

Narrating towards a semiotic vision of freedom

[Göstergebilimsel bir özgürlük anlayışına doğru anlatı]

[La narration vers une vision sémiotique de la liberté]

Hongbing YU*

Geliş Tarihi (Received): 27.02.2024 -**Kabul Tarihi (Accepted):** 12.03.2024 -**Yayın Tarihi (Published):** 30.04.2024
Makale Türü: Araştırma makalesi - **Article Type:** Research article - **Type de l'article:** l'article de recherche

Abstract

The past decades have witnessed a significance growth of interest in the matter of “storytelling”, so much so that it would not be much of an exaggeration to argue that the word “storytelling” might have already become a hype, especially in a world where commercialization has been underwriting almost everything that can be commercialized. A debate has naturally followed. Some authors have cautioned against hyping storytelling, whereas countless more seem to have contributed to its popularization. In the same vein as semiotician Thomas Sebeok, who once commented that “a sign is just a sign”, I would simply like to point out (remind) in the present paper that “a story is just a story”, in which light it is the human being, as a storying animal, that ultimately and truly matters. This might promise to be a key to solving the above-mentioned debate. To take the argument one step further, we may as well highlight a point that the storying animal is but a catchier name than the narrating animal, in the same way as “storytelling” is indeed just another name for “narrating”. What is, then, “to narrate”? The present paper holds that to narrate is to semiotize, and to semiotize (whether through semiosis or through modeling) inevitably creates what I have called the “double semiotic paradoxes of humanity” (Yu, 2024a), shackling and liberating human existence at the same time. Yet still, narrating, as an instance of semiotizing, is as close to true freedom as the human being can ever get. It is a life-affirming and self-affirming action that brings us an opportunity for freedom. Building on Hoffmeyer and Kull, the present paper, as a self-referential narrative about semiotics, incorporates a Zhuangzian approach and proposes a relevant Peircean framework for an inclusive semiotic vision of freedom, which includes intra-semiosic freedom, inter-semiosic freedom, and ultra-semiosic freedom.

Keywords: Antisemiosis, freedom, narrative, symbolization, Zhuangzi, semiotic agent

Özet

Geçtiğimiz on yıllar “öykü anlatıcılığı” konusuna olan ilginin önemli ölçüde artmasına tanıklık etti; öyle ki özellikle ticarileştirilebilecek hemen her şeyin ticarileştirildiği bir dünyada “öykü anlatıcılığı” sözcüğünün çoktan bir yutturmaca hâline gelmiş olabileceğini ileri sürmek abartılı olmayacaktır. Bunu doğal olarak bir tartışma izledi. Bazı yazarlar öykü anlatımının abartılmasına karşı uyarıda bulunurken, sayısız yazar da yaygınlaşmasına katkıda bulunmuş gibi görünüyor. Bir zamanlar “bir gösterge yalnızca bir göstergedir” yorumunda bulunan göstergebilimci Thomas Sebeok ile aynı biçimde, bu makalede basitçe “bir öykünün yalnızca bir öykü olduğunu” belirtmek (hatırlatmak) istiyorum, bu ışık altında sonuçta ve gerçekten önemli olan öykü anlatan bir varlık olarak insandır. Bu, yukarıda sözü geçen tartışmanın çözümünde bir anahtar olabilir. Tartışmayı bir adım daha ileri götürmek gerekirse “öykü anlatma”nın aslında “öykülemenin”nin bir başka adı olması gibi öyküleyen varlığın da öykü anlatan varlıktan daha akılda kalıcı bir ad olduğunu vurgulayabiliriz. O hâlde “anlatmak” nedir? Bu makale, anlatmanın göstergebilimselleştirmek olduğunu ve göstergebilimselleştirmenin (ister

* **Corresponding Author:** Hongbing Yu, Toronto Metropolitan University, Faculty of Arts, Canada, hongbing@torontomu.ca, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1944-1514>.

göstergebilim ister modelleme yoluyla olsun) kaçınılmaz olarak “insanlığın çifte göstergebilimsel açmazları” (Yu, 2024a) olarak adlandırdığım şeyi yarattığını, insan varlığını aynı anda hem zincire vurduğunu hem de özgürleştirdiğini ileri sürmektedir. Yine de bir göstergebilimselleştirme örneği olarak anlatmak, insanın gerçek özgürlüğe en yakın olduğu andır. Bize özgürlük fırsatı sunan, yaşamı onaylayan ve kendini doğrulayan bir eylemdir. Hoffmeyer ve Kull’u temel alan bu makale, göstergebilim hakkında öz-göndermeli bir anlatı olarak Zhuangzian bir yaklaşım benimsemekte ve göstergebilim içi özgürlük, göstergeler arası özgürlük ve uç-göstergebilimsel özgürlüğü içeren kapsayıcı bir göstergebilimsel özgürlük anlayışı için ilgili bir Peirce yanlısı bir çerçeve önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göstergebilimsel araç, özgürlük; anlatı, simgeleştirme, Zhuangzi, göstergebilim karşıtı

Résumé

Au cours des dernières décennies, l'intérêt pour la "narration" s'est considérablement accru, à tel point qu'il ne serait pas exagéré d'affirmer que le mot "narration" est peut-être déjà devenu une mode, en particulier dans un monde où la commercialisation est à l'origine de presque tout ce qui peut être commercialisé. Un débat s'en est naturellement suivi. Certains auteurs ont mis en garde contre la surenchère du storytelling, tandis que d'innombrables autres semblent avoir contribué à sa popularisation. Dans la même veine que le sémioticien Thomas Sebeok, qui a dit un jour qu'"un signe n'est qu'un signe", je voudrais simplement souligner (rappeler) dans le présent document qu'"une histoire n'est qu'une histoire", ce qui signifie que c'est l'être humain, en tant qu'animal raconteur d'histoires, qui compte en fin de compte et véritablement. Cela pourrait constituer une clé pour résoudre le débat susmentionné. Pour aller plus loin, nous pourrions même souligner que l'animal conteur n'est qu'un nom plus accrocheur que l'animal narrateur, de même que "raconter" n'est qu'un autre nom pour "narrer". Qu'est-ce donc que "raconter" ?

