Semiotics

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Semiotics

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Introduction

A parent and two children play a pretend game on a living room rug while folding clothes. The 3-year-old suggests the father become a vampire bat to defeat the evil hunters of Cruella de Vil, a Disney cartoon villain who had become a regular protagonist in the family's pretend play. She urges him (as bat) to fly into the backyard—pointing to a spot on the rug where shortly before they had found some mud and vacuumed it up. The father consults the 8-year-old daughter about how to be a vampire bat. This stretch of interaction is being videotaped by the mother as a way to explore Goffman's (1981) notion of footings for a graduate seminar. Almost a decade later, after the video has been transcribed, discussed, and written about in a series of texts, the transcript and digitized version of the original videotape becomes one of three data sets analyzed in a co-authored article (Prior, Hengst, Roozen, and Shipka 2006). Whether the term *semiotics* is familiar or not, this vignette illustrates how thoroughly and necessarily life involves the historically unfolding blend (and it's always a blend) of multiple semiotic resources, including oral language, embodied action and gesture, perception of environments, written texts, films, music, and touch.

Semiotics is a broad diverse field that involves the study of multiple kinds of signs conveyed via varied channels and media, of socially-organized and evolutionarily-generated sign systems, and of the conditions of signification or semiosis (i.e., the processes of making meaning from signs). It can be traced to ancient Greek formulations of *semeion*, as symptom or sign, in medical and philosophical traditions, leading etymologically to current notions of semantics as well as semiotics. The standard medieval definition for the sign became *alquid stat pro aliquo* (something that stands for something). In modern history, semiotics has been taken up in philosophy, literary and cultural studies, language and literacy studies, psychology, and even biology. The present shape of the field has been forged in the competing theoretical traditions of Saussure's (1983) dyadic and Peirce's (1998) triadic accounts of the sign and of Voloshinov's (1973) historical-materialist accounts of the social and psychological functions of signs. A full account of the histories and current state of this complex field is well beyond the scope of the present chapter, but rich accounts have been undertaken in a number of introductory texts, several of which are

noted in the further readings at the end of the chapter. The modest goal of this chapter is to introduce some key figures and theoretical frameworks in the history of semiotics, consider how those frameworks have played out in English Studies, and identify a few current issues in the field that portend future developments.

Historical Perspectives

Western intellectual traditions have long been interested in understanding the process of making meaning from signs (semiosis or signification), in how signs get connected to referents (seen as real or imagined, naturally occurring or intentionally produced), and in how signs prompt interpretations or responses of sign-recipients. One critical dimension of this history is its varied formulations of the sign. For example, Saussure (1983:15), whose work redefined linguistic inquiry and shaped the modern discipline, suggested the need for semiology, "a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life." Conceiving semiology as a field that would "investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them" (de Saussure 1983: 15), he saw linguistics as a part of semiology, which would in turn be part of psychology. Although he alludes to studying rites and customs as signs, he attends primarily to the nature of the linguistic sign. Saussure offered a dyadic account of signification as the relation of *signifier* (sign) to *signified* (referent). Taking a quite idealized view of these relations, he argued that the signified must be understood as a concept (rather than a thing in the world) and the signifier as the sign image (not the occurring physical sign, but the mental representation of the sound, graph, gesture, etc.). He saw meaning potential as generated by associations among elements of the whole linguistic/conceptual system. A robust social concept like gender, for example, would emerge in the internal dynamics of that system, in a web of interactions among binary oppositions (male-female, mother-father, husband-wife, sister-brother), routine phraseologies, and conventional cultural associations, however tight or loose (e.g., of female with lipstick, dresses and child-raising, of male with beards, suits, and physical labor). Saussure's model proved to be generative for a number of approaches to structuralist and text semiotics (e.g., Barthes 1967) because its attention to the circulation of signs within systems was well attuned to the materials and goals of that work, to the project of making visible the webs of significations in static texts (or performances rendered static).

