

Signs, Language, and Listening: A Review

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Review of *Signs, Language and Listening: Semioethic Perspectives*, by Susan Petrilli. *Language, Media & Education Studies* 65 (Ottawa: Legas, 2019). 225 pp. ISBN 978-1-897493-67-0.

Susan Petrilli is a professor of philosophy and theory of languages at the University of Bari, Italy, who has introduced into semiotic and linguistic studies a seminal orientation, internationally recognized under the name of “semioethics.” Her recently-published book, *Signs, Language and Listening* (2019), is the culmination of many years of research and publication in this field. Based on inspirations from reading this seminal work, the question of different cultural traditions seems to me crucial to semioethics. More specifically, in what follows, I ponder how and if the multi-millenary Chinese traditions of knowledge, wisdom and awareness of life forms are conducive to the well-being of semiosis, of life, to the care for life, and to the health of semiosis. I wonder if, as an outworking of the communication between Nature and culture described in Petrilli’s system of semioethics, the idea held among Chinese gentry scholars and officials removed from their posts as to communication between human beings and his/her members of their communities—i.e., between an individual and the society as well as the social surroundings in which he/she lives—should necessarily be considered in terms of semioethics as well. And I wonder whether the addition of another three diagnostic means of observing (as non-verbal sign activity), asking (as verbal sign activity), as well as “feeling the pulse” (as non-verbal sign activity), in a metaphorical sense drawn from traditional Chinese medical systems, might also be supplementary to the Petrilli’s (2019) system of semioethic anthroposemiosis.

Signs, Language and Listening includes an introduction with acknowledgements and dedication, followed by eight chapters with a general list of references and a note on the author at the end of the book. In the Introduction, the departure point of the book and the general contents of the book are outlined, being introduced by the author herself in the opening of the Introduction, to the effect that “the sciences of signs and language are viewed [. . .] from the perspective of the philosophy of language”, with its aim is to “develop a critique of sign processes and communication [verbal and nonverbal] in the sphere of anthroposemiosis and to search for their conditions of possibility, their foundations” (Petrilli 2019: 7). As for the “philosophy of language” used in this book, Petrilli makes the following point:

rather than consider “of language” in the expression “philosophy of language” as indicating language as the object of study of philosophy, this expression, “philosophy of language,” may be understood as indicating “philosophy” inherent in language itself, that is, the attitude, the inclination to philosophy, to philosophizing characteristic of language. “Understood in these terms “philosophy of language,” the philosophy pertaining to language, is present in the plurilingualism, in the polylogism, in the inexorable inclination characteristic of language to plurivocality. It is also manifest in what Giambattista Vico calls the “poetic logic” of language. (Petrilli 2019: 7)

As is outlined in its Introduction, “the general title of this book *Signs, Language and Listening. Semioethic Perspectives* is developed around three main sub-themes throughout the whole work being *Semiotics as semioethics*, *Philosophy of language as the art of listening*, *Prolegomena for linguistics as part of the science of signs or semiotics*” (Petrilli 2019: 13).

As to the first subtheme “Semiotics as semioethics”, Petrilli defines semiotics as both “the general science of signs in a continuous dialogic relationship with the special sciences” and “the general science of semiosis [which coincides with life]” (Petrilli 2019: 15). She then introduces ten theses in response to the Sebeok’s question “what future for semiotics” including: (1) a general theory of signs must avoid glottocentrism which takes the verbal sign as its general sign model and the linguistics of verbal sign systems as its model science; (2) a general sign model cannot be constructed on the basis of the verbal sign; (3) listening is an interpretant of responsive understanding, a disposition for the welcome and hospitality, in the house of semiotics, towards signs that are other, signs of otherness; (4) in terms of extension, semiotics must tend towards the global; (5) semiotics as a science must be conscious of its very conditions of possibility

and consequently deal with the problem of its foundations; (6) language-syntactics tells of the meta-operative capacity specific to human beings; (7) semiotics is connected with responsibility; (8) semiotics is a critical science not only *à la Kant* . . . , but also *à la Marx*; (9) as global semiotics, metasemiotics, critical semiotics, semiotics must be concerned with life over the planet; (10) this programme outlines a special approach to semiotics as practised by the Bari-Lecce School and designated as “semioethics” (Petrilli 2019: 18–23).