Le présent article soutient que raconter, c'est sémiotiser, et que sémiotiser (que ce soit par la sémiologie ou par la modélisation) crée inévitablement ce que j'ai appelé les "doubles paradoxes sémiotiques de l'humanité" (Yu, 2024a), qui entravent et libèrent l'existence humaine en même temps. Pourtant, la narration, en tant qu'exemple de sémiotisation, est aussi proche de la véritable liberté que l'être humain peut l'être. Il s'agit d'une action d'affirmation de la vie et de l'individu qui nous offre une opportunité de liberté. S'appuyant sur Hoffmeyer et Kull, le présent article, en tant que récit autoréférentiel sur la sémiotique, intègre une approche zhuangzienne et propose un cadre peircéen pertinent pour une vision sémiotique inclusive de la liberté, qui comprend la liberté intra-sémiotique, la liberté inter-sémiotique et la liberté ultra-sémiotique.

Mots-clés : Anti-sémiologie , liberté , narration , symbolisation , Zhuangzi , agent sémiotique

“Life, uh, finds a way.”

Dr. Ian Malcolm in “Jurassic Park” (1993)

“Don’t think. Feel!”

Bruce Lee

1. Introduction: From narrative to a semiotic vision of freedom

It has become a truism that humans live in and by stories in all possible ways, including talking, drawing, writing, vlogging, even dancing and daydreaming, and so on so forth. The past decades in human history have indeed witnessed a significant growth of interest in the matter of “storytelling”, so much so that it would not be much of an exaggeration to argue that the word “storytelling” might have already become a hype, especially in a world where commercialization has been underwriting almost everything that can be commercialized. A debate has naturally followed. Some authors have cautioned against hyping storytelling (see, for instance, Brooks, 2022), whereas countless more seem to have contributed to its popularization (see, for instance, Gottschall, 2013). In the same vein as semiotician Thomas Sebeok’s comment that “a sign is just a sign” (Sebeok, 1991), I would simply like to point out (remind) in the present paper that “a story is just a story”, in which light it is not so much the story as the human being, as a storytelling animal, that ultimately and truly matters in any form of storytelling (cf. Harari, 2014, [2011], p. 3).¹ This might promise to be a key to solving the above-mentioned debate.

¹ In the broad sense of the word “story” as proposed by Yuval Harari, chemistry, biology, and history, among other human representational systems of knowledge, can all be thought of stories.

To better appreciate what “storying animal” could entail, we need to take the argument one step further and highlight this crucial fact: the “storying animal” is but a catchier name than the “narrating animal”, in the same way as “storytelling” is indeed just another name for “narrating”. Under the lens of semiotics, to narrate has something in common with to represent, to interpret, to describe, to historize, to philosophize, to cognize, and so on: they are all the concrete embodiments of humanity’s agency as a semiotic animal (see below in Section 2). As Yunhee Lee points out, the storytelling subject/person/self is a semiotic agent (see Lee, 2022; 2023), and agency is related to freedom (Tønnessen, 2015; Sharov & Tønnessen, 2021). In short, to narrate is to semiotize, and to semiotize (whether through semiosis or through modeling) is to be free. Semiotization, especially its derivative form “symbolization”, inevitably creates what I have called the “double semiotic paradoxes of humanity” (Yu, 2024a, p. 32), shackling and liberating human existence at the same time, a point I will elaborate on in the following sections. Yet still, narrating, as an instance of semiotizing, is as close to freedom as a human being can ever get. It is a life-affirming and self-affirming action that brings us an opportunity for freedom.

A semiotic vision of this age-old idea of freedom is not only relevant but also necessary for a better-informed understanding of human struggles in our lifeworld than theories provided by established academic disciplines. As Kalevi Kull noted during the 15th World Congress of IASS-AIS (August 30 – September 3, 2022, Thessaloniki, Greece), semiotics is the study of freedom. In as early as 1992, the late biosemiotician Jesper Hoffmeyer even proposed the term “semiotic freedom” for an updated view on the evolution of life. It was defined as “the depth of meaning an individual or a species is capable of communicating” (Hoffmeyer, 1992, p. 109-110). In this light, as Hoffmeyer points out,

“the most central feature of organic evolution is not the manifold fantastic morphologies of organisms, but the general increase of semiotic freedom—i.e., the increased richness and ‘depth’ of communicated meaning, gained from the development of multitudinous kinds of horizontal semiotic processes: from pheromones to the song of birds, from antibody production to Japanese greeting rituals” (ibid., p. 109).

Hoffmeyer intended with this term to highlight “an activity that is indeed free in the sense of being underdetermined by the constraints of natural lawfulness” (Hoffmeyer, 2008, p. 187). “Semiotic freedom” is crucial for studying life in the biological or biosemiotic sense of the word, but it can be far more inclusive than what its progenitor might have envisioned: it can include semiotics itself. After all, semiotics as a form of inquiry consists in the ways (semiotic processes) semioticians have carried it out. Building on Hoffmeyer and Kull, the present paper, as a self-referential narrative about semiotics, proposes a relevant Peircean framework for an even broader semiotic vision of freedom, which includes intra-semiotic freedom, inter-semiotic freedom, and ultra-semiotic freedom. This vision serves as an example of the tools that semiotics can provide for understanding the nature of life (Kull, 2023a, p. 94), not just biological life, but life in the broad sense. In addition, it showcases what Asian semiotics can offer to contemporary semiotics, as the present paper incorporates a Zhuangzian approach that we can call “antisemiosis”.