Peirce (1998) offered a triadic account of the sign, in which meaning potentials are generated in relations among *objects* (real or imagined, conceptual and material), *representamens* (sign-vehicles), and *interpretants* in the minds of recipients. Peirce emphasized that each interpretant could then enter into

relations of a new triadic sign, perhaps revising the understanding of the original object, perhaps serving as a representamen for another object and a second order interpretant. This recursive generative chaining led Peirce to the notion that semiosis is a dynamic, open-ended process. One of Peirce's (1960: 135) definitions of the sign makes two critical amendments to the medieval definition as he says that signs "stand *to somebody* for something *in some respect or capacity*" (italics added). Peirce's sign then is not ideal but situated: not standing for something in the abstract, but doing so *to* some particular person and in an interested, partial, situationally-motivated fashion.

Table 11.1: Peirce's Triadic Matrix of Semiotic Relations (based on Peirce 1998).

	Firstness	Secondness	Thirdness
Relation of sign to itself	Qualisign	**Sinsign (token)**	**Legisign (type)**
Relation of sign to its object	**Icon**	**Index**	**Symbol**
Relation of sign to its interpretant	Rheme (term)	Dicent (proposition)	Argument

Peirce (1998) worked through a fundamentally triadic ontology. His three-by-three matrix of relations of firstness, secondness, and thirdness generated nine semiotic qualities (see Table 11.1). From this scheme of nine, two sets of distinctions have been widely cited (the bold items in Table 11.1). In terms of the character of signs themselves, Peirce's distinction between *sinsigns* (usually called tokens) and *legisigns* (usually called types) has been separated out and widely adopted for lexical analysis. In terms of how signs relate to their objects, Peirce's earliest scheme of *icon* (resemblance), *index* (pointing), and *symbol* (convention) has often been represented as making up the whole of Peirce's classification of signs. However, Peirce noted that individual signs, such as a map, blend iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions, though one or two are likely to dominate (at least in the foreground). Likewise, any legisign (type) can only be experienced as a sinsign (actual token) and each token in turn must represent some qualisign (the potential of some conceptual/perceptual quality). In short, the two partial schemes are often mistaken as mutually exclusive categories and represent only five of the nine qualities Peirce identified, notably absent are all three of the semiotic categories related to interpretants—*rheme* (term), *dicent* (proposition), and *argument*. Moreover, Peirce identified ten possible ways (sometimes identified as ten classes of signs) that these semiotic means can combine sign, referential, and meaning dimensions. For example, a common noun (in a language), for Peirce, would be a *rhematic symbolic legisign* while a weather vane indicating the current direction of the wind would be a *dicent indexical sinsign*. Peirce also

noted that some combinations from Table 11.1 are not possible (e.g., noting that a qualisign can only be rhematic and iconic). Peirce's theory is notoriously difficult and was in seemingly constant motion throughout his life, yet it is worth noting how much more complex it is than most current, very partial, uptakes. Peirce's account of semiotics, in contrast with Saussure's, has been taken up in areas like linguistic anthropology, cultural psychology, and biosemiotics because his model of signs seems more attuned to teasing the situated, dialogic dimensions of signification out of the tangle of lifeworlds.

Although situated and dialogic, Peirce's pragmatic semiotics was addressed primarily to epistemological fields (logic, mathematics). In contrast, Voloshinov (1973) proposed a deeply social, ideological model for the semiotics of everyday life, seeing signs as dialogic matters of a materialist history. Voloshinov was concerned to articulate the relationship between the material base of a society, its social ideologies, and individual consciousness. He argued that these relations were fundamentally semiotic: "Everything ideological possesses meaning: it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself. In other words it is a *sign*" (1973: 9). Like Peirce, Voloshinov conceived of semiosis as encompassing all forms of thinking and feeling, seeing understanding as "a response to a sign with signs" forming a continuous "chain of ideological creativity and understanding" (1973: 11). Insisting on the integration of the social and the individual, Voloshinov not only argued that signs arise "in interindividual territory" (12), but also that the consciousness of the individual is formed in social interaction. If the inner world of consciousness is formed through the uptake of social signs, it is also the case that:

