

'Oh, semiotics? Umberto Eco and stuff like that?'

Telling and constructing a discourse of marginality

Original study

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Received: December 2021; Accepted: May 2022

Abstract: The current status of semiotics in society and the academic environment is rather marginal, and this is one of its many paradoxes (Gaines 2015). It is paradoxical because semiotics deals with all aspects of meaning; it is relevant to every field of inquiry (Posner et al. 2003) and is applicable to everyday experiences producing meaning. Yet, it is not an established field in most academic systems, and it lacks full recognition in the disciplinary 'market' (Rastier 2001). This paper discusses a particular aspect coming from a larger study carried out with 40 semiotics scholars in 12 countries in 3 languages (English, French and Spanish). I will focus on the construction and development of a prevailing discourse that intends to convey the practitioners' own subjective experiences of living and working in a marginalised field.

Keywords: semiotics, semioticians, discursive constructions, academic identity.

INTRODUCTION

The current status of the field of semiotics in society and the academic environment is rather marginal. As a field of knowledge (Posner 2003), semiotics might be relevant to all the aspects of human life, as the domain which seeks for the production and circulation of meaning. Nevertheless, semiotics is not an established field in most of the academic systems, and it lacks full recognition in the majority of national academic systems. The local situation of semiotics in every country is contingent upon two facts: firstly, its embeddedness in mainstream academic culture; and secondly, how it is constrained by higher education institutions, or research councils, in countries such as France, Italy and Denmark. Moreover, lack of organisation and institutional recognition have direct impact on those who construct and maintain this field: semioticians.

In this paper I discuss a central issue for semiotics. The topic of this paper has to do with the academic organisation of semiotics, but there will be a transition from the field of semiotics towards semiotics practitioners. The data analysed in this research comes from a larger

study conducted in the framework of the ERC-funded project DISCONEX.

This research adds to general semiotics by providing a reflexive account of the field, through the told personal experiences and identity constructions of its practitioners. As such, this is the first study that investigates how a group of semiotics scholars do identity work, considering them as its main research object in order to determine their identity dilemmas vis-à-vis the multiple problems that emerged when they felt that the recognition of the field was challenged.

This paper is organised in three parts. First, I address the epistemological issues of semiotics regarding its organisations around two main discourses, as well as current concerns of the field and its practitioners. Second, I discuss the institutional organisation of semiotics, issues of recognition of semiotics as a field of knowledge in national academic systems. Third, I present the construction of a dominant discourse that was shaped as shared conventions, in which working in the field of semiotics (as a marginal field) is considered.

THE ACADEMIC ORGANISATION OF SEMIOTICS

Recently, we have seen a growing interest in literature addressing multiple aspects of the organisation of semiotics, particularly on the following topics: the teaching of semiotics (Kull 2008; Kull et al. 2015); the development of semiotic programmes in higher education (Nöth 2010; Danesi 2012; Pessoa de Barros 2012); semiotics outlets (Kull & Maran, 2013); and how semioticians established a number of associations (Tarasti 2012; Bertrand 2014; Copley, Bankov 2016).

Despite these efforts, the current status of semiotics in society and academic environments is rather unnoticed even for those in favour of its practice as an academic endeavour. In fact, semiotics has a different status according to the context in which it is practiced, namely, in its degree of organisation in national academic systems. In this manner, semiotics is considered a fully-fledged discipline in Estonia, with chairs (three in total: cultural semiotics, biosemiotics, and semiotics and translation studies), journals, study programmes (in three levels: BA, MA and PhD), and research traditions (The Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics as well as the Jakob von Uexküll biosemiotics-oriented one) (Torop 1998; Kull, Välli 2011; Kull et al. 2011). At the other extreme, in Great Britain, semiotics has no degree of organisation at all. Paradoxically, the structures of the British higher education system, favouring a model of 'entrepreneurial governance' (Angermüller 2013), is less restrictive and allows researchers to shift between fields.