2. Some remarks on semiotics as both science and art

V. Doğan Günay, the father of modern Turkish semiotics, once aptly cautioned us against a type of occupational disease among semioticians, “a spirit of colonization”,² in which “pedantry, arrogance and assertion are not alien to the semiotician...walking in an unknown space and holding the flag are among the diseases of the semiologist” (Günay, 2020, p. 35). Günay was referring to the fact that semiotics has often been said to be a branch of science examining all kinds of signs used by humans. This fact can be easily misunderstood, leading to a common misconception about and even within the field of semiotics: since everything can be thought of as a sign, semiotics is a discipline that has no boundaries, at best an armchair discipline that stands far above other established disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy, communication, and so on.

It is not difficult to debunk this misconception. We just need to consider two simple things. First, this misconception might be grounded in a skewed scientific vision, an anti-scientific idea (ideology) about science. True science may appear pedantic, but it is far from arrogant or assertive. Scientism, by contrast, is very much so. Second, “everything can be thought of as a sign” is only part of the picture of what semiotics can offer. According to Charles Sanders Peirce, who famously expressed in 1908 that it had never been in his power “to study anything [...] except as a study of semeiotic” (Hardwick, 1977, p. 85-86), “nothing is a sign

² cf. “semiotic imperialism”, Johansen & Larsen, 2002 [1994], p. 124.

unless it is interpreted as a sign” (CP 2, p. 307). In the same vein, Yuen-Ren Chao observed that “while everything can potentially work as a sign, but they are not necessarily already a sign” (Chao, 1926, p. 583). In this rather humble light, semiotics is apparently less assertive than many established academic disciplines. To me, it is not just a science, but also a humble art of meaning making,³ a meta-cognitive reminder in methodology and perspective that accentuates a fact fundamental to both scientific research and artistic creation, that humans are interpretive beings (Yu, 2024b). Because of its dual nature of being at once scientific and artistic, semiotics does not intrude, let alone colonize. This brings me back to a point that I have made about semioticians: they are “artists who engage in envisioning and presenting their carefully or casually created models, which exhibit relevance with differing levels of attractiveness or context-specific efficacy” (Yu, 2021, p. 657).

It is arguably a well-established observation in contemporary semiotics that the human being is a semiotic animal (Deely, 2005). This observation has been interpreted in two ways. First, humans use various types of signs, most notably symbols, to “grasp” their worlds, including themselves, as it were; in this sense, the human being is an “animal symbolicum” (Cassirer, 2021 [1944], p. 26), or “symbol-using animal” (Habermas, 2001 [1997], p. 25). Second, it seems that only humans can be aware of their use of signs (Deely, 2010 [2005], p. 32; 2018 [1990], p. 152). What may reasonably derive from this two-fold interpretation, in connection with the previous paragraph, is that semiotics is not just constative, foregrounding the ubiquity of rule-bound processes of abstraction (Habermas, 2001 [1997], p.19) as science or even quasi-science, but also performative as art, implying a chance and possibility of freedom.⁴ This is a feat not exclusive to semioticians. However, compared with lay people, semioticians seem to possess a vantage point of being semiotic animals par excellence, so to speak, and thus could be more acutely conscious of semiosis via semiosis, performing a perfect loop of semiotic cognition.⁵

If we adopt a “progressive” view of doing semiotic research, one thing we can reasonably claim is that it might just be a matter of time when a semiotician finds him/herself confronted with this question: what could be beyond semiosis? In the history of contemporary semiotics, this question seems to have been a taboo, or at least a heterodox view. After all, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, the first true proponent of this semiotic concept, semiosis is a definition that “confers on anything that so acts the title of a ‘sign’” (CP 5, p. 484). In addition, given that all thought must necessarily be in signs (CP 5, p. 251), humans can only think by means of semiosis. This view of semiosis has laid the foundation for the entire enterprise of semiotic inquiry since at least the 1960s, so much so that Thomas Sebeok famously argued that “semiosis becomes uplifted as a necessary, if not sufficient, criterial attribute of life” (Sebeok, 1991, p. 13). However, at the same time, thanks to human semiotic freedom,⁶ the uniqueness of semiotic inquiry as a free art has enabled a form of self-transcendence, moving (at least partially) the field beyond indoctrination. This includes the possibility of moving beyond the concept of semiosis. And for such a possibility, where to look? Let us turn to the proverbial East.

At the 1st International Conference of the Asian Semiotics International Association,⁷ Massimo Leone aptly remarked that semiotics ultimately originated in Asia, considering, for instance, that the combative materialist Chinese philosopher Wang Chong (27 – c. 97 AD) in the Eastern Han dynasty provided what Leone has proven to be a rationalist and proto-semiotic approach to rituals. There is much that Asian semiotics can contribute to the existent “Western” paradigms of semiotic inquiry. Many if not most “Western-minded” semioticians these days would probably not hesitate to object to the remark, but I tend to see wisdom in what Leone said about the Eastern origin of semiotics. Granted, “semiotics” as an umbrella term designating an academic domain or

³ True science is and should be humble as well; otherwise.

⁴ Habermas even goes on to argue that “only art promises a happy equilibrium between freedom and abstraction” (Habermas, 2001 [1997], p. 19).