Petrilli comments on “semiotics practiced as global semiotics [considering any sign relation] fostering an interdisciplinary approach to the life of signs that includes all the special fields of semiosis from medicine, physics, chemistry [and others . . .]”, “in a position to evidence the extension and consistency of the sign network which includes the semiosphere as construed by human beings, [. . .]” (2019: 26). Petrilli believes “semioethics” can be explicated with “the art of listening”, “the art of caring”, and the “semiotics of otherness”, highlighting that “to care for the human is to care for all of life over the planet given the condition of interdependency in a system which flourishes interconnectedly [. . .] with the larger system called Gaia, and possibly beyond” (2019: 25). She understands metasemiosis as “the capacity to reflect upon signs” (2019: 29), which (of a semiotician) “for self and for others”, while that (of a global semiotician) is connected with the responsibility “for life over the entire globe” (2019: 29).

Concerning the second subtheme “Philosophy of language as the art of listening” (especially as the topic of the last chapter in the book), Petrilli considers semiotics as a “philosophy of language” which “places otherness at the heart of the sign and is associated to the ‘art of listening’” (2019: 15) and “the vocation of language and communication” as otherness, calling for “a critique of identity”. She emphasizes that the philosophy of language as the art of listening, qua semiotics “(if adequately formulated in terms of a general theory of signs) is oriented in the direction of a third sense, that of sense and value (semioethics), beyond the quantitative (global **semioethics**) and the theoretical (general semiotics)” (2019: 15). As is accounted for in the Introduction,

philosophy of language keeps account of semiotics not only understood as the name of the general science of signs, but also as a human species-specific capacity, as *metasemiosis* which is connected to the human capacity for responsibility: the human being, [. . .], is the only animal capable of accounting for signs and sign behavior. [. . .], the critical instance of the philosophy of language towards the science of signs— which, [. . .], posits that semiosis and life coincide and thus concerns

all of life over the planet—does not limit its attention to the cognitive dimension of semiosis, but focuses on the pragmatic dimension as well, on the well-being of semiosis, of life, on care for life, for the health of semiosis, which cannot be reduced to the concept of therapy in a strict sense, with its vocation for ‘curing’ rather than ‘caring.’ (2019: 8)

Therefore, the primary problem of language philosophy is “the problem of the other” while “the problem of the other is the problem of the word”, that of the word as voice, recognized as the request for listening. In this regard, “philosophy of language clearly involves the ‘art of listening’”, since “listening is not external to the word, an addition, a *supplement*, a concession, an initiative taken by the person who receives that word, a choice, a decision, an act of respect towards it. On the contrary, listening is a *constitutive element of the word*, [. . .]. In fact, the word demands listening and understanding, a response, and as such is always in dialogue” (2019: 8). Moreover,

Listening to the other is the condition of possibility for the very constitution of subjectivity and communication. It is in listening to the other, to the word of the other that subjectivity flourishes and develops. The body is in the sign, in the word, in language, in the relation to the other. (2019: 140)

What is more, “Listening to the other is an attitude that extends beyond roles and identities, listening understood as hospitality towards the other in one’s singularity.” (Petrilli 2019: 143) Finally, Petrilli takes as a case Bakhtinian ideas on concepts such as otherness and dialogism to deal with philosophy of language as the art of listening in and beyond Bakhtin.

As to the final subtheme, “Prolegomena for linguistics as part of the science of signs or semioethics”, Petrilli, in terms of new approaches to language in its pragmatic-ethical dimension, considers the question of meaning and of the “meaning of meaning” closely related to the notion of semiosis, and takes semiosis as “the process, or relation, or situation in which something carries out the role of sign” (2019: 81). Based on this assertion, she reviews the interpretations of the “meaning of meaning” by 20th century interpreters and deals with “Sense, meaning and interpretation” under the name of “Significs” proposed by Victoria Lady Welby (1837–1912), pointing out that “transcending the limits of a merely descriptive approach to linguistics grounded in the dogma of codes, conventions, and intention, Welby developed her theory of meaning and significance in an ethical framework, what today we have proposed to denominate as ‘semioethics’” (2019: 94) **B**ased on the fundamental problem in “semiotics”, as well as in “philosophy of language”, being the problem