This asymmetry in organisation generates problems when placing semiotics at institutional levels. For instance, as Salupere (2011) has pointed out, the Common European Research Classification Scheme (CERCS) locates semiotics as part of 'philology (H004)' in subsection H352 Grammar, semantics, semiotics, syntax ('H' stands for humanities). The fact that semiotics does not have an official designator as a field and is considered as a branch of philology (not even linguistics), restricts the allocation of resources for grants and research projects.

Another two examples of institutional constraints take place in France or Italy. In France, semiotics is institutionally separated into two disciplinary fields. According to the National Council of Universities (CNU), semiotics belongs either to the language sciences (CNU section 07), or to the information sciences and communication (CNU section 71). In Italy, semiotics is an institutionally recognised discipline by the national academic system, but it shares a disciplinary code with philosophy: M-FIL/05 Philosophy and Theory of Language. These divisions hamper the accurate development and recognition of

the field. Furthermore, the absence of a recognised disciplinary status alongside institutional constraints has consequences for practitioners, since they are the ones who construct and maintain the field.

SEMIOTICS' RECOGNITION ISSUE

We put to the fore the fact that no single scholar is a semiotician from the beginning and, just in the same way as other academics in different fields, this development could be straightforward and linear, or can involve 'marginalisation and exclusion' (Colley, James 2005). In this way, those who have chosen to remain in the field of semiotics have to learn to dissociate their identities and to negotiate them according to the field they are working in (literature, linguistics, philosophy and anthropology, among others). Sometimes, semiotics scholars have to learn to integrate under other inter- or transdisciplinary academic labels.

Very little is currently known about semioticians' identities and how the absence of institutional recognition affects their lives as academics. Previously published studies are limited to local surveys, as in the case of Darras (2012) in the English language, or Biglari (2014) in the French language. Both analyses are limited, since they rely heavily on internet-based surveys and email interviews.

In global terms, the current state of semiotics is a late outcome of the institutionalisation of disciplines¹ in academia at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century (Foucault 1966; Becher, Trowler 2001). This process contributed to the disciplinarisation of certain 'forms of knowledge', leaving semiotics out of this process (Rastier 2001). This issue was also raised in my data, when my respondents made reference to this difficulty of recognition. In Ricoeur's (2004) terms, it is a problem of *unrecognised identity*. Thus, semioticians feel that they are not fully recognised when they see that semiotics cannot be accurately organised or that their peers reject the field and represent it as some sort of fad within other disciplines. Therefore, the question of identification becomes relevant for the entire semiotics community and needs to be addressed by semioticians themselves, so that the field can achieve better levels of organisation and dialogue.

Identity is thus made relevant in this research at the micro level when interviewees present themselves in the local context of the research interview. Therefore, my focus has been on the types of identities researchers locally perform, construct and negotiate (with me, as

1 On this, Umberto Eco discusses the dichotomy 'field' and 'discipline' (Eco, 1976). He refuses to define semiotics as a specific discipline due to two main reasons: 1) semiotics lacks a particular research object, its object is any event in the world as it happens in human culture, and 2) the second reason is more historical insofar as it is "a repertoire of interests that is not yet completely unified" (Eco, 1976: 7). Thus, semiotics for Eco cannot be regarded as a discipline but rather as a field of studies that aims at being fully defined. The understanding of 'discipline' in this study regards disciplines as an organised form of knowledge which has been institutionalised in university faculties as well as in scholarly associations (Weingart, 2010: 10)

interviewer) through language, when talking about themselves, their personal and professional links with semiotics, and how they refer to the semiotic discourse(s) they produce and reproduce as academics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, the interviewees showed a disposition to use the narrative mode (Bruner 1990). Participants recalled past experiences, emerging as longer episodes of storytelling about their lives, but also other activities and circumstances of action. Furthermore, they were able to elaborate on the presentation of themselves and others (Bamberg 2004). The narratives resulting from our interviews are regarded as products of auto-epistemical processes that reveal new insights and 'levels of sense-making about one's life' (Lucius-Hoene, Deppermann 2000, 205).