> every outer ideological sign, of whatever kind, is engulfed in and washed over by inner signs—by the consciousness. The outer sign originates from this sea of inner signs and continues to abide there, since its life is a process of renewal as something to be understood, experienced and assimilated…. (Voloshinov 1973: 33)

As Bakhtin (1986) later elaborated, Voloshinov saw language as situated, dialogic *utterances* that came— in routine spheres of social life— to form genres (i.e., types of situational utterances). However, Voloshinov highlighted (as Bakhtin did not) that those utterances were accompanied by other semiotic performances (e.g., gestures, music, imaging, ritual activity) and that externalized utterances and genres were seamlessly linked to a sea of inner signs.

Working in the same historical milieu but in psychology, Vygotsky (1999: 40) also began to articulate how humans become human through—and engage in higher psychological functions of thinking,

remembering, and problem solving via—the mediation of material tools and "symbolic forms of activity (speech, reading, writing, counting, drawing)." Vygotsky (1999: 55) noted that his experiments in child development repeatedly found that "what was an external operation with a sign, a certain cultural method of controlling oneself from outside, is converted into a new intrapsychological layer and gives rise to a new psychological system incomparably higher in composition and cultural-psychological in genesis." The sociohistoric tradition that Voloshinov and Vygotsky began to articulate in the 1920s has generally gotten less attention in mainstream semiotic circles because it did not focus on the theory of the sign, but instead on examining the social and psychological functions of signs in situated activity.

Finally, it is also important to recognize that semiotics has served as a kind of banner for studies that have resisted language-centric views of communication and cognition. For example, studies of nonverbal communication (gesture, posture, facial expression, gaze, non-linguistic sounds) have routinely appeared in semiotic journals and collections, often without any explicit reference to more general semiotics. Of course, semiotics ultimately resists the privileging of any single semiotic domain, suggesting that studies of other specific semiotic resources, such as gestures or images, should orient to a multi-semiotic or multimodal framework, one that considers multiple channels, media, codes, and contexts rather than any single one. In sum, if one long-standing impetus for work on semiotics has been a theoretical interest in articulating the relations of sign, reference, and meaning, another has been a deep desire for a complex, heterogeneous, holistic account of semiotic life.

Critical Issues

As the quick historical sketch in the previous section might suggest, the field of semiotics includes several different (if related) projects that we can begin to identify here. One project—that of mainstream semiotics—has focused on defining the general nature of signs/semiosis, identifying classes of signs, and understanding how signs shape the meaningful responses of sign-recipients. A second project, interpretive semiotics, has taken up ideas from mainstream semiotics to assist in the analysis of literary and cultural texts, seeking ways to read objects (cars, clothes, furniture, etc.) in texts or to trace the role of language in mediating systems of objects and actions (e.g., seeing fashion as not only clothes, but also ways of talking, writing, and imaging clothes). A third project involves contesting language-centered approaches to communication, with semiotics offering a space for making studies of gestures, images, music, mathematics, and so on more legible. A fourth project, sociohistoric semiotics, is oriented to the way heterogeneous semiotic resources are functionally blended in cognition, communication, and

ultimately the co-genesis of people and societies. Across these different disciplinary projects, two issues are particularly relevant to English Studies, one around the question of how to define objects of inquiry and the second around the question of how to characterize the knowledge of different kinds of signs.

The first issue centers on whether the object of inquiry is taken to be *texts* (i.e., any coherent semiotic artifact, including paintings, photographs, buildings, gestures, films, and conversations as well as written linguistic artifacts) or *practices* (i.e., situated, embodied, mediated activity). Consider a hypothetical magazine advertisement (a common example for semiotic analysis). A textual analysis of the ad will examine the visual, linguistic, and perhaps even material resources that can be read as designed by the ad's producers and inferred as consequential to the meaningful uptake of those who read/view/hold the ad. The spatial organization and textual style of language and image; use of color, typeface, technologies; and the signification (denotative and connotative) of the things represented, all may contribute to the reading of the ad. In contrast, a practice-oriented approach may pay close attention to the semiotic text (the ad), but it will also directly investigate the semiotic practices or activity that produced the ad (e.g., through situated, ethnographic observation of the work processes of producers, of recipients' reading and use of the ad, of social means of distribution, and of the ideological frameworks that the ad draws on and intervenes in). The distinction, it is important to note, is what object of inquiry is investigated. It is not unusual for those analyzing texts to be concerned with practices, but they read those practices indirectly through the texts, imaginative reconstructions of what motivated production, and imaginative projections of reception. Indeed, much work in cultural studies (e.g., Williams 1973) and critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough 1992) approach practice from exactly this text-centered perspective.