of the other (while the problem of the other is essentially the problem of the word as voice recognized as the quest for listening), Petrilli asserts that the “voice”, on a linguistic level, is “a characteristic of the utterance, not only the oral utterance, but also the utterance in *writing*, writing versus transcription, writing as understood by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva” (Petrilli 2019: 139). This indicates “a singular, unique perspective, as a singular, unique act, a special standpoint, to stay in a position without the possibility of substitution, of replacement, voice with its unrepeatable intonation, accentuation” (2019: 139). Furthermore, “dialogism is encounter and interweaving of voices. The voice (in the sense of Bakhtin) is always oriented towards another voice. In this sense, it is transcendent ‘transgredient’. One’s own utterance alludes always and in spite of itself, whether it knows it or not, to the utterance of others.” This, in turn, “means that the utterance, the live word is never oriented directly by its theme. There is always a process of refraction in a word, for the word is always mediated by the relation to others, which is a relation of both the cognitive and emotional orders” (Petrilli 2019: 139). In terms of translation in the proper sense,

The demand for listening that characterises the word is amplified in translation processes across different languages, and is a condition thereof. The task of translation, the shift from one language into another language, transposition of sense and signifying materiality, of the very musicality and rhythm of language calls for a *listening* attitude towards the text, towards the other in translation. (2019:149)

Based on my personal reading and background knowledge, the author’s reflections on global semiotics and semioethics as well as semioethics and otherness, and on the relation between translation and otherness, on signification, the concepts of translation, writing and listening, on Mikhail Bakhtin and his circle, as well as on his philosophy of language, are all closely connected to themes explored in a series of her earlier texts, such as “Sebeok’s Semiotic Universe and Global Semiotics” (2003), “Semioethics and Translating as Communication in and across Genres” (2013), “Translation, Interpretation, and Common Meaning: Victoria Welby’s Significant Perspective” (2007), “Translation as the Doctrine of Inter-Genre and Trans-Genre Communication: A Semioethical Perspective” (2005), and “Translation as Listening and Encounter with Other in Migration and Globalization Processes Today” (2006), “Dialogue, Responsibility and Literary Writing: Mikhail Bakhtin and His Circle” (2016), among others. The author has clearly been focusing on the three sub-themes described

above for years, so the current book is the result and development of her thematic thinking as proposed in a series of previously published articles.

In general, the book is a seminal work on human sign activities—more precisely anthroposemiosis—which is based on semioethics derived from global semiotics, an expression coined by Thomas A. Sebeok in *Global Semiotics* (2001). As Petrilli observes in the Introduction, global semiotics “posits that semiosis and life coincide and thus concerns all of life over the planet” (2019: 8). Developed in terms of semioethics, global semiotics

does not limit its attention to the cognitive dimension of semiosis, but focuses on the pragmatic dimension as well, on the well-being of semiosis, of life, on care for life, for the health of semiosis, which cannot be reduced to the concept of therapy in a strict sense, with its vocation for ‘curing’ rather than “caring” [. . . Also,] “as global semiotics the general science of signs, or semiotics, reconnects with the most ancient branch of semiotics, medical semeiotics (represented by such eminent figures as Hippocrates and Galen) not only contributing to a historical renaissance of semiotics, but also recovering its goals and readapting it to historical reality today: that is, keeping life *alias* semiosis over the planet, in all its manifestations, in health. (Petrilli 2019: 8)

Hence a global semiotics “adequately founded on a general theory of signs” would entail a philosophy of language engaged with the “art of listening” due to its requisite orientation toward semioethics, or “the relation between signs and values, the ethico-pragmatic dimension, in addition to the quantitative, theoretical and cognitive dimensions” (2019: 8).

Therefore, as mentioned above, as a special directional turn in the study of signs,

semioethics is also concerned with the practice of listening. And here we are alluding to the capacity for listening in terms of auscultation as well, that is, listening as practiced in medical semeiotics. We must listen to the symptoms of today’s globalized world and identify the manifestations of malaise proliferating over the planet (in social relations, international relations, in the life of single individuals, in the global spread of aggressive forms of technoscience functional to profit, with consequences for the entire ecosystem, for life generally). (Petrilli 2019: 8–9)

As a reader with a Chinese cultural background, familiar with the Chinese tradition of sign activities or life forms, the inspiration I draw from reading this book clusters around three points related to the book’s argument at the macro level. Each point is, I think, conducive to further understanding and restructuring of sign activities in the global or glocal world and development of semioethics, though not essentially important

in illustrating and illuminating principles related to signs, language, and listening philosophically and semiotically.