⁵ See “semiotics as a self-validating inquiry” in Yu, 2024c.

⁶ This may be considered an instance, a subcategory, of Hoffmeyer’s concept of “semiotic freedom”. We might as well call it anthropo-semiotic freedom. In the discussion of the present paper, it should be more properly called “intra-semiotic freedom”. See below in Section 4 An inclusive semiotic vision of freedom.

⁷ The conference was titled “A Transdisciplinary Imagination of the Asian Culture Studies: Rooting the Asian Semiotics” (October 14 – 15, 2022, East Asian Time, Seoul), organized by Semiosis Research Center at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies & Center for Applied Cultural Sciences, Korea University, and Sungkyul University. The event was joined by the IASS-AIS (International Association of Semiotic Studies), the ASIA (Asian Semiotics International Association), and the Korean Society of Semiotic Studies. The presentation in which Leone made the remark was titled “The Avatar Face: From Spiritual Incarnation to Digital Disembodiment”.

field that cuts across disciplinary boundaries is a “Western” — or to be exact, an Anglo-American — product. However, this is merely nominal. What the name stands for, the thought and study of signs in use, is something that has been clearly shared by all human communities, ancient and modern. What I am talking about here is true semiotics in its proper nature as both a science and an art of meaning-making, or in other words, as an inquiry of meaning-making via sign use, derived from humanity’s inherent attribute of being a semiotic animal. In fact, we could take the origin of semiotics even further back. The reflections on the semiotic nature of humanity, that is, the meta-ability to reflect through signs on human reliance on (and possibly liberation from) the use of signs, could be easily traced back to Siddhartha Gautama, way before the advent of Wang Chong’s Lunheng (論衡, “Critical Essays”). Between these two figures, among many other semiotic precursors in classical Asian philosophy, there existed a giant whom I would think of as an “anti-semiotician”, a unique personage who anticipated and indeed greatly influenced Zen Buddhism. The giant is Zhuangzi.

3. Zhuangzi’s antisemiosis

By “anti-semiotician” I mean that Zhuangzi’s thought can be considered as an instance of antisemiosis, that kind of semiosis that “points” not only “against” itself but also “to” a possibility of existential transcendence, at least a state of being one with Umwelt. It reflects a way of thinking that seeks to transcend the human lifeworld as experienced semiotically and empirically, towards an authentic state of existence grounded in spontaneity (nature or the natural untainted by human thought), a state of freedom from, for instance, attachment to things, interpersonal manipulation, personal conceit, and existential fear, among other forms of great human suffering. Since the root of human suffering is the severance of humans from their early spontaneous existence, which leads to the limited lifeworld of the alienated self, the above-mentioned transcendence requires going beyond the self, that is, “non-selfing” or “de-selfing” (cf. Yan, 2022, p. 276-278). Whether the self is considered a semiotic subject (see Lee, 2022), or a semiotic process (see Pickering, 1999), or a semiotic mechanism that is not an entity but an evolving state of cognitive homeostasis (Yu, 2024c),⁸ going beyond the self inevitably entails going beyond anthroposemiosis. It is the human semiosis (especially symbolization) that is to blame for the alienation of the human being. See, for example, Zhuangzi’s comment on the ancients:⁹

“The wisdom of the ancients reached its zenith. How so? Some realized that in the beginning there were no things at all. This is the zenith of wisdom, the ultimate end of human knowing, to which nothing else could be added. Next, there were those who believed that there were things in the beginning, but no boundaries existed between things. Next, there were those who believed there were boundaries in the beginning, but there were no rights and wrongs. With the clear differentiation between rights and wrongs, the Dao wanes. What sets the Dao to waning is what allows self-centered desires to form” (Zhuangzi, 2013, p. 72).

The differentiation between thing and self implies breaking an original state of human oneness with nature (Zhang & Yu 2020, p. 519), which to Zhuangzi can only be restored by downplaying and removing human self-centeredness, manifested in pride, ego, conceit, etc. This might be the core teaching of the Zhuangzi, that is, navigating the lifeworld with a seriously playful (a playfully serious) attitude (Yan, 2022, p. 359).¹⁰ In this light, a sense of humor, for instance, could go a long way towards rectifying human self-centeredness. In the semiotic sense, Zhuangzi’s transcendence means at least de-symbolization, which is a form of de-semiotization (Yu, 2024c). One may argue that even so, the Zhuangzi still relies on words to narrate this process of de-symbolization; isn’t the narrative of the Zhuangzi contradicting itself? This is a legitimate question, which is precisely why I have coined the word “antisemiosis” to describe Zhuangzi’s thought. The basic logic still seems to be semiosis, but there is more at stake than just semiosis in the common sense. This brings me back to what I have called “double semiotic paradoxes of humanity”, a contradictory state that the human subject, as a semiotic agent, seems inevitably to face in the process of meaning making. The reason for this lamentable but inevitable state is precisely anthroposemiosis (Yu, 2024a, p. 35).

First, there is the “grasping paradox”: Through signs (including representamens and interpretants, in Peirce’s terms), humans are under the impression that we have grasped the objects we intend to grasp. However, the

⁸ Or the self could be a product of the evolution of various corporeal dynamics on different levels. Consider, for instance, “are you the same person you were when you were a child?” (Rothman, 2022).

⁹ The translation is mine.