The second issue centers on whether to represent knowledge of signs as abstract systems (with a lexicon of signs and a syntax of sign combination) or to take a dialogic perspective (where signs draw on historical chains of semiosis, are inflected by immediately situated goals and conditions, and are oriented to future uptakes). This question is the one Voloshinov (1973) and Bakhtin (1986) raised in their critique of Saussure's call for linguistics and semiology to seek the synchronic system that governs situated semiotic performances. In the case of language, Saussure (1983) constructed *langue* (the system of language) as the only coherent and potent object of interest for linguists while *parole* (situated utterance) was relegated to being a poor pale reflection of the system. Voloshinov and Bakhtin reversed Saussure's account, insisting that language (and signs) are heterogeneous and historical at every level (from the particular utterance to the national language), are sites of conflict and change, are only partially stabilized through centralizing sociohistoric force, and are only relatively shared. They identify the

situated utterance as the real unit of language and treat genres as key to social and communicative coherence. Voloshinov, in direct contradiction of Saussure, defined language as "a purely historical phenomenon" (Voloshinov 1973: 82). Saussure's views were echoed in later linguistic accounts of the idealized competence of idealized speakers of a national language. Such notions were contested by researchers in the ethnography of communication, like Hymes (1971), who argued, aligning well with Voloshinov and Bakhtin's perspective, that communicative competence involved situated rules of use as well as rules of form; indexed social situations, identities and goals; and was tied not to anonymous isolated sentences drawn on linguists' chalkboards but to situated personalized courses of action. That said, as Prior (1998) noted, many researchers seem to have taken up a hybrid of these two stances by continuing to look for systems of rules that govern performance but doing so by collecting situated data, shrinking the domains of rules from national languages to more local social settings, and expanding from a language-centric focus to a broader palette of semiotic resources and practices. In short, how particular studies fall on this issue may be complex.

These two issues have clear implications for the disciplinary and interdisciplinary configurations of semiotic theory, research and practice. Learning to read the connotative semiotics of the texts of the fashion system (Barthes 1967) calls on very different traditions, skills, stances, and means of inquiry from those involved in close tracing of embodied, situated, and mediated literate activity (see Prior and Hengst 2010; Streeck, Goodwin, and LeBaron 2011). In the next section, we will take a closer look at some of the ways these semiotic issues—and their methodological, theoretical, and disciplinary implications—arise in current semiotic work in English Studies.

Current Contributions

This section focuses on five current approaches that draw on semiotic theories in English Studies. These approaches range from structuralist study of texts aimed at uncovering systems of rules in different semiotic domains to sociohistoric studies of semiotic practices that aim to describe how dialogic semiotic heterogeneity is achieved. The different applications here also vary in disciplinary locations and goals. In terms of the issues identified in the last section, the five approaches here divide most clearly on the central question of whether to take texts or practices as objects of inquiry.

Textual approaches to semiotics

In literary and cultural studies, semiotics has generally been deployed in the service of structuralist text analysis. Barthes's semiology is an early and key example of this kind of approach. Drawing on Saussure's dyadic framework, Barthes (1967) was keenly interested in figuring the signification of objects, whether in novels, films, or advertising. In particular, he turned to Hejlmlsev's (1953) account of connotative semiotics, where the denotative relation of signifier to signified is refigured at a higher level as the expression of a second level of signification. Thus, silk (as expressed in speech, writing, image, or the material fabric itself) may contribute to the first-level denotative content of a certain dress; however, that semiotic relation of silk-to-dress may also serve at a second-order connotative level as an expression of notions of social class (silk as a fine, expensive, luxurious material that marks people of distinction). Following Saussure, Barthes worked to identify semiotic systems (equivalent to *langue*) for domains such as furniture, fashion, cars, and food that would aid in understanding particular instances of use (equivalent to *parole*). This semiological approach helped literary approaches to interpretation take up a wider array of cultural texts and to explore how cultural domains involve orchestration of meanings across multiple genres and media.

When Hodge and Kress (1988) argued for a critical social semiotics that would attend to the functional dimensions of signs in realizing the grouping, values, identities, power, and inequalities of social life, they pointed as key sources for their theory to Voloshinov's focus on ideology and Halliday's theory of semiotics and language. For Halliday (1978: 2), seeing language as social semiotic meant "interpreting language within a sociocultural context, in which the culture itself is interpreted in semiotic terms." Halliday viewed texts as constituted in the intersection of three functional modes of meaning (ideational, interpersonal and textual) "present in every use of language in social context" (Halliday 1978: 112). In the 1990s, the emergence of digital information and communication technologies led Kress and colleagues to reformulate this social semiotic approach around the notion of *multimodality*, with the notion of mode taking the place of the sign. This branch of multimodality studies, like much of the work that has so far followed Halliday, has taken a basically linguistic approach (see, e.g., O'Halloran 2004): objects of analysis are typically treated as texts to be analyzed for their deployment of modes, so practices—of production, distribution, reception, and use —are read into or from the text, inferred and imagined rather than being investigated.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001: 21) defined modes as "semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter)action" and pointed to examples including

language, writing, speech, narrative, color, layout, furniture, and perhaps, they suggest, plastic. They argued that language is a mode because it can be realized in talk or writing, while writing is one because it can be done on paper, stone, and other material and as print or handwriting. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001: 22) elaborate that "media become modes once their principles of semiosis begin to be conceived in more abstract ways (as 'grammars' of some kind)." Kress (2010: 87) states that "what a society decides to regard and use as a mode is a mode." For example, in considering whether layout and font are modes, Kress (2010) suggests that the social test is whether a community has metadiscursive notions that foreground font and layout and some kind of informal grammar (schemes of use, norms, rules of thumb) whereas the formal test is whether font and layout can embody Halliday's ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. The definitions offered by Kress and van Leeuwen and their emphasis on educational practice highlight a marked similarity between their notion of mode and classical rhetorical notions of a trope. Both offer not a systematic definition but an open field of practical classifications; tropes and modes are what somehow come to attention, get named, and can be manipulated to effect. As Barthes (1988: 85) noted in his review of the rhetorical tradition in Western education, this *ad hoc* noticing and naming may have resulted in a "taxonomic frenzy" as new tropic distinctions were enumerated, but also succeeded in organizing centuries of pedagogical application.

The term multimodality has rapidly caught on as a new way of talking about semiotics, particularly among English educators interested in refashioning school language and literacy study for a digital age (see, e.g., Hawisher and Selfe 1999; Pahl and Rowsell 2012). Dozens of books that feature multimodality in their titles and content now come out each year. Many researchers and theorists from different traditions, including those who focus on semiotic practices discussed in the next section, have adopted the term multimodality in at least some their work. Thus, in contrast with Kress and van Leeuwen's focus on semiotic analysis of texts, multimodality might point to the multiple sensory modalities involved in a practice, index an interest in the semiotic artifacts and spaces produced by new digital technologies, or highlight the multiplicity and heterogeneity in semiotic acts and objects.

Ethnographic approaches to semiotic practices

Street's (1984) critique of autonomous literacy in favor of a notion of ideological literacy, along with other work on literacy as practice (e.g., Heath, 1983), opened a new avenue into semiotic practices. In contrast with the text analytic approach that dominates in semiology and social semiotic multimodality studies, Street's (1993: 1-2) new literacy studies stressed that the ideological approach requires "detailed,

in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings" as well as "bold theoretical models that recognize the central role of power relations in literacy practices" (pp. 1-2).

As Street (2007) notes, new literacy studies have routinely resisted limiting practices to a single site (tracing instead movements across sites like school, home, and community) or seeing literacy only in terms of written texts because seeing literacies as practices, as cultural ways of being in the world, means seeing literacies in terms of the necessarily multiple semiotic resources mixed into practice. Gee (1999: 18) captured this sense in defining a Discourse not as some kind of text type or even a use of language:

> The key to Discourses is "recognition." If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others *recognize* you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse…."

In practical terms, valuing an alternative discourse practice, like hip-hop music, as a 'literacy' means paying attention to the way embodied acts, spoken language, writing, musical rhythm and sound, visual representation, social values and identities, and technologies must operate together in that practice (see Alim 2006). Such semiotic blends are named 'literacies' in this approach in part because literacy is a term that confers social value to a practice but critically because these cultural practices are profoundly mediated by literate practices, values, technologies, and artifacts (including written texts).

As an applied linguist interested in sociohistoric and anthropological approaches to linguistic and semiotic practice, Scollon (2001) proposed mediated discourse analysis, which begins with the mediated activity of individuals in situated sites of engagement, but sees such sites as always linked to histories of practice and the production of mediational means. To capture the hybrid that emerges when multiple histories are tied together in situated action, he proposes the *nexus of practice* as something akin to Bourdieu's (1990) *habitus*. A nexus of practice forms as repeated cycles of semiosis and action over time and space thicken and stabilize a site of engagement and an associated constellation of social practices. Discussing nexus analysis, Scollon and Scollon highlight the way that tracing trajectories of people, signs, objects, and actions involves attention to what Lemke (2000) termed scales of time:

> If we think of an action of a moment in time and space in which the historical bodies and the interaction order of people and the discourses in place intersect, then each of these can be thought of as having a history that leads into that moment and a future that leads away from it in arcs of semiotic cycles of change and transformation. (Scollon and Scollon 2004: 160)

Scollon's (2001) analysis of the ontogenesis of handing is a key example. Using ethnographic observation in multiple sites, he explores the way people learn how objects are handed and received, with what kinds of gestures and sometimes accompanying talk or textual exchange, and how certain kinds of cultural forms of life, certain kinds of people, are being formed in the socialization of such practices. The ontogenesis of handing involves repeated but varied practices (a parent handing food, toys, and other objects to a baby; a child sharing toys with a sibling at home; a professor buying coffee at Starbucks; a political group handing out literature on Hong Kong streets; students and teachers handing papers back and forth in a classroom). Learning this family of handing practices also means learning associated social practices of identity, affect, motive, and means associated with them. Norris and Jones's (2005) collection presents a set of studies that take up a mediated discourse analytic framework in different contexts.

In the field of English writing studies, a sociohistoric semiotics has also begun to emerge. Witte (1992) offered an early statement of this approach and its particular theoretical blend of cultural-historical psychology (Vygotsky, Leont'ev), dialogic semiotics (Voloshinov, Bakhtin, and Peirce), and actor-network theory (Latour). Drawing on these theories along with mediated discourse analysis and Peircean approaches to anthropological linguistics (e.g., Hanks 1990; Irvine 1996), Prior, Hengst, Roozen and Shipka (2006) argue for a dialogic sociocultural approach to semiotic practices-in-the-world, defining *semiotic remediation* as "the diverse ways that humans' and nonhumans' semiotic performances (historical or imagined) are re-represented and reused across modes, media and chains of activity" (734). The *re-* here calls attention to dialogic chaining, to the notion that signs are always being repurposed, and to the critical issue of how people (as producers and receivers) recognize a semiotic token as an index of prior uses even across shifts in genre, medium, and other contextualizations. Methodologically, Prior and Hengst (2010: 19) argue that following this approach suggests that:

> researchers should recognize the simultaneous, layered deployment of multiple semiotics (talk, gesture, artifact use and production, interaction with environmental structure): people are never just talking, just reading, just writing. It also means that researchers should look at semiotic trajectories and chains across time and place, recognizing both the need to understand semiotics as dispersed and mediated and the value of tracing out mediations ANT-like, rhizomatically, across situated functional systems. Semiotic remediation as practice also foregrounds that the twinned processes of learning and social formation are ubiquitous dimensions of practice.