First of all, given that the general structure or departure point of this book is semioethics derived from a global semiotics focused on anthroposemiosis, or all life forms on the planet in relation to the human world, all kinds and forms of life understood in terms of sign activities from virtually all cultural backgrounds involving language and listening are included in its content. Here, then, reference to the multi-millenary Chinese tradition of knowledge, wisdom and awareness of life forms or sign activities would be fitting; but such reference is missing. This might include such topics as the well-being of semiosis, of life, and care for life, for the health of semiosis, namely, “keeping life *alias* semiosis over the planet, in all its manifestations, in health” (Petrilli 2019: 8), all of which are central in the philosophy of ancient Chinese thinkers such as Guan Zhong (c.720–645 BCE), Laotze (c.576 BCE), Confucius (551–479 BCE), Mozi (468–376 BCE), Mencius (372–289 BCE), Xunzi (313–238 BCE), and others in the era of Chinese Enlightenment (featured by ‘one hundred schools of thought flourishing’) even if only touched upon lightly.

Some 2,800 years ago, for instance, Guan Zhong proposed the ordinary philosophical principle that ‘the senses of rite, justice, integrity and shame are the four virtues. If these four virtues are flourishing among its people, the country will flourish. Otherwise, the country will perish’ (Guan c.700 BCE, my translation) This principle serves still as the universal values for international politics and ethics as human life forms semiotically. Laotze constantly talked about the natural laws of human life forms and relations between nature and human beings some 2,500 years ago. Confucius elaborated on the relations between human behavior (verbal and non-verbal) and fate (individual and state) close to the same time. Mencius was one of the first thinkers to talk about the relations between human behavior and mind. This is a connection which I. A. Richards (1893–1979), one of the authors of *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (1923), came to China in 1930s to research. His research on Mencius led to his publication of *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition* (Richards 1932), written with the assistance of Chinese scholar Li Anzhai (1900–1985). Xunzi dealt with the necessity of standardized language use as well as its role in governing a country. Among these figures, Mozi is also typical in terms of promoting ideas that intimate global semiotics and semioethics. This can be noted in his calls to care for all people under heaven and for the well-being of individual, society and state. Merely considering these

few examples from ancient Chinese contexts sketched out above, it is a regret for such a seminal work to ignore Chinese traditions of life forms or anthroposemiosis in general. In this regard, Sebeok's global semiotics and Petrilli's semioethics can be considered as interdisciplinary systematic developments of earlier Chinese views of semiotic activities turned toward caring for people on the planet, especially those views involved in Petrilli's *Sign, Language and Listening*.

A second point concerns communication between nature and culture, which essentially involves Chinese traditions of life forms under the veil of Taoism. Generally, there are no diverse cultures without human beings from different ethnic backgrounds, drawing on societies with a broad array of historical experiences, both physically and mentally. Also, culture is the product of human struggles for survival from Nature for thousands of thousands of years (cf. Pearson 1911). Petrilli (2019: 37–50) focuses on sign activities between Nature and Culture (at the levels of individual, group, and state), which primarily involves the communication between human beings and Nature. In this regard, she neglects one link with its focus on the communication between human beings, as “speaking animals”, and members of their communities, namely between an individual and the society or social surroundings in which a person lives. In ancient China, scholars with different beliefs have always observed the relations between human beings and Nature as well as relations between human beings and society—and this is especially true for the documentation of human beings in relation to court life.

Consider Xin Qiji (1140–1207), a poet of the Later Song Dynasty (1127–1279), for instance, who once wrote ‘pinetrees and bamboos become my companions, birds and flowers in the mountains are my cousins’ (Xin i.1181–1207, my translation) in order to articulate relationships between human beings and Nature and to highlight the therapeutic effects of Nature on human minds. Another instance can be cited from the personal experience of Zeng Guofan (1811–1872), a Confucian idealist philosopher in the late Qing Dynasty. In his writings, recorded in *The Annotated Collection of Zeng Guofan* (Ma 2004: 330), he recorded his experiences and sufferings in court life, namely the relations between him and his colleagues in court. He also depicted his farming life and friendships with village scholars after returning to home upon removal from office. Actually, the relations Zeng depicts between himself and his colleagues is essentially the (verbal and non-verbal) communication between human beings and society (i.e., culture). Furthermore, his accounts of frustrated experiences and sufferings contrasted with the friendship he documents between