The main theoretical approach that I have drawn upon in this research is known as *positioning theory* (Davies, Harré 2001). This approach aims to address multiple facets of identity in the way they are performed through discourse. The concept of positioning finds its origin in the notion of 'subject position', coined by Foucault (1969), who rejected the notion of a fully agentive, controlling subject having power over behaviour and knowledge. Thus, positions arise in ongoing talk, storytelling, and are semiotically structured, linked to social action and accomplished by social practice (Deppermann 2015). In addition, positions can take place locally and represent a multiplicity of identities. This research brings together and establishes a synergy between different strands of positioning theory (mainly those of Bamberg 1997; Sørreide 2006; De Fina 2013; Wortham, Reyes 2015; Deppermann 2015).

In line with Bamberg (1997) and his analytical schema of three levels, we analysed locally co-constructed narratives in order to explain how semioticians take up multiple acts of positioning vis-à-vis themselves as researchers and vis-à-vis a collective other. While level 1 is specific to narrative, since it works on the referential plane of the story world and how characters are positioned in the narrative, level 2 shows how speakers are positioned in regard to the audience. Level 3 seeks to explain how the speaker takes up a position in regard to herself by means of self-identification. Also, level 3 aims at describing more permanent and 'portable' identity traits, which go beyond local or situational identities (De Fina 2013). Therefore, this perspective addresses the navigation between respondents' local identity claims (Bamberg et al. 2011) and larger macro contexts to formulate and construct concrete types of identification.

Another resource accompanying positioning is the *principle of relationality* (Bucholtz, Hall 2005). This stresses the fact that identities become meaningful in relation to other available identity positions. This principle was developed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) in the framework of their theory of the discursive construction

of identity. To them, identity is not an isolated process. It is rather seen as a phenomenon that is constructed in relation to three particular relations: *similarity/difference*, *genuineness/artifice* and *authority/delegitimization*. These relations address different dimensions of identity construction. The first set shows how interlocutors generate similarities or divergences in relation to other individuals. The second couple reveals how individuals perceive others' identity claims and whether they are considered as being genuine or not. Lastly, the third pair of relations is related to power and ideology and how these features influence the production and enactment of identities. According to the authors, these relations can happen simultaneously (Bucholtz, Hall 2005, 598-604).

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND DATA ANALYSED

In this study, I conducted a series of semi-structured research interviews with semiotics practitioners to get to know different aspects of their realities. Thus, I wanted to delve into the organisation of the field through the eyes of its practitioners. Semioticians need to justify and negotiate the pertinence of their research, according to the field they are institutionally attached to, but they are also obliged to show and confirm their right to exist in the field of semiotics by producing outstanding research and negotiating their positions with their home institutions. Moreover, the interviews were the setting that afforded a great deal of identity work. Firstly, choosing interviews as the main method for data collection, corresponded with the in-depth type of data I wanted to obtain. Secondly, in these interactions, participants displayed the telling of argumentative stories and chose from among a diversity of identity affordances. When doing so, they reflected and discursively enacted their actions in the storyworld as characters, as well as from the perspective of the here-and-now of the interaction. The narratives resulting from the interviews are considered as outcomes of self-reflexive processes that shed light on new insights and levels of sense-making about respondents' practices and lives.

The study was conducted for my dissertation in the framework of the ERC DISCONEX project, a project that did research on academic discourse and the construction of disciplines. I interviewed 40 respondents from 12 countries (France, Great Britain, Estonia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Sweden, Denmark, Luxembourg, Germany, Italy, the US and Mexico) between 2015 and 2017. Thus, I drew on a dataset composed of an oral corpus of research interviews in 3 languages (French, Spanish and English). This is a study of a particular population (40 semiotics scholars) that intends to include a diversity of researchers from different semiotic orientations involving: cultural semiotics, visual semiotics, cognitive semiotics, biosemiotics, semiotics of law, among others.

In addition, the pool includes multiple institutional positions, ranging from Emeriti professors (7), full

professors (19), associate professors (9), senior lecturers (2) and lecturers (2). In most cases, semioticians are researchers bordering two disciplinary fields: they are institutionally attached to a discipline: linguistics, communication, anthropology or philosophy.

