AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTI RANDVIIR
on Semiotics and the Future

Interviewed by
Eleni Alexandri

Anti Randviir is a senior researcher in semiotics, lecturer and programme director of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu, and member of both the Estonian Semiotics Society and the Finnish-Ugric Semiotics Society. Since 1993, when he began his BA studies in the Department of Semiotics at Tartu University, he has been actively engaged in research and contributing to the development of the field, with a focus on spatial semiotics and sociosemiotics.

I was thrilled to have the chance to speak with Anti about what attracted him to the field of semiotics, what encouraged and motivated him over the years, and what inspired his research. In addition, I wanted to know what he anticipates not only for our lives, but most importantly for our field of study in light of the anticipated yet extraordinary explosion of technological advancements, the hype surrounding artificial intelligence, and the shift in academic interest towards the future. I was captivated and inspired by our conversation, the stories of the early years of the Department of Semiotics, the insightful remarks regarding the definition of our domain, and the enthralling perspectives on artificial intelligence. Therefore, I would like to close this short introduction by thanking Anti once more for this incredible discussion.

Interview

Eleni Alexandri: Setting a marker as a starting point of your career in 1993, this year, you successfully reached a 30-year course in the field of Semiotics. Do you recall what drove you to this field and what your hopes and aspirations were at this early stage?

Anti Randviir: Like many other people I was also young some time ago, and after finishing high school, I had to make a choice of 'what to make of my future'. I sort of was driven since my kindergarten years at home, so to speak, since both my parents

were philologists and therefore we were surrounded by humanities literature at home. In a sense I was by default inclined towards humanities, or cultural affairs, so to speak. At that time in Tartu there was the possibility to study cultural anthropology, sociology, or psychology, which all seemed to be a little bit old-fashioned, a little bit too technical, and they could not answer my youthful questions about the meaning of life. Perhaps I should be ashamed to admit that my first sort of semiotic literature – which can be indeed regarded as semiotic literature – was *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts* by Rudolph Steiner[1], who is now pretty much thrown out of the academic circles.

So, when I graduated high school, it was the very first year when there was offered a combined admission to psychology, philosophies, semiotics, social work and something else. It was the year that the Department of Semiotics had opened its first curriculum for the study of semiotics; so it was kind of an experimental program, and the first time that other specializations were introduced in this five-item-study package. Those who got admitted had to pass all five specializations during the first year, and then it would be decided what will happen next. Quite soon it became apparent that psychology was indeed too technical for me, inclining towards experimental psychology, psycho-physical stuff, biopsychology, and so on. On the other hand, philosophy was pretty much about rehearsal of what one could actually read from books. Thus, semiotics remained on the sieve, whilst also preserving some intriguing enigma. That was also partially due to the fact that we had no semiotic literature, only information about the domain from our handful of teachers. So it was pretty much a mentor-based study of semiotics. The Department of Semiotics back then was located on seven square metres I think, and its library contained four to nine books on semiotics, which I went through in a couple of months.

Therefore, it was partially my choice, but also the choice of the head of the Department, Igor Chernov, that I was chosen to be amongst those five students who were eventually thrown into the pool of semiotics, instead of psychology or philosophy. From that time on I sort of stuck to that topic, and I smoothly transitioned from my bachelor onto master and then doctoral studies. Thus, I may modestly say that I am the first officially educated semiotician in the known universe who has passed semiotics from the base courses to the degree in the university studies; although it was pretty much a coincidental course of events, as it usually is.

EA: Did you consider at any point choosing a different career path? Perhaps moving away from humanities and going towards other fields of study and knowledge?

AR: For one year, in parallel to semiotics, I studied environmental protection at Maaülikool[2], but it was too much math and physics for me.

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[1] Steiner, Rudolph 1973. Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts: Anthroposophy as a Path of Knowledge – The Michael Mystery. London: Rudolph Steiner Press.