¹⁰ It would not be difficult to build a partial connection between this core teaching of Zhuangzi and the spirit of the ancient Roman festival Saturnalia, at least with regard to the “sense of play” and the “parade of freedom” (Beard, 2014, p. 64), which could easily be found in both sources.

more these representamens and interpretants develop, the farther these objects¹¹ are from humans. Humans have long distanced themselves from the dimensions replaced by their self-created “virtual space”. In other words, through anthroposemiosis (symbolization in particular), humans seem to have the objects in their hands, unaware that the results of symbolic activity and the objects may be fundamentally different things. In the process of symbolic activity, alienation and concealment have already occurred. The so-called crisis of representation of language is a typical example. Ernst Cassirer was keenly aware of this (Cassirer, 2021 [1944], p. 25); so has Habermas (2001 [1997]), although Habermas celebrates their liberating power of that distance, contrary to Cassirer’s emphasis on the limiting and distancing power of symbols:

“The fact that sensory contact with the world is reworked into something meaningful through the use of symbols is the defining feature of human existence and also constitutes, from a normative standpoint, the basic trait of a properly human mode of being. In other words, the objectifying force of symbolic mediation breaks the animal immediacy of a nature which impacts on the organism from within and without; it thereby creates that distance from the world which makes possible a thoughtful, reflectively controlled reaction to the world on the part of subjects who are able to say ‘no’” (Habermas, 2001 [1997], p. 7).

This brings our discussion to the second paradox, the “freedom paradox”. Signs, especially symbols, seem to endow humans with a certain “freedom”, as Habermas has favorably argued, enabling us to break free from the constraints of Umwelten and the referents of symbols, and to deal directly with the signs themselves. For example, humans live in various representational systems such as money, writing, language, images, rites, and so on. These representational systems enable and enact a myriad of narrative, in such a deeply entrenched way that perhaps humans can only think through these representational systems.

Speaking of thinking, an even more pertinent example of the “freedom paradox” is human knowing.¹² Human knowing is a blessing, but at the same time it can also be a curse. Fundamentally a form of semiotic modeling (Yu, 2021), human knowing seems to liberate human beings from the kind of temporal-spatial restrictions imposed on most other animal species by in the immediate conditions in their Umwelten. However, in the meanwhile, together with the various representational systems the species has been capable of, human knowing has created a peculiar plane of existence. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Yu, 2024d), the human being could be thought to reside in three dimensions of modeling, in which reality is created and/or experienced and with which human knowing is associated. We might as well call them the three dimensions of reality. They are representational dimension, the interpretational dimension,¹³ and the Umwelt. The first two correspond to what I call “semiotic modeling”, whereas the third corresponds to what I call “existential modeling” (Yu 2021). Not necessarily excluding one another, these three dimensions might overlap and interpenetrate to different degrees, although they highlight different aspects. It is the first two dimensions that compose the peculiar plane of existence, a semiotic universe, or a subjunctive universe (Seligman et al., 2008, p. 8), as it were.

In this sense, therefore, signs do not necessarily grant humans freedom, contrary to what Habermas believes, but rather enslave them. In other words, as semiotic animals, humans are truly suspended in our own web of significance. However, to say that symbolization is double-edged swords would be a misleading understatement, since humans live and think in symbols (as specific species of signs or results of semiotic modeling); we do not just use signs or symbols as if they were outside us. Signs, especially symbols, are in us, and we are in them. This is what Cassirer’s “animal symbolicum” means, at least partially. On the surface, it seems that symbolization has liberated us from the constraints we face in our Umwelten, as if we had transcended the limitations of time and space, yet we fall into the constraints of symbols. If Umwelt is understood as what people have commonly referred to as Nature, then the existence of symbols has deeply separated humans from Nature. Or shall we say, human Umwelten have been altered since at least the advent

¹¹ It does not seem to matter very much whether the objects are immediate or dynamical. After all, as Peirce concedes, “perhaps the Object is altogether fictive” (CP 8, p. 314).

¹² In the history of “Western” thought, the concept of “human knowing” has come in many guises under different names, for instance, intellect, imagination, reason, rationality, knowledge, cognition, spirit, mind, psyche, and so on. Many of these words have become so semantically overloaded and obscure that if we allow ourselves to be fixated on of these words instead of their possible referential commonality, that is, what they might jointly signify despite their apparent differences, we may fall victim to our own semiotics creations, as Ernest Cassirer rightly pointed out decades ago (Cassirer, 2021 [1944]).

¹³ This is the dimension of human knowing, which is manifested in the forms of cognitive and effective states, including fantasizing, imagining, brainstorming, and experiencing joy, anger, sorrow, terror, worries, and so on, are diverse but all symbolic in nature, that is, examples of what Peirce calls interpretants.

of language (linguaging) as an adaptation (Sebeok, 2001 [1994], p. 147)?¹⁴ In the same sense, we can also say: Nature and humanity were originally one, that is, human oneness with nature; it is symbolization (as an instance of semiotic modeling) that has created separation and alienation. This provides a rationale for Zhuangzi’s antisemiosis: a vision towards a whole new world (not this imperfect, corrupt, miserable, and even dark lifeworld) through a completely updated reimagining of the-self-as-a-semiotic-agent, a radical reconceptualization that is known as “selfing through non-selfing/de-selfing” (Yan, 2022, p. 359). From the dialectic as outlined in this section, we can now proceed to devise a new framework of freedom.

4. An inclusive semiotic vision of freedom

Granted, as Hoffmeyer notes, “freedom is an ambiguous word” (Hoffmeyer, 1992, p. 109). In addition, just as Kull posits, “an active living organism, as opposed to an inactive or a dead one, can be described as a complex of processes that have some freedom of behaviour. The nature of such freedom has been a major enigma for biology.” (Kull, 2023b, p. 172) But not so much for semiotics. The reason is simple: freedom, however it has been construed, is ultimately a semiotic phenomenon, and thus perfectly falls in the purview of semiotic inquiry. In the semiotic sense, freedom can be defined as the ease with which meaning is made or generated spontaneously. It is the degree of spontaneity of meaning making. Spontaneity implies unaffectedness, and therefore entails choice and arbitrariness (cf. Kull, 2023a). We can identify at least three interconnectible kinds of freedom, as shown in the following table.