Most respondents come from language sciences and communication. A small part of the sample is scattered among 11 different fields (law, architecture, cognitive science, education, sociology, media, visual communication, psychology, anthropology, art and philosophy). Respondents come from multiple national contexts where disciplinary boundaries are differently organised and, as discussed above, where semiotics has a different disciplinary status. The heterogeneity of this population, with regard to the diversity of fields the respondents are institutionally attached to, as well as the different career stages, is abundantly clear. Respondents come from multiple national contexts where disciplinary boundaries are different and where semiotics has different disciplinary status. Yet, as a community, they are intertwined through theoretical connections and common research interests.

Concerning the amount of data elicited, I obtained 34 hours of audio recordings. The mean length of these research interviews was 52 minutes. Despite the fact that I conducted several interviews on site, usually at the interviewee's office, I also drew on videoconference interviews, via VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology.

In these interviews, participants engaged with the *narrative mode* (Bruner 1990) as well as the telling of argumentative stories. When doing so, they reflected and discursively enacted their actions in the storyworld as characters, as well as from the perspective of the here-and-now of the interaction. The narratives resulting from the interviews are considered as outcomes of self-reflexive processes that shed light on new insights and levels of sense-making about respondents' practices and lives.

Respondents were asked about their biographical information, research orientations, institutional relationships and publications. The interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Transcripts are presented in an uncomplicated script style with interactional markers when necessary for the analysis. Participants' names and personal data have been anonymised. I am not using pseudonyms to identify participants, but rather a token, plus a number (e.g., I32).

TYPES OF STORIES

There is no unified method or 'recipe' to identify and elicit narratives. Since the interviews were not conceived of as narrative interviewing from the very beginning, asking 'only for narrative' (Slembrouck 2015, 245), I did not draw on a method of biographical narratives solely. Instead, I endeavoured to identify my inquiry phenomena as they appear in the data during the analysis. Since this research is about researchers who told stories about their lives as academics in the fringes of, most of the times,

two academic fields, it was necessary to shift from the telling of events to their *experiences* of being academic semioticians. This is why, in this study, I am oriented towards what Riessman (2005) has called *performative analysis*, this type of analysis intends to account for different features of performance, including the characters' positioning in the story, the settings (the conditions of production of the story and its setting).

Stories recur in the talk in my interviewees. These take different forms in my data. Some of them could look close to accounts of personal experience. Some are abbreviated accounts of recent events insofar as they are a temporally ordered list of more than two events. However, many of them are non-biographical accounts of stories more oriented towards factuality, or habitual stories of regular events and ongoing activities.

In the interviews, upon my request, when asking the first question, all forty participants talked about their lives as if they were continuous and chronological marks. Therefore, there was a common way of using a *linear model* of telling their biographies and constructing narratives about themselves as a process of understanding one's self throughout time. In this process, they talked about past events and experienced a process of linking those with the present, as well as future expectations (which are deployed in subsequent parts of the interview) when explaining their academic trajectories.

I briefly present now the type of stories found in my data. They range from stories with a higher degree of narrativity (mainly biographical narratives) to stories featuring a lower degree of narrativity (Carranza 1998), i.e., narratives that might have a reference to a sequence of past actions or a character's representation. Yet, the events being told are not discreet or singular. Plus, many of these events are not in the past.

The main stories found in my set of data are:

Biographical narratives: accounts of lives which mostly focus on personal experiences and biographical information.

Generic narratives that 'claim typicality' and are linguistically characterised by features such as personal pronouns or the use of generalised actors and the general present, signalling a repeated state of affairs (Baynham 2011).

Projections of the self: I coined this term to refer to stories presenting a lower degree of narrativity due to their explanatory character. They are more focused on practices, representations and beliefs about the self and others as members of certain communities; they include explicit and non-explicit evaluations.

Anecdotes: As Holmes maintains, they are digressions from the main topic and 'constitute the core of interaction' (Holmes 2006, 674). They feature a higher degree of tellability (because they illustrate a point,

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are concerned with personal experience and include evaluations – explicit or implicit (*ibid*).

