

Why Semiotics? A Question Requiring a Fundamental Answer for Peirce's Sake¹

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Abstract: This address begins with a few historical considerations regarding the foundation of the Semiotic Society of America and how the founders came to define the purpose of the Society as that of advancing the study of signs. The question of what it means to ask “Why semiotics?” is then taken up, introduced, and framed within a strictly Peircean framework. How would Peirce have answered it, he the paramount logician of signs? Taking inspiration from his 1902 essay “Why Study Logic?”, of Peirce’s answer to that seminal question I extend important elements to semiotics understood as logic in a much broader sense than Peirce’s 1902 conception of logic. Then I make it clear that Peirce’s approach to our main question would have been as demanding and rigorous as the spirit in which he expected semiotics to be studied: in a genuine scientific spirit of fundamental inquiry. I expand about Peirce’s conception of fundamentality, and then show how it entails properties that are common to a particular class of fundamental concepts Peirce called “continuous predicates”. Taking advantage of a recent publication by Francesco Bellucci on the subject, I illustrate what makes continuous predicates so special, and how it is that Peirce’s general definition of a sign relation conforms exactly to the inherent form of continuous predicates. This has a direct consequence on the definition of semiotics itself, and thus on the expression of its most fundamental purpose, which is then spelled out. The address concludes with considerations about what it would take to accomplish such a fundamental purpose.

Keywords: Peirce, logic, semiotics, continuous predicates, fundamentality

¹ Presidential Address, SSA Annual Meeting 2013.

Let us begin with a few light considerations harking back to the foundation of the Semiotic Society of America. Our Society was founded in July 1975, legally incorporated in the State of New York in February 1976,² and the constitution of the Society was adopted on 24 September 1976 in Atlanta, Georgia.³ In May 1975, encouraged by the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Professor Daniel Laferrière from Tufts University began publishing an information bulletin in literary semiotics, which was simply called *Bulletin of Literary Semiotics*. Three issues of that *Bulletin* were published in 1975–1976. The newly founded SSA began publishing a newsletter titled *The Semiotic Scene* in January 1976. Three issues (perhaps more) of *The Semiotic Scene* appeared in the winter–spring of 1976, all edited by Margot Lenhart in Bloomington, Indiana (she was Assistant Executive Director of the SSA). Daniel Laferrière then proposed to the executive officers of the SSA that his *Bulletin*, which was having financial difficulties, and the SSA newsletter be merged into something very different that “would become the official organ of the SSA. And thus was born *Semiotic Scene, Bulletin of the Semiotic Society of America*. Its first number appeared in January 1977, under Laferrière’s editorship.⁴ That number contained a report of the business meeting of the first annual meeting of the Society, as well as the first publication of the Society’s constitution. The number also contained three essays, the first one very brief (only three pages long including the bibliographical references). It was written by Laferrière himself and its title was not “Why Semiotics?” but “What Is Semiotics?”

The opening sentence of that brief inaugural essay offered the following tentative and terse answer: “Simply put, semiotics is the study of signs” (Laferrière 1977: 2).⁵ As I said, the text of the SSA’s original Constitution

² As Margot D. Lenhart reported in *The Semiotic Scene* no. 1, January 1976, 1: “The Semiotic Society of America was formed at the first North American Semiotics Colloquium, held at the University of South Florida, Tampa, July 28–30, 1975, and will be incorporated this month in the State of New York”. Two months later she reported in *The Semiotic Scene* no. 2, March 1976, 1, that “On February 5, 1976 the Semiotic Society of America was officially incorporated in the State of New York”.

³ The committee that drafted the Constitution consisted of John N. Deely, William O. Hendricks, and Allen W. Read. They submitted the draft for consideration at the 24–25 September 1976 meeting of the Society in Atlanta (*The Semiotic Scene* no. 2, March 1976, 1), where the draft was further revised and the Constitution finally adopted.

⁴ Thanks to John Deely and the Philosophy Documentation Center, the *Semiotic Scene* issues and much else are available online. The SSA Constitution was originally published in *Semiotic Scene, Bulletin of the Semiotic Society of America* 1.1 (1977): 34–38.

⁵ At the end of the paper, Laferrière acknowledged that this was a “somewhat overly terse definition of semiotics” (Laferrière 1977: 4). I think the Society would be well advised to replace this overly terse definition contained in the statement of its purpose with a more eloquent one. After forty years, it should be possible to describe the Society’s purpose if not