[2] The Estonian University of Life Sciences in Tartu. Homepage: https://www.emu.ee/en/

EA: What would you say was the driving force that kept your interest and commitment to semiotics and your research intact throughout the years?

AR: I think it is just the nature of life, which is always changing. If you have already touched the core of semiotics, it is very difficult to get out of it, because when you have realized the meaningful lessons of being human, then it is difficult to deny this. It is an essence which is constantly changing and evolving, and it required continuous learning, reviewing, and revisiting. In this sense, being a semiotician is a never-ending journey, and this realization shields your fate.

EA: Therefore, the core of semiotics is the source of inspiration and energy that has sustained your research; but have you observed any changes in your interests in the field of semiotics throughout the years? Were you devoted from the outset to a very specialized area, or did you have a plan to start from a certain point, with the eventual objective of focusing on metatheory and general semiotics when you would have acquired the skill and knowledge to do so?

AR: Originally I started from the semiotics of city, and then, as a natural continuation, I moved to the study of semiotics of space. But in as much as my teacher, Igor Chernov, was a very modern, western-oriented person, he picked up the notion of social semiotics – which he had not quite yet made sense of himself. Consequently, I was constantly pushed towards this area of social semiotics. By striving to cope with it and make sense of it, I developed an inclination towards this more theoretical area, which, again, happened quite organically, and it also enabled me to conceptualize aspects of the semiotics of city and the semiotics of space in a more concrete way. Finally, this theoretical sense-making of social semiotics, led naturally to issues concerning the very essence of theoretical semiotics or semiotics in general. And in this sense, those theoretical issues led me to metatheoretical issues, at which I am stuck at the moment.

EA: Since you mentioned Igor Chernov, how was it working with him? And how was he as a mentor?

AR: He was a very personal person, and he is very still very lively. He was always very dedicated, and I think one of the most important things was that he considered students as equal colleagues. He led his students very quickly to normal, serious scholarly business, and motivated them to take up quickly on practicing in writing, going to international conferences, organizing conferences, and so on. I remember we were second year students when we went to the Imatra International Semiotic conference and we very immodestly presented our pretty modest ideas. These presentations were attended by eminent semioticians of whom we had only heard or read from books, like Roland Posner or Alexandros and Karin Lagopoulos, or Thomas

Sebeok, or Jean Umiker-Sebeok, or, Julia Kristeva, or Vilmos Voigt, or Jeff Bernard or even scholars from the Northern spheres like Eero Tarasti, Göran Sonesson and so on. So we were quite quickly immersed in the international semiotic interaction and communication.

Personally, I had to get in touch with the leading semioticians of the 90s, because of my position in the Department of Semiotics, and due to the fact that professor Chernov was not a writing person, concerning also international communication and emails. So, I became a mediator and I had to be in contact with those pretty legendary names; which was embarrassing at first, but became normal very soon.

EA: In relation to what we said regarding the motivating factors in academic life… students, professors, and artists often face writer's block or lack of inspiration. Others consistently undervalue their efforts, which is also a factor that inhibits their development. Have you ever had a similar experience? What obstacles did you face in your career, and how did you overcome them?

AR: Of course, as it has been mentioned several times, semioticians belong to the writing type of scholars, which is a two edged blade. On the one hand, you can express more exactly your thoughts and ideas in writing form, and it should be a good way to communicate and interact with the international community; but it's getting more and more difficult, because people are writing too much. Some time ago it was very common to exchange ideas in book form; for instance, some scholar would write a book on a certain topic, and then the international community would spend a year or two before publishing a kind of discussion book on the basis of the initial monograph. This is impossible today due to the rapidity of publishing. There are so many publications that it is unfeasible to go through everything, while, unfortunately, it becomes even harder to discover decent publications and actually novel ideas.

Somehow, it seems that a personal communication should take the role of keeping up your motivation of continuing your academic research. In this connection I must stress the importance of the aforementioned Imatra gatherings and the merits professor Tarasti has for the rebirth and development of Tartu semiotics. But today this personal communication is also a little bit challenging to achieve, because of our growing travel difficulties, concerning not only COVID, bur other circumstances as well.