Exemplum narratives: according to Baynham, these were expressly designed to 'illustrate a point' (Baynham 2011, 67).

A PERVASIVE DISCOURSE AMONGST SEMIOTICIANS: THE DOMINANT D-DISCOURSE OF SEMIOTICS

In this section, I explain how respondents constructed a D-discourse of the field of semiotics through different representations that include explicit and implicit referents to diverse aspects of semiotics.

In this manner, Gee (1999, 2008) distinguishes between *small-d discourse* (which refers to language use and practices in different interactional contexts, 'stretches of language which hang together so as to make sense to some community of people in a particular setting') (Gee 2008, 115), and *capital D-discourse* (referring to distinctive ways of speaking and listening, as well as distinctive ways of writing and reading). D-discourses can also denote a more macro-level concept, i.e., ideologies or value systems that circulate in particular socio-historic locations.

Across the interviews, several respondents were negatively oriented against the field of semiotics through a multiplicity of representations about it: as an old-fashioned, irrelevant, or esoteric field of knowledge. This orientation to negativity is displayed in the way they employ a range of discursive means, in particularly explicit formulations.

This Discourse with a capital 'D' somehow conveys the respondents' subjective experience of dwelling a marginal field. The character of this Discourse is ambivalent since it is enacted as a form of self-critique of the semiotics community from an inner viewpoint, on one hand. On the other hand, it articulates other social actors' voices (academic peers mostly) pertaining to the way the field is perceived. Negatively orienting to or being complicit in this Discourse is one of the motives whereby respondents developed sameness or difference in the group.

This D-discourse is linguistically informed by *d-discourses* with a lower case 'd', in which different types of resources are mobilised, such as the following:

- 1) Age-related terms; 2) Spatial expressions;
- 3) Complexity-oriented terms; 4) Evaluative indexicals;
- 5) Reported speech.

Age-related terms are representations that pejoratively design the field of semiotics as something that harkens back to the past, presented as 'old-fashioned' or 'non-fashionable' anymore. The *spatial dimension* concerns a series of expressions that depicts semiotics as being outside in regard to other disciplines, as 'peripheral',

'isolated', 'everywhere and nowhere.' Furthermore, it also stresses a particular state, as being 'in isolation'. With regard to *complexity-oriented terms*, they are either designed to make qualitative evaluations about the entire field, or about one particular aspect: 'semiotics as too difficult', 'too heavy' or 'too complicated'; using 'a complex- metalanguage' or too 'self-referential'. I borrowed Wortham and Reyes' term *evaluative indexical* to name the fourth cluster (Wortham, Reyes 2015). Evaluative indexicals are a resource that contributes to cue particular contexts of use. In this case, these terms are *doing referring* rather than *categorising* (Schegloff 2007). That is to say, they are indexically linking semiotics to the works of Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes or Charles Peirce, and in their particular contexts of appearance, semiotics is referred to as an ancient field. For instance, as two respondents (I04 and I29) put it: 'Barthes and all that', 'Umberto Eco and that stuff'. These *evaluative indexicals* presuppose that in particular contextual conditions semiotics is closely related to the works of either of them, and that the field and the authors are considered as out of fashion.

This D-discourse is also constructed by others, and this was linguistically represented by dint of other voices' *reported speech* – indirect reported speech, mostly. So, through this pragmatic resource, respondents discursively enacted what others think of the field and reconstructed ways in which semiotics is 'being talked about' by others.

I will now provide two contexts of appearance in order to show how this D-discourse was taking shape².

Extract 1 (I04)

B: Quite often they'd say, 'Well, why, (name)? What do you do? You know, what's your work?' and I would say something about, 'Well, I'm interested in English and biology, Buddhism, and semiotics.' And they'd say, 'Oh, semiotics? What, you mean (.) Umberto Eco and stuff like that?' I would say, 'Well, there's more.' So, I gave a talk on biosemiotics to try and explain, because I was writing something for well, I think I wrote something for the festrichft for (name).

I: Oh, yeah, it's in (name of publication), I think.

B: That's it.