Intra-semiotic freedom	Intra-agential
Inter-semiotic freedom	Inter-agential
Ultra-semiotic freedom	Existential transcendence

Table 1: The inclusive semiotic vision of freedom

Intra-semiotic freedom is similar to, if not the same as, “semiotic freedom” as explicated by Hoffmeyer and later developed by Kull¹⁵ for biosemiosis, although my term here leans more specifically towards anthroposemiosis. Intra-semiotic freedom refers to the ease with which meaning is made or generated spontaneously in the more or less creative immersion of the semiotic agent in all possible forms of semiosis involving all possible semiotic resources he or she can produce and use. Thus, this freedom is largely intra-agential, that is, existing within the semiotic universe of the semiotic agent. The examples are many, too many. If one does not like certain ways of talking, behaving, or even thinking, for instance, they could opt for other possible ways, as these are semiotic resources. A hermit or recluse, for another instance, is highly free in this sense, breaking away from the immediacy of their otherwise shackling or troubling surroundings. In the same vein, a yearning for company, a love for literature, a fetish about keeping things tidy (or messy), a hate for mundane affairs, etc., all can be said to pregnant with intra-semiotic freedom as long as they are spontaneous, even if to differing degrees. Naturally, therefore, intra-semiotic freedom could indeed imply richness and “depth” of meaning an individual is capable of, and therefore, connect well with Hoffmeyer’s definition of semiotic freedom, and even Habermas’s view of the liberating power of symbols. Take narrative. In terms of narrative effect, to narrate is never simply about creating stories using all possible forms of media, such as written stories, movies, music, and so on. What makes something a story is that it disrupts a mundane sense of regularity, creating a surprise, an unexpected break, a fleeting second of freedom, from a continuing order of things. The story typically features how a character responds to these disruptions. A perfect example is this online challenge:

After the first line of a book – any book – add “and then the dragons arrived.”

Readers of the present paper should feel free to take up the challenge and see (feel) what might happen. The cognitive effects of such narrating through continuing/discontinuing might be as fascinating as they are

¹⁴ By “language as an adaptation”, Sebeok means and highlights that language is not for communication, but “having been built by selection for the cognitive function of modelling” (Sebeok, 2001 [1994], p. 147). This profound point that has been similarly stressed by many other leading thinkers such as Roland Barthes (2016 [1966], p. 79), Noam Chomsky (1980, p. 230), John Deely (2002, p. 477), and so on.

¹⁵ Kull has most recently remarked that “one of the fundamental features of life is its semiotic freedom. We define it here using the concept of semiotic indeterminacy. Indeterminacy is a precondition and an aspect of semiosis. In Saussurean semiotics, indeterminacy is described via the concept of arbitrariness. In Peircean semiotics, indeterminacy is a precondition for interpretation” (2023a, p. 93).

amusing. Among many factors, a sheer liberating sense of free storying makes the challenge interesting and indeed beyond imagination. Speaking of which, imagination is often assumed and even perceived to be free. Semiotically speaking, it is part of semiosis and continual interpretation from representamen to interpretant to new interpretant, thus making possible intra-semiotic freedom. But people could be trapped by and in their own imagination.

As we have seen in the previous sections, in at least anthro-semiosis, immersion (including indulgence) in semiotic/subjunctive universe would produce the paradoxical effect of liberating and shackling. However, this is the innate limit of intra-semiotic freedom, as with inter-semiotic freedom. The chance to break this limit could only be found in ultra-semiotic freedom, but not everyone can actually find this, as we have seen in the section on Zhuangzi's antisemiosis (Yan, 2022, p. 277). As Zen Buddhist priest Vanja Palmers has said, "Our mind, our consciousness, is constantly enriched by stories and images. It is not necessary that we stop them, but that we do not identify with them, that we do not get attached to them. We talk about life, we philosophize about life, we comment, but that is not life itself." (Palmers, 2024) Then again, paradoxically, the talking, the philosophizing, the commenting, are precisely acts of life manifesting itself, the forms that life takes. For most people, the most affordable and most plausible chance of freedom would be intra-semiotic freedom.

As for inter-semiotic freedom, let us first continue the above discussion about narrative. Of the many functions of narrating, one that has often been neglected is the instillation of values, part of which could become or be transformed into codes of conduct (see Fu, 2023, p. 88). Ultimately, it is about social or inter-personal control. Religious storytelling, rituals, legislation, law enforcement, even literature, paintings, movies, news broadcasts, among others, could share this function. We are now entering the domain of inter-semiotic freedom, which refers to the ease with which meaning is made or generated spontaneously in interpersonal (sometimes inter-species) interactions in all sorts of social settings that involve two or more semiotic agents in their often connected yet colliding semioses. In short, this is freedom at the inter-agential level. In anthrosemiosis alone, examples could include freedom from not just conformity and manipulation, but also suppression and other forms of symbolic violence in Pierre Bourdieu's sense. Inter-semiotic freedom is thus more about breaking or remaining, of a semiotic agent's own accord, away from inter-agential constraints and rules, which are at least partially responsible for the formation and sustenance of social structure.

However, it is notable that rules and constraints are ubiquitous. As historian Lorraine Daston remarks, "rules of all sorts govern, constrain, specify, guide, and otherwise order action into rituals and routines. Rules dictate what to do when with whom and how, and they do so down to the last comma, in the imperative. [...] Rules rule." (Daston, 2022, p. 31) In semiotics, a relevant term that has been widely used in a similar way is "code" (Sebeok & Danesi, 2000, p. 32), although as Kull has reiterated, "codes are necessary, but not sufficient for meaning making" (Kull, 2023a, p. 90; cf. Kull, 2020). When it comes to the ease with which meaning is made or generated spontaneously at the inter-agential level, rules, codes, constraints, etc., might just prove to be the obstacles reducing or obstructing the semiotic agent's spontaneous meaning generation, however necessary and inevitable they might seem.

Compared with intra-semiotic freedom and inter-semiotic freedom, ultra-semiotic freedom is quite straightforward, because ultra-semiosis is precisely what antisemiosis does. Ultra-semiotic freedom refers to the utmost ease with which meaning is generated without separation or alienation. This is beyond contemporary semiotics, dominated by "Western" paradigms or "trends" (most notably Saussurean and Peircean) and commonly construed as a science of signs or of meaning making. The best way to understand ultra-semiotic freedom is to view semiotics, and indeed, semiosis, as pure art. As can be seen in the section on the Zhuangzian antisemiosis, this freedom is about existential transcendence, a form of true transcendence and high degree of freedom from, say, existential suffering, or *Duḥkha* (Yu, 2024a). This might be a unique feat that can only be achieved by a human being. At least, no evidence has been available to prove that non-human semiotic agents can accomplish this. It is about going beyond a form of "self malaise", attachment and clinging to a fixed self or the belief in a fixed self, simply put, clinging rigid conceptualization of a self. If we think of ultra-semiotic freedom as a state of achieving the *Dao*, in not Laozi's sense but Zhuangzi's sense of the word, that is, being restored to the authentic spontaneous existence of human oneness with nature, then there are at least three interconnected routes that might be involved: human knowing, human languaging, and human action, all of which are deeply grounded in or associated with semiotic modeling. All these three interconnected routes also imply structure and rules, without which, paradoxically, freedom cannot be a possibility. Given the complexity and counter-intuitiveness of such a project of working towards ultra-semiotic freedom, as well as the fact that only a limited number of thinkers and practitioners are purported to have achieved this freedom, it is perhaps not so disheartening to hear that this is not for all of us. For common people, this *Dao* is not

fathomable, let alone attainable (Yan, 2022, p. 277). Then what is all the fuss about narrating it? In the same way as Palmers says about life, any proper narrative that has been used to objectify/signify ultra-semiotic freedom can only serve as an index finger, like a hand pointing at the Moon. If one's aim is to experience the heavenly glory of the Moon, then his or her attention should be redirected from the finger to the Moon. Otherwise, the best that one could access is only the finger, the narrative, not the narrated object. Let us heed what Peirce once said, "it would be difficult if not impossible [...] or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality" (CP 2, p. 306). Ultimately, all narratives, as semiotic artifacts or resources, may just be indices, pointing at something beyond the semiotic self, unless, perhaps, the self transcends itself.

5. In lieu of a conclusion

At this point, it should be noted that freedom, as understood in the semiotic sense above, can hardly be absolute. We often think of freedom as being completely free of constraints, or as having free choice, arbitrary and indeterminate (see Kull, 2023a; 2023b). However, even in the mundane and common sense of the word, "freedom" never implies absolute rule-less, ground-less, constraint-free, however one really wishes it to be. The reason is not a cryptic one. It is about another form of dialectic, one that is found between freedom and structure, which seem to be inherently connected and indeed presuppose each other, like yin and yang. Not only freedom can only be grounded in structure (even in the sense of de-structuring and restructuring), but structure can only derive from freedom. Structure comes out of a predisposition towards freedom, whereas freedom tends to break away from constraints of structure. We see a such constant tension between structure/rule and freedom that freedom itself might inherently be a paradox. In addition, without structure or with too rigid structure, there would be nothing out of which freedom could possibly come. On the other hand, without freedom or with too much freedom, structure would invariably lose vigor and eventually cease to exist. In the same vein as Hoffmeyer, we may well say that structure is largely framed within and must obey certain constraints arising from the trend toward freedom (cf. Hoffmeyer, 2008, p. 187). Interestingly, this seems make semiotics an even more fitting perspective on freedom, because semiotics constructs a comprehensive perspective on all media with respect to their capacities for structure and representation.¹⁶

References

- Barthes, R. (2016) [1966]. *Signs and images: Writings on art, cinema and photography*. (Chris Turner, Trans.). Seagull Books.
- Beard, M. (2014). *Laughter in ancient Rome: On joking, tickling, and cracking up*. University of California Press.
- Brooks, P. (2022). *Seduced by story: The use and abuse of narrative*. New York Review Books.
- Cassirer, E. (2021) [1944]. *An essay on man: An introduction to a philosophy of human culture*. Yale University Press.
- Chao, Y. R. (1926). 符号学大纲 [A sketch of a science of symbolology]. *K'o-hsueh (Science)*, 11(5), 571–591; 11(11), 1477–1497.
- Chomsky, N. (1980). *Rules and Representations*. Columbia University Press.
- Daston, L. (2022). *Rules: A short history of what we live by*. Princeton University Press.
- Deely, J. (2002). The quasi-error of the external world: An essay for Thomas A. Sebeok, in memoriam. In S. Simpkins & J. Deely (Eds.), *Semiotics 2001*. Legas Press. (pp. 477–509).
- Deely, J. (2005). Defining the semiotic animal: A postmodern definition of human being superseding the modern definition "res cogitans". *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 79(3), 461–481.
- Deely, J. (2010) [2005]. *Semiotic animal*. St. Augustine's Press.
- Deely, J. (2018) [1990]. *Basics of semiotics*. Nanjing Normal University.

¹⁶ The credit for this sentence goes to Canadian semiotician David Lidov. At the dinner table on April 3, 2018, the first day we met, David wrote to me on the back of his business card: "To Hongbing Yu for the glory of signs: Semiotics constructs a comprehensive perspective on all media with respect to their capacities for structure and representation". I have kept the card in my wallet since.

- Fu, X. (2023). Are humans the “Homo Narrators”? A study of what narrative is, what narrative does and where narratology goes. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Science)*, 1, 86–101.
- Gottschall, J. (2013). *The storytelling animal: How stories make us human*. Mariner Books.
- Günay, V. D. (2020). *21. Yüzyılda Göstergebilim [Semiotics in the 21st century]*. Daisy Science Publishing.
- Habermas, J. (2001) [1997]. *The liberating power of symbols: Philosophical essays*. (Peter Dews, Trans.). The MIT Press.
- Harari, Y. N. (2014) [2011]. *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. Vintage Books.
- Hardwick, C. S. (Ed.). (1977). *Semiotic and signifiacs: The correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*. Indiana University Press.
- Hoffmeyer, J. (1992). Some semiotic aspects of the psycho-physical relation: The endo-exosemiotic boundary. In T. A. Sebeok & J. Umiker-Sebeok (Eds.), *Biosemitotics: The semiotic web 1991*. Mouton de Gruyter. (pp. 101–123).
- Hoffmeyer, J. (2008). *Biosemitotics: An examination into the signs of life and the life of signs*. Scranton University Press.
- Johansen, J. D. & Larsen, S. E. 2002 [1994]. *Signs in use: An introduction to semiotics*. (Dinda L. Gorrée & John Irons, Trans.). Routledge.
- Kull, K. (2020). Codes: Necessary, but not Sufficient for meaning-making. *Constructivist Foundations*, 15, 137–139.
- Kull, K. (2023a). Freedom in living beings: Arbitrariness and the forms of semiotic indeterminacy. In A. Biglari (Ed.), *Open Semiotics*, 4(Life and its Extensions). L'Harmattan. (pp. 81–97).
- Kull, K. (2023b). Further considerations on semiosis in evolution: Arbitrariness plus semiotic fitting, and/or mutability plus natural selection. *Sign Systems Studies*, 51(1), 171–194.
- Lee, Y. (2022). The dialogical semiosis of self-narrative in Burning. *Semiotica*, 249, 177–195.
- Lee, Y. (2023). Narrative modeling and cultural literacy in the storyworld: a quest for meaning. *Language and Semiotic Studies*, 9(4), 561–575.
- Palmers, V. (2024). *Stille*. Directed by Chris Santiago. Produced by Daryl Hefti. February 19, 2024. Retrieved February 25, 2024, from <https://aeon.co/videos/a-zen-buddhist-priest-voices-the-deep-matters-he-usually-ponders-in-silence>
- Peirce, C. S. (1931–1958) [1866–1913]. *The collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1–6, C. Hartshorne & P. Weiss (Eds.); vols. 7–8, A. W. Burks (Ed.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Cited as CP.
- Pickering, J. (1999). The self is a semiotic process. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6(4), 31–47.
- Rothman, J. (2022). Becoming You: Are you the same person you were as a child? *The New Yorker*, (October 10), 20–24.
- Sebeok, T. A. (1991). *A sign is just a sign*. Indiana University Press.
- Sebeok, T. A. (2001) [1994]. *Signs: An introduction to semiotics*. University of Toronto Press.
- Sebeok, T. A. & Danesi, M. (2000). *The forms of meaning: Modeling systems theory and semiotic analysis*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Seligman, A. B.; Weller, R. P.; Puett, M. J. & Simon, B. (2008). *Ritual and its consequences: An essay on the limits of sincerity*. Oxford University Press.
- Sharov, A. & Tønnessen, M. (2021). *Semiotic agency: Science beyond mechanism*. Springer.
- Tønnessen, M. (2015). The biosemiotic glossary project: Agent, agency. *Biosemitotics*, 8(1), 125–143.
- Yan, S. (2022). *游世与自然生活：庄子评传 [Playfully navigating the lifeworld and spontaneously living: A commentary biography of Zhuangzi]*. Hunan People's Publishing House.
- Yu, H. (2021). Modeling in semiotics: an integrative update. *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 17(4), 639–659.

- Yu, H. (2024a). 生命的悲剧意识：关于“苦”的符号学漫谈 [The tragic sense of life: A semiotic causerie on “Duhkha”]. *Studies in Culture and Art*, 1, 38–44.
- Yu, H. (2024b). 语言活动的仪式性：一次语言符号学的冒险 [On the ritual nature of languaging: A linguasemiotic challenge]. *English Studies*, 2, (forthcoming).
- Yu, H. (2024c). The cultural semiotics of Jingshen and cognitive homeostasis. *Cognitive Semiotics* (forthcoming).
- Yu, H. (2024d). The peculiar case of danger modeling: Meaning-generation in three dimensions. In Alexei A. Sharov & George E. Mikhailovsky (Eds.), *Pathways to the Origin and Evolution of Meanings in the Universe*. Scrivener Publishing LLC. (pp. 363–376).
- Zhang, J. & Yu, H. (2020). A cultural semiotics of Jingshen: a manifesto. *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 16(4), 515–534.
- Zhuangzi. (2013). *The Annotated Zhuangzi*. Qingfan Guo (Ed.). Zhonghua Book Company.