So, I don't know how to keep up your motivation. You just have to. I think, one way of doing so is by forming smaller research groups. Ideally, these groups would be international, and then you can work in the line of your interest and receive decent feedback that will positively enable you to filter the information that is actually and heuristically relevant in the field of your specific scholarly undertakings. Otherwise, it is very easy nowadays to get lost.

EA: Do you think that our lack of collaboration in recent years has been caused by this overabundance of information and publications? Could it possibly be due to the increasingly antagonistic environment within academia? Do you believe people still desire to work together?

AR: I have met very eminent semioticians who have been disappointed in recent years, both in international cooperation, because they think that this amateurish impact is too great on semiotics, and because they simultaneously feel that they don't get enough support from their own academic institutions. It seems to me that those semioticians who have been lucky to have their own groups of students, they have somehow survived better than many people who have authored very substantial semiotic publications and who have been influential for semiotics in past years. The latter have somehow faded away into the background due to the lack of professional contacts and lack of support from their institutions. And this lack is in a way connected with the proliferation of semiotics in terms of international conferences where it is possible to meet less semioticians than representatives of other specialities nowadays.

EA: Since we are talking about collaborations, in 2009, you and Paul Cobley co-authored the introduction chapter "What is Sociosemiotics"[3] which, according to the first lines, is a tricky issue; perhaps it would be even more difficult to describe in a few sentences, but how would you define semiotics at large? Or at least offer a streamlined explanation of what the field comprises.

AR: As we were discussing the other day, there have been many definitions of semiotics; in fact, semiotics seems to be, in this sense, a little bit different from other disciplines. Pretty much everyone knows what sociology is, or what mathematics is; even psychology is pretty much certain. But this trouble of defining semiotics seems to be an ongoing business, and indeed there have been many different definitions of semiotics. It is and probably will be an ongoing business, because the very boundary of meaningfulness and semiosis is and will be floating, possibly expanding. Expanding in two senses – on the one hand our knowledge of the universe is expanding, we discover meaningfulness in novel and possibly more minute spheres and phenomena, and on the other hand we shift the boundary of the human semiosphere through inventions by ourselves. Having said that, I don't know if we can call these 'definitions' of semiotics, but rather demarcations of the domain and the object field.

There are meaningful units that are the object domain of semiotics, and so, semiotics can be seen as the study of signs. On the other hand, it can be seen as the study of semiosis, or meaning-making, which means that semiotics can be associated

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[3] Cobley, Paul; Ranviir, Anti 2009. What is sociosemiotics? *Semiotica* 173(1): 1-39. https://doi.org/10.1515/SEMI.2009.001.

not with some certain units, but rather with some processes. And inasmuch as semiotics is the study of semiosis, as it comes from Peirce already, I think.

This question was also my first question in my own interview with Thomas Sebeok[4]. One of his versions was that semiotics is the study of relationships between the mind and reality. This could have been a possibility to go around the issue. However, he eventually discovered that he has to answer the question of 'what is the mind?' which was, and still is, a very tough question. Furthermore, it came to my surprise that he never questioned the issue of 'what is reality?'

Nevertheless, I think we can agree that semiotics can be regarded as the science studying semiosis; and this is a bit better than mediating processes in general, because there can be other mediating processes as well that are not engaging any meaningful aspects whatsoever.

However, besides questioning what semiotics is, or which is its object domain, another highly important question is what is the role of semiotics? Semiotics, in a way parallel to its object domain, is also a mediating paradigm or mode of theorizing, or however you choose to call it. It is mediating between the sciences and humanities, which nowadays is becoming more and more important, not only in connection with the emergence of cognitive science, but also in connection with novel areas of the human activity, concerning primarily, the most popular, artificial intelligence. On the other hand, semiotics is a mediating mode of theorizing that has a crucial role in transdisciplinary developments.