I: Yeah

(4 lines omitted in which the respondent regains the topic of the talk)

B: I don't think anybody (.) had any purchase on it at all. They didn't (2.0) know what I was talking about. And they were in that rather (.) awkward position when somebody gives you a talk, you don't understand a bullet, and sometimes you think, it doesn't matter because there wasn't anything to understand. There wasn't anything there really.

2 In the following, only larger narratives are presented in boxes. This is not the case of narrative sequences.

In this extract, the respondent locates himself as a character in the telling in order to convey an image of himself as ‘not popular (positioning level 1)’. The respondent thus draws on the enactment of two reported dialogues to position some characters in the telling. The metapragmatic verb ‘to say’ is what opens the reported dialogue in which the discursive formulations of these characters in the narrated world give shape to the narration of this event: I04 being interpellated by his colleagues. Actually, the temporal adverb ‘often’ marks the frequency of the quoted interpellation (lines 1–2). Then, in the second reported dialogue (lines 3–4), I04 attempts to enact the ironic tone of his colleagues as a positioning strategy: ‘Oh, semiotics? What, you mean (.) Umberto Eco and stuff like that?’ In this utterance, the *evaluative indexical* ‘stuff like that’ preceded by the name of Umberto Eco is presupposing the existence of a field called semiotics and, under these particular conditions, entailed something in the context of its use: I04’s engagement in this field. Interestingly, the evaluative indexical contributes to characterise the respondent as an ‘esoteric researcher’ vis-à-vis his colleagues, while they are positioned as ‘rigid researchers’ who reduce semiotics to the name of Umberto Eco. At Level 2, by making reference to an event in which he failed to engage the audience (lines 11–14), he cast himself as a ‘non-understood researcher’ because of his work with semiotics. Here it is noticeable that the respondent draws on a high level of granularity of representation to implicitly depict his colleagues’ degree of incomprehension.

This anecdote also emphasises the *difference* aspect of the *similarity/difference* relation in the *principle of relationality* when the respondent constructs himself as an *outcast*. Not only does this anecdote show I04’s tense relationship vis-à-vis his colleagues (when enacting reporting dialogues), it also helps to illustrate the representation of semiotics as related to the name of Umberto Eco, which can be interpreted as a link with something that is not fashionable anymore. Furthermore, this story gives us a glance of I04’s identity work with regard to the differentiation of others.

The second example I will provide in this section makes reference to two facts: first, I40’s representation of semiotics through a metaphor. Second, in this sequence he bridges two representations: the field of semiotics and that of practitioners.

Extract 2 (I40)

So (.) I think it’s a vast partly cultivated, partly wild field in which desperate inquiries go on and all to the metaphor of something of the tower of Babel, right? Where people are speaking different languages and therefore cannot communicate with each other. And so, one of the ironies of course is that semioticians have such a hard time sometimes communicating with each other.

In this sequence, the evaluation of the field of semiotics by the respondent is provided through predication in line 1 ‘it’s a vast partly cultivated, partly wild’. Afterwards, I40 draws upon a figure of speech to make a representation of semioticians: a metaphor in which semiotics is regarded as a ‘tower of Babel’, inhabited by scholars unable to communicate with each other (lines 2–4). Lastly, the speaker openly evokes the irony of this example which is grounded on the fact that one of the research objects is, among others, communication.

In these two examples I offered some depictions of the field of semiotics that feed off this D-discourse of semiotics. However, there is an additional dimension of this Discourse which is grounded on the respondents’ construction of a membership categorisation.

CATEGORISING SEMIOTICIANS AS ‘DIFFERENT’

Another linguistic device that feeds off this D-discourse is what I have called a *membership categorisation of semioticians as being ‘different’*. This categorisation marks a paradigmatic shift in the D-discourse since it focuses on practitioners and not on the field. This categorisation emerged when respondents repeatedly evoked some semioticians’ features and represented them in their conversations. It is composed of representations regarding:

- 1) The performance of actions that seek to reduce agency levels. For example, being at odds with other factions (Peirceans versus Saussureans), or lacking the capacity to establish dialogue with researchers from other fields.
- 2) The ascription of negative attributