiotic observations on the textual, ecology of public urban space in East Asia"; Richard L. Lanigan, "Slugging: The *nonce sign* in urban communicology of transportation"; Roland Posner, "City furniture and its role in the organization of human behavior – A systems-theoretic approach"; Mikołaj Sobociński, "Verbal proxemics in metropolitan discourse. Investigating how urban signs create space and influence social interactions"; Daina Teters, "Imaginative architecture and the verbal descriptions of emptiness: Ways and roads"; Zdzisław Wąsik, "Discursivism as an epistemological perspective in urban studies", and Józef Zaprucki (Kolegium Karkonoskie in Jelenia Góra, and

Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław), "The historical interference in the urban discourse".

The subject matter of this "Round Table" had constituted a semiotic approach to the discursive patterns and practices of people who communicate in the urban environment. The notion of urbanity had been defined as a way of life in cities, towns, and their agglomerations (metropolises), specifying the distinction between "urban vs. rural". The notion of discourse, in turn, had been taken as defined by philologists, or in a broader context, by representatives of social sciences. In that particular context, it had been noticed that practitioners of philological sciences, linguists and theoreticians of literature, used to refer the term *discourse* to the relational properties of *text*-types or types of *text-processing* activities embedded into the social roles of communication participants and their culture. In such a narrower disciplinary scope, discourse was seen as the realization of language in spoken and written texts determined by the functional circles, interest spheres or the domains of human behavior.

However, from the perspective of cultural-communicational sciences, discourse was proposed to be specified in terms of semiotic codes and processes that link human individuals as communicating selves into interpersonal and intersubjective collectivities when they create and interpret similar meanings embodied in material bearers. Accordingly, the unfolding of the semiotic web was understood, firstly, with respect to observed phenomena, as detecting and evaluating the growth and manifestation of the sphere of meaning-bearers or a sequence of meaning-bearing events, and secondly, regarding the observer's focus of attention, as identifying and explaining the constituents and aspects of discourse in the light of signs and/or sign-processes that aggregate individual participants of communication into discursive linkages on a lower level and discursive communities on a higher level of social grouping.

It was expected that the "Round Table" might have offered the opportunity to bring the practitioners of *text*-and-*sign*-oriented disciplines together who perceive and apprehend the formative nature of urban discourse at various planes of its expression, creating thus a combination of conceptual simplicity and complexity, as well as the simultaneity of varying types of views where the described and descriptive objects intermingle, where the explanatory statements are explained in terms of other statements. In their papers, they might have had the opportunity to expose such semiotic aspects of human interrelationships in the urban environ-

ment, as the opposition between, e.g., public vs. private, global vs. local, strange vs. intimate, alien vs. proximate, foreign vs. domestic, distant vs. near, anonymous vs. distinctive, etc.

As it was assumed, the inquiries of semiotics- and discourse-oriented participants might have concentrated around such individual- and group-communication related categories of concern, as for example, require-ments, needs, values, power, authority, conflict and accommodation, co-operation and competition, etc. Also invited had been those researchers who were interested in the conditions under which the semiotic objects might be treated as vestiges of man's communicational customs which unite the inhabitants of towns, cities and metropolises into organized communities. Prospective proposals for papers following the rules of 10th World Congress of Semiotics as to the length of the abstract had been invited to be sent to the moderator of the workshop, Daina Teters, having been nominated President of the "Round Table" according to the customs of congress organizers.

Two papers of Daina Teters and Zdzisław Wąsik, selected for this volume, have either utilized or extended the contents of the papers pre-sented and simultaneously published in *Consultant Assembly III: In Search of Innovatory Subjects for Language and Culture Courses* (Or-ganized in Jelenia Góra between May 15 and 18, 2010 by the Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław, Karkonosze College in Jelenia Góra and State Museum "Gerhart Hauptmann House" in Jelenia Góra in co-operation with the Research Center for Semiotics of Berlin University of Technology and the Metamind-Project of the Latvian Academy of Cul-ture in Riga).

Appreciating her crucial role as organizer of three stimulating interna-tional research conferences: *Metamorphoses of the Mind: Out of One's Mind, Losing One's Mind, Light-Mindedness* (2006), *Metamorphoses of the World: Traces, Shadows, Reflections, Echoes and Metaphors* (2008), and *Metamorphoses of the Absolute* (2010), as well as co-organizer of three Consultant Assemblies in Poland, subsumed under the framework of Riga-Berlin-Wrocław Triangle for Semiotics and Communicology, I have felt obliged to express my indebtedness to Professor Daina Teters by inviting her to act as an Associate Editor in this volume.

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