In a series of ethnographic case studies, Roozen has traced the developmental trajectories of semiotic practices across school and non-school settings. For example, in an ethnographic case study of Kate, an English major, Roozen (2009: 137) documents the multiple ways that her " fan fiction and fan art mediate[d] her engagement with English studies" from high school through graduate school, but also the ways that "her participation with English studies figure[d] prominently in her fan activities." Whether noting her extensive engagements with fan art and fiction as she took up an assignment to write an alternative version of a James Thurber short story or her comic-like sketches of Kenneth Burke's rhetorical pentad as she studied for a graduate examination, Kate's case displays how students themselves forge links between school and home, print and online, literacies. Pedagogically, this framework's focus on how available resources are used, developed and transformed represents one kind of response to the New London Group's call for rethinking pedagogy in terms of design and redesign (Cope and Kalantzis 2000). For example, Shipka (2011) presents research on her students' semiotic composing practices in college writing and rhetoric classes. Focusing on the "interconnectedness of systems of production, distribution, reception and circulation," Shipka (2011: 15) designs complex tasks of inquiry and communication that ask students to select language, genres, media, and activities for rhetorical and practical purposes. Her students might produce digital texts or write on everyday objects (e.g., shirts, shoes, mirrors), structure simple or complex strategies for distribution and reception, and compose relatively on their own or organize a production team, but her pedagogy stresses that they must account rhetorically for their choice of semiotic means and semiotic activity.

Future Directions

The quick sketches of five semiotic approaches to English Studies are not intended to be comprehensive accounts of these approaches much less of the diverse ways that semiotics currently appears in English Studies. However, they do capture some key dynamics at play in the move from approaches like semiology that focus on identifying synchronic systems in the service of interpreting texts to approaches like mediated discourse analysis, new literacy studies, and semiotic remediation practices that examine chained histories of semiotic practice, with strong interests in the semiotic production of people and society as well as in understanding semiotic artifacts (texts, varied physical objects, etc.) and situated communicative performance.

The place of semiotics in English Studies is at the moment complex, experiencing some of the same tensions that emerge when theories of language as an object (a text, transcript of talk, a linguistic corpus)

encounter theories that take language as embodied, situated practice. Semiotics also displays the contrast of approaches that produce systematic accounts of language (even at the level of small language domains, registers and such) versus those that insist language is necessarily always dialogic (heterogeneous and not amenable to fixation of meaning). To tackle these issues, multiple disciplines need to be at the table, including gesture studies, visual studies, cultural-historical activity theory, actor-network theory, ethnomethodology, and dialogic theory. Once the question of the social—of how action at a particular time and place can be articulated with national and transnational flows—is recognized as central to questions of language/semiotics, the field needs to look beyond traditional sociological theory and cultural commonsense that pictures a hierarchical macrostructure that governs performance, to see, as ethnomethodological approaches suggest, the local achievement of sociality, but also the way flat viral chains of association (Latour 2005) complicate notions of both the local and global. Finally, there is the question now of whether semiotics, sign, and signification will continue to be the terminological framing and historical tradition for such exploration or if multimodality will become the new semiotics. However the future of the field works out, it is hard to imagine a viable English Studies that takes up language only as an abstract ideal or that privileges only a single semiotic means. When the anthropological linguist Agha (2007: 6) defines language use as "an imperfect way of talking about events of semiosis in which language occurs," it becomes clear that the notion that a single kind of sign could account for any practice is a limiting fiction, that all questions of language are questions of semiotics.

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Further Reading

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This book offers a very clear statement of dialogic semiotics with a focus on language practices.

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