himself and his village scholars, as well as his farming life and his contact with Nature, are essentially the communication (verbal and non-verbal) between human beings and Nature, recounting also the curing and caring effects of Nature on his frustrated mind. Regarding communication between human beings and society, verbal communication is dominant in his writings, while nonverbal communication is secondary—though certainly implicit in court struggles. Nevertheless, considering the communication he records between himself as a human being and the natural world, verbal communication is non-dominant while nonverbal communication in the forms of feeling, observing, listening to, as well as learning from Nature are prevalent. This is illustrated in the poetic lines cited above. Seen from these two instances from the writings of Xin and Zeng, communication may occur between humans and Nature at both the individual and group level, between humans and society at both individual and group levels, as well as between humans as either individuals or groups at the cultural level (including overlapping ethnic, national and/or international levels). Such activities are prevalent in any tradition involving life forms and sign activities, whether Oriental or Occidental.

The third and final point concerns listening in its broader and metaphorical senses, including the literal sense in “medical semiotics” plus various implications in and beyond listening as diagnostic means in medical semiotics. Considered within Euro-American contexts, Petrilli (2019) is a great work. However, considering various diagnostic procedures in traditional Chinese medical work, listening is only one of four diagnostic means in the dynamic procedural system of observing, listening to, and asking about the symptoms—as well as ‘feeling the pulses’ (i.e., nonverbal signs) as symptoms of a patient. Generally, observing, listening, asking (about), and feeling—though both in verbal and nonverbal forms of sign activities—demand understanding and response. As such, they are always implicated in verbal and/or nonverbal communication or dialogue between doctors and their patients and between information senders and their receivers, whether conceived of in a general or metaphorical sense. Specifically, regarding observing as a diagnostic means, or for general practical purposes, symptoms in patients, as well as signs of various forms and types, carry varied layers of information that are sent out by senders, while receivers obtain given information by means of observing various nonverbal signs presented by senders. Regarding listening as well as asking as a diagnostic means, or for general practical purposes, symptoms in patients, as well as given information, will be presented by means of asking and listening between senders and the receivers: i.e., verbal communica-

tion, or dialogue. Finally, regarding ‘feeling the pulses’ of a patient—i.e., feeling in its general sense—senders give the information in forms of “symptoms” and/or unconscious behaviors or nonverbal signs carrying the messages while the receivers decode them and get the information by means of feeling the signs or symptoms in the metaphorical senses. In the context of traditional Chinese diagnostic procedures, doctors make the best use of their senses or perceptions following the order of observing, listening, asking and feeling. Practically, in our daily life and/or scientific inquiries, we also try to make full use of these senses or perceptions—albeit, perhaps, in a different order. This can be illustrated in Peirce’s lab experiments and Pearson’s chemical and physical experiments. 添加有关倾听作为行为、态度和过程的批评

As I suggest above, the ‘four ways’ in the context of ancient Chinese diagnosis and of general uses are checked against each other (or counter-checked) in the logically interrelated and interacted semiotic procedural system. If one link is missing from such systematic operations, the accuracy of diagnosis or scientific operations (sign processes) will be affected in one way or another. Turning to the context of life forms or communication with otherness, it also seems that listening may not be sufficient. Combining observing, listening, asking and feeling (in a sense analogous to feeling the pulse) in the service of diagnosing various symptoms in and about the other, better effects may be brought about. Whatever the case, if these three means of traditional Chinese diagnostic procedure could be incorporated into Petrilli’s (2019) system of semioethic antroposemiosis-as-listening, the work would be improved both logically and systematically.

Regardless of content that could potentially be related to Chinese traditions of sign activities, Petrilli’s *Signs, Language and Listening* is a remarkable work which may inspire those readers in the fields of translation semiotics, semioethics, general semiotics, linguistic semiotics, and communication studies, among others. My addition of Chinese traditional diagnostic procedures into Petrilli’s semioethic frame is not intended to deny, refute or judge this seminal work and its framework in any sense but simply to supplement and augment the existing framework by evidencing how interpretive trajectories in the system can be taken up and further developed in dialogue with different cultures and worldviews.

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