Ultimately, the question of what is semiotics should be answered from these two viewpoints, in my opinion. The first part should concern the issue of what is the domain of semiotics, in the sense of how you define its objects of study; and the second part should be the role of semiotics. I want to note here that when I refer to the objects of study, it is very important to dismiss the traditional idea of different disciplines as if they have their own specific objects, as sociology has the society, the social groups, or the individual, or cultural anthropology has the artifacts, and so on. The different objects, as such as units, do not belong to any specific discipline. They need to be regarded as objects containing an inherent transdisciplinarity. And in terms of defining the object of study of semiotics, I think it is useful to exactly define it through processes, not units; and semiosis is one of those mediating processes that can be taken as the key.

EA: Could this approach lead back to what Igor Chernov had said about semiotics being more of a metascience since it does not have an object of study[5]? Perhaps he meant that there are no specific units, but rather processes that we understand and

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[4] Randviir, Anti 2001. Intervjuu Tartus Thomas A. Sebeokiga. "Mis on Semiootika, tõepoolest?" (An interview with Thomas A. Sebeok in Tartu. "What is Semiotics, Really?"). *Acta Semiotica Estica* I: 11–32.

[5] Chernov, Igor 1988. Historical survey of Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School. In: Broms, Henri and Rebecca Kaufmann (eds.), *Semiotics of Culture: Proceedings of the 25th Symposium of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics*, Imatra, Finland, 27th-29th July, 1987. Helsinki: Arator Inc., 7–16.

analyze, and this is a mental activity of understanding and realizing the interconnections and how eventually things make sense.

AR: I think that this is the point of any scholarly activity that has, as a target, culture, society, the individual, or others, since they are all meaningful things. So, I do not understand Chernov's intention here, and I think that metatheoretical activity should be a part of the ongoing identity process of any science in terms of its internal law of communication. But I think semiotics as an object cannot be listed in a kind of finite manner, because semiosis is unlimited. Not only due to the nature of human thinking, and the endless semiosic activity in the terms of Peirce's unlimited semiosis[6], but also because we just cannot pin point the ending that marks where semiosic processes are finished with.

EA: Would you say that it is fair or even safe to come up with a definition that could be applied universally to the study of semiotics, or is this a bit unthoughtful, given that different schools of thought or different parts of the world may have a different approach to semiotics? Furthermore, we have many branches, and sub-branches, so perhaps a holistic definition cannot encompass everything.

AR: I think it is very unfortunate that we start to think about different sub-branches of semiotics. Indeed there are different target areas of semiotic study already formed, but they should not be regarded as special sub-semiotic disciplines; this leads to disciplinary schizophrenia, which I think has already happened. Different sub-semiotic disciplines have already been competing for being the most genuine semiotics for a long time now, and there have been questions asked, for instance, by cultural semioticians regarding the right of life of zoosemiotics or vice versa, and so on.

      Somehow the process has already developed so far, unfortunately, that it is difficult to see how to bring semioticians back together under one umbrella, although it has been tried for decades.

      One of the most effort-making people towards that direction was the late Roland Posner, President of IASS, who dedicated much of his life to the institutional integration of semiotics, and to the institutionalization of semiotics in the educational system in general. However, this institutionalization of semiotics, stemming from the most positive intentions, has been sadly and largely unsuccessful. Maybe it could be more effective if we could have semiotics formally institutionalized within academic circumstances, like universities. Right now, the very many sub-semiotic disciplines are not even connected with any formal institution, which means that they are also not responsible for their exclamations about the identity of semiotics amongst other disciplines. But the autocommunicative identity of semiotics is important also for communicating semiotics to other disciplines that, in fact, are using it or its selected vocabulary or selected methods in inter- or transdisciplinary research.

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[6] Charles Sanders Peirce 1960. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Volume II, paragraph 303, 1903. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 169.

