



**“THE COMPLEXITY OF SOCIAL-CULTURAL EMERGENCE:
BIOSEMIOTICS, SEMIOTICS AND TRANSLATION STUDIES”**

Organizers:

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Since the emergence of complexity thinking, scholars from the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities are renewing efforts to construct a unified framework that would unite all scholarly activity. The work of Terrence Deacon (2013), at the interface of (at least) physics, chemistry, biology, neurology, cognitive science, semiotics, anthropology and philosophy, is a great, though not the only, example of this kind of work. It is becoming clear that this paradigm of complex relational and process thinking means, among others, that the relationships between fields of study are more important than the differences between them. Deacon's contribution, for instance, lies not (only) in original findings in any of the fields in which he works but (also) in the ways in which he relates bodies of knowledge to one another. An example would be his links between a theory of work (physics) and a theory of information (cybernetics) by means of a theory of meaning (semiotics).

This line of thinking indeed situates semiotics and biosemiotics in the centre of the abovementioned debate (also see Hoffmeyer, 2008; Kauffman, 2012).

In semiotics, Susan Petrilli's (2003) thought-provoking collection covers a wide variety of chapters focused on translation, which she conceptualizes as semiotic process. Her work made it possible to link biosemiotics and semiotics through the notion of “translation”, which is what we aim to explore further in this conference.

Michael Cronin's work in translation studies links up with the above through his use of the notion of “ecology”. To apprehend interconnectedness and vulnerability in the age of the Anthropocene, his work challenges text-oriented and linear approaches while engaging in eco-translational thinking. He calls *tradosphere* all translation systems on the planet, all the ways in which information circulates between living and non-living organisms and is translated into a language or a code that can be processed or understood by the receiving entity (Cronin, 2017, p. 71). The aptness of Cronin's work on ecology finds a partner in that of Bruno Latour, whose development of a sociology of translation (2005) responds to the need to reconnect the social and natural worlds and to account for the multiple connections that make what he calls the ‘social’.



In an effort further to work out the implications of this new way of thinking, Marais (2019, p. 120) conceptualized translation in terms of “negentropic semiotic work performed by the application of constraints on the semiotic process” (see also Kress 2013). Building on Peirce, namely that the meaning of a sign is its translation into another sign, translation is defined as a process that entails semiotic work done by constraining semiotic possibilities. This conceptualization allows for the study of all forms of meaning-making, i.e. translation, under a single conceptual framework, but it also allows for a unified ecological view for both the sciences and the humanities. “The long standing distinction between the human and social sciences and the natural and physical sciences is no longer tenable in a world where we cannot remain indifferent to the more than human” (Cronin, 2017, p. 3).

These kind of approaches open ample possibilities for a dialogue between Translation Studies, Semiotics and Biosemiotics, exploring translation not only in linguistic and anthropocentric terms, but as a semiotic process that can take place in and between all (living) organisms – human and non-human organic and inorganic, material and immaterial alike. Not only the translation of *Hamlet* into French, or of oral speech into subtitles, but also communication between dolphins or between a dog and its master, or moving a statue from one place to another, or rewatching a film are translation processes. However, many of the implications of this line of thinking still need to be explored, and if the references to Deacon, Petrilli and Cronin holds, this should be done in an interdisciplinary way that tests, transgresses and transforms scholarly boundaries.

It is for this reason that we call for papers for a conference in which we hope to draw together biosemioticians, semioticians and translation studies scholars to discuss the interdisciplinary relations between these fields and the implications of these relations for the study of social and cultural reality as emerging from both matter and mind. We invite colleagues to submit either theoretical or data-driven or mixed proposals, reflecting on the complexity of social-cultural emergence as a translation process. Some of the topics that colleagues could consider would be the following:

- Is translation, as semiotic work and process, indeed able to link all of the biological world, including humans, with the non-living world in one ecology, and if so how?
- What conceptual constructs in each of the three fields are relevant for the other fields, and how?
- Could the fields learn methodological and epistemological lessons from one another? If so, what would these entail?
- Could collaborative scholarship enhance an understanding of social-cultural emergence, and if so, what would this scholarship entail?
- How, if at all, does entropy and negentropy play out differently in social-cultural systems compared to biological and/or physical systems?
- How does social-cultural emergence differ from biological and even physical emergence? Systems thinking tends to ignore differences like the intentionality of biological agents in contrast to physical agents. Thus, if one were to consider the possibility that intention has causal effect, how does one factor intention into thinking about complex adaptive systems?



The aim is to have an interactive conference. Firstly, we invited three keynote speakers, one from each of the fields involved, to give their views on the relationships between these three fields. Secondly, apart from the normal responses to papers, we would like to end each day of the conference with a session (about one hour) in which the keynote speakers reflect, round-table style, on the papers of the day and in which participants have the opportunity to engage them and one another in open debate style.

Keynote speakers:

- Biosemiotics – Terrence Deacon (University of California, Berkeley)
- Semiotics – Frederik Stjernfelt (Aalborg University, Copenhagen)
- Translation studies – Michael Cronin (Trinity College Dublin)

Conference date:

- 26-28 August 2021

Place:

- Online

References

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