EA: Now, since we have discussed, or attempted to approach a more objective and somewhat inclusive definition of semiotics, how about subjectively? Are there differences? What does semiotics mean to you? As in your very own definition, either in the manner you would explain it to somebody, in a creative form and based on your personal experience, or in the way you record it within yourself.

AR: I think semiotics is simply the study of meaningful units and meaningful processes; point, end, dot. But the problem is that this object domain of semiotics is in continual continuous development. Whilst it was some time ago a normal thing to agree that the domain of semiotics has to do with the limits of the semiotic reality – however you decide to call it... semiotic reality, or social reality, cultural space, or semiosphere, *lebenswelt*, and so on – the issue now is becoming more and more difficult. This trouble comes from the fact that it is tough to delimit human semiotic reality, nowadays, as we are going through certain processes.

       Approximately a century ago, people started, more seriously, to talk about the semiotic essence of humans and their self-created realities, and reached the notions of the semiotic self and semiotic reality. Now we are in a very similar situation, yet way more difficult, since we have hardly any means to draw the boundary between the human, in the psychological and biological sense; now we also have to do that in a way more complicated technical sense. This was not on the table one hundred years ago, at least not at level. The human was discovered, multiplied and expanded from the inside; but now the human is expanding also in the technical areas. So we are facing questions that, I think, we are far from being able to answer. Questions concerning the expansion and multiplication of the human – we are in no capacity to even formulate those questions yet.

EA: As we were talking, I was thinking that semiotics and psychology are somehow similar in that they both cannot precisely standardize their object of study. Perhaps this is owing to the vast range of individual experiences and inner worlds, in the case of psychology, and given that the domain deals with complex and subjective phenomena. In a same vein, we are confronted with a similar situation since there are as many interpretations as there are people in the world. Would you say that there is such a connection between these two fields, and it is also linked with the problem of definition?

AR: I think psychologists can answer you quite precisely where the human psyche can be found from. It is, nevertheless, confined within the human body; whether from a more cultural-psychological approach, or tackling the issue based on biochemical processes that are taking place in the brain or even in other parts of the body. Be that as it may, psychology has more concrete, or at least, an easier possibility to answer what its object domain is.

For semiotics defining the human mind as its object of study, that is, as a meaningful thing of study, raises a problem, because the mind is floating out of itself. The mind is expanding in the environment, and it becomes even more complicated than when Charles Cooley defined the mind as a social[7], meaningful entity. In this sense, when we have those difficulties brought along with AI, it is hard to say where AI starts, where it ends or stops, and where is the 'meaningful' ending.

EA: Moving away from the issue of definitions, I would like to ask what do you consider the proudest moment in your career or your most significant contribution to the field of semiotics?

AR: I think in terms of semiotics itself, it was good that Paul Cobley and me reached, or tried to bring, some clarity into the international general semiotic paradigm by attempting to define, or redefine, social semiotics[8]. Social semiotics had been used in a casually mixed manner alongside with sociosemiotics for some decades. There is a very significant difference between the two both paradigmatically and ideologically. In a pretty awkward manner, sociosemiotics which we considered as having to do with semiotics proper, allowed us to add a nuance to bring also cultural semiotics closer to the so-called Western semiotics (I think sociosemiotics was in fact first used by Juri Lotman in Russian, although sporadically). Thus, the whole volume of the journal was entitled as 'Sociosemiotica'. Through this effort, we called for contemporary semiotics to return to its sources, which were in fact a unified scholarly theorizing paradigm that has been broken up nowadays. I think that was a good thing to do. I don't know how successful we were, nevertheless, we at least tried to recall some basic principles of semiotic studies that had been defined by semioticians from the birth time of modern semiotics.

Finally, when it comes to practical terms, I feel pretty proud of having been lucky to contribute to the creation and development of the Department of Semiotics and its curricula, here in Tartu, and I am lucky that it is still alive!

EA: Again, picking up from our discussion so far, you mentioned AI; your most recent publication, "Space" (2022)[9], concludes by emphasizing the significance of Lotman's thoughts on space and its applicability to future study, particularly as we approach an even more digitalized era and with the rise of artificial intelligence. Months after your publication, we observed the proliferation of different AI-based programs and a worldwide interest in AI for the sake of experimentation, play, education, creativity, and general production. How are these changes reflected in meaningful space?

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[7] Cooley, Charles H. 1907. Social consciousness. *Publications of the American Sociological Society* 1(1): 97–109.

[8] Cobley, Paul; Ranviir, Anti 2009. What is sociosemiotics? *Semiotica* 173(1): 1-39.

[9] Randviir, Anti 2022. Space. In: Tamm, Marek; Torop, Peeter (eds.). *The Companion to Juri Lotman: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 200-210.

AR: If we are talking about meaningful space, then this is where the humans live in. It is natural that this meaningful space is unlimited because it has to be potentially open in order to bring new information into the system of human culture. Because, otherwise, the system would wither off, even according to systems theory. Ultimately, humans have the right of their meaningful space to be undefined. They have the right for creating poetry, the right for creative and artistic expansion of their meaningful space; the right for innovation and imagination. They have the right to imagine how to live under water or how to fly to faraway planets, and they hold the right to actually accomplish those dreams eventually. So, in this sense, it is natural that the meaningful space is without borders.

Now, in connection with AI, there is the question of how ideas produced by AI should interact with actual human produced meaningful space. It is essentially a question of agency; who is responsible and who has the right of expanding the meaningful space of humans? And it is in fact a tough question, in the sense that eventually humans must handle that meaningful space. In a very curious manner, we may be meeting here a kind of "upper semiotic threshold" – something that we have never even talked about, or have talked about only theoretically under notions like 'text of culture' or 'tradition of culture' as so-to-speak self-managing functional entities.

EA: Perhaps I can expand this question a bit, as I believe I was somewhat vague. As you stated, the meaningful space is potentially limitless, so I was wondering if we could say that AI will further expand this boundless space, although this might sound paradoxical, given we are talking about an infinite acreage. But the point is, could we say that because AI is programmed and trained by humans, it is a pure circulation of human ideas and perhaps even biases, thus it does not alter anything? Or should it be viewed as a distinct realm of meaningful space that potentially interacts with ours?

AR: You are right. I think that there are at least two options, considering that out of AI production of textual units people on the one hand can possibly start running in circles inside their existing meaningful space. The developmental potential, which has been inherent for the human mind is somehow diminished by AI, because it takes up patterns of mental processes that have existed in the behavior of human mind for centuries and AI starts to repeat them. Thus, the meaningful space of the human comes to a standstill.

On the other hand, however, there is a possibility that AI would somehow exponentially expand the meaningful space of humans, by injecting impossible objects into human meaningful space. This can happen by introducing very long leaps in logical processes towards very novel information. This would maybe lead to some sort of cultural schizophrenia, especially if the existing human mind would not be able to cope with very long semiosic jumps.

EA: For the first time in India, an AI system was formally recognized as a co-author of a work of art in 2021[10]. Given the potential of AI programs like ChatGPT to generate whole essays, as well as the predicted progression of artificial intelligence into increasingly more powerful forces in the near future, how, if at all, do you believe this tool should be employed in the academic environment?

AR: I have no idea how to discriminate between human ideas and AI generated ideas in a text that is printed out from a computer. I would still like to think that we prevail over the technical energy and power-circuits, and that we, as humans, have the right to decide what is ours, what is decent, what makes sense, and what a casual combination of existing syntagms is.

I am not very certain that it is possible to claim the originality of the ideas of AI systems, or at least, I am unable to judge the originality of AI artworks, for example. It is a possible random combination of existing meaningful chunks, meaningful units, that can be brought together in an interesting manner, but then it is up to humans to attribute meaning to them. So perhaps, meaning is in the eyes of the human beholder, much like beauty.

The same goes for any scientific text, since it is not a matter of strictly pictographic artworks, but also scientific articles, and verbal texts in general. In a way, it is a very old discussion: is it culture or is it the individual that produces meaning. Eventually, from the semiotic viewpoint, it should not matter, whether we believe that texts are produced by texts or they are produced by human geniuses. What matters is the meaning we attribute to those texts, what those texts do with us and what we do with those texts. Again – the decisive part in the chain is the interpretant in the mind.

EA: What are your thoughts on the rising interest in these types of technology in the academic world? Do you believe that fields such as computational semiotics will gain strength and attract more people to this multidisciplinary research? Is it possible that the excitement will fade away after a period of oversupply of relevant research?

AR: There are several factualities that speak against recognizing the 'mentality' of AI; some of those have to do with the relationships between meaningful units, or semantic units and syntactic units. All this computational stuff, computer translating processes and computer generated texts, are based on the idea that syntactic units can be translated into semantic units and vice versa. That is, the meaningful units could, as if, be unidirectionally associated with certain syntactic units. This is the basis of how to create the ideal translation machine, or how to create...

EA: The semantic web?

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[10] https://www.lexcampus.in/india-recognises-ai-as-author-of-a-copyrighted-work/

AR: The problem is that the semantic web cannot be directly or univocally translated into a syntactic web which is the dream of today's machine translation and a view how AI could be put to work. The semantic web is a contextual web.

Umberto Eco was speaking about the two main characteristics of semiotic units, or cultural units, and one of those was the dictionary type of definition, while the other one was the encyclopedic type of definition of the semiotic units[11]. Dictionary type of knowledge can be associated with more or less syntactic units; like any dictionary proper. But the encyclopedia type of knowledge is always contextual. Thus you cannot have a universal encyclopedia, since every semiotic unit is potentially open for whatever kind of meaningful contents according to its context. Encyclopedias are fluid, essentially and inherently, while dictionaries, in comparison, are more stable. However, it is the encyclopedic type of knowledge that gives us accurate information about the world, because this information goes for the 'here and now' of our communication. The accuracy of knowledge and semiotic units is therefore dependent on the agreement humans achieve amongst themselves.

Consequently, I think, it is a very idealistic hope that you can create such stable connections between the syntactic and the semantic units. Under that logic, considering these connections cannot be created, there can be no communication proper between AI and the human mind, and there cannot be any AI at all, because it can only operate with the dictionary type of knowledge; it is unable to connect with the 'here and now' of the human context. No matter how many parameters it can technically take into account, it nevertheless cannot interfere with or into our abductive logic, which as you know is a logic which is not logical. It may be logical for humans, because of our cultural competence, but this is too vast a knowledge, too deeply contextual, too motivated, too value-prevailed and spontaneous to be accurately translated into properly meaningful syntactic units.

Here lies this non-resolvable paradox of human communication: it is motivated, but it is unmotivated at the same time. It is unmotivated in the sense of not being subject to logic in the sense how we relate our mind with reality, and it is unmotivated in the semiotic sense of making signs. At the same time it is motivated, for we want our communication to be rational and understandable for the others. Yet even that motivation rather depends on our social and cultural realities, and is unmotivated in this perspective. Human communication is based on the creation of mixed up bundles of the motivated and the unmotivated, the logical and (seemingly) non-logical in both the semiotic and simply psychological aspects.

In this sense, the syntactic and the semantic fields are to be left disconnected in the technical spheres.

Furthermore, another aspect to be considered is the motivational, or rather psychologically motivational affairs that cannot be found in artificial intelligence, because this is also too spontaneous and in a way unjustified. Think about how Maslow describes the logical buildup of human behavior by the pyramid of needs,

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[11] Eco, Umberto 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

which in fact is governed by the meta-needs, and how these meta-needs are defined by value preferences that can turn the pyramid of values upside down at any given point[12]. I think AI simply cannot deal with this non-logical logic. Human behavior is too much based on abductive logic, which I think can be compared to what Vilfredo Pareto kept in mind when he was talking about the human non-logical conduct[13].

So, this non-logical essence of human behavior has been maintained by many authors for many years already, but it seems to be somehow forgotten in this euphoric rush towards logical AI, nowadays. I think that in this sense, the human mind and the AI should be regarded as incompatible. However, there is a far greater lurking danger which is hidden in the topic and undertakings concerning AI systems. The basic hazard, and please correct me if I am wrong, is that AI will start manipulating the human life in the physical sense.

EA: You mean manipulating human life as for instance AI can assist in the generation of fake news, or propagandas and modify false information in a way that they sound factual? Or perhaps the practical implications it will create, or even already has, in various professions, taking over tasks that people were responsible for?

AR: Yes; although I think this has to do with aspects that are still located outside the human mind. Whether you are talking about tasks or operations AI is doing, or whether you are talking about fake news, it is something outside the mind of humans, even though the human mind will have to deal with them.

However, I am talking about a far greater danger. Humans have created AI whose operations may lead to homogenizing the human mind processes themselves, and in my opinion this is the most dangerous outcome; a result which will not be created by AI systems, but humans themselves.

EA: Perhaps the increasing dependence on AI systems for various everyday tasks will eventually lead to inertia, blocking in a way the process of semiosis. If we are just clicking buttons to be fed information, we don't even absorb any knowledge. We are just mechanically copy and paste things; we are no longer creating, we are no longer interpreting, we are no longer living... This also relates back to what we discussed about meaningful space becoming static.

AR: You are right! This would deprive us, as humans, from our agency in semiosis and turn us into some factors of a possibly only hypothetically semiosic process that does not engage any novel information any longer. It is highly doubtful, if relation-production can be considered as a semiosic process in the sense of meaning-making.

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[12] Maslow, Abraham H. 1968 [1962]. *Toward a Psychology of Being*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.

[13] Pareto, Vilfredo 2003 [1935]. The Mind and Society. London: Routledge.

Meaning-making in a classical semiotic rendering of semiosis should be an open-ended process.

EA: Moving towards the end of the interview, I would like to ask how do you envision the future of semiotics, and what is your ideal version of that future?

AR: I think that there is no other way for the world and for the scholarly community than to recognize the role of semiotics and to start to regard it as a domain which becomes more and more important, even decisive. We are living in an increasingly informational environment, which means that we are living in an environment that is heavily inclined towards the semiotic rather than the physical or the actually ontological. It has been like this already for some – not so many – decades, but we can now observe clearly the informational overload which leads to the increasing fattening – and also flattening – of the semiotic space. That means that for human thought and for human conduct, the decisive factors can be found in human conduct itself. Human behavior is not, that much anymore, reality checked in the ontological reality; the reality check is being done on the basis of the social cultural reality, which means that scholarship should concentrate more at the study of this meaningful reality in order to keep the actual human conduct still on track. It is clear from the metalevel transdisciplinary developments that semiotics could be taking back the founding role it had one hundred years ago in the process of unified science. On the other hand semiotics must take more responsibility for the study of culture and human behavior, which is becoming increasingly more connected with the semiotic rather than the physical and ontological.

EA: And what about your personal future? Where do you see yourself in ten years from now?

AR: I see myself in ten years preparing my lawn tractor for mowing the first lawn in spring, exactly like this year.

EA: Lastly, is there anything further you would like to add? Perhaps some words of advice for our readers?

AR: I think that we as semioticians should, at least, try to keep our minds sound and our identity discourse on track through the autocommunicative process, and that we should try to value our predecessors more than they have been valued in the past decades. If we are able to keep the dialogue with our own founding fathers from a century (and more) ago, then we can keep up our self-identity, and if so, then we can be clearer in our research and purposes as well. It is a vital necessity especially today, because humanity has entered a novel developmental stage in so many senses and aspects, and those developments set novel settings also in scholarship. Without self-

identity we won't be able to even recognize our research object, not to talk about building a firm basis for our research viewpoint.

EA: Thank you very much!

AR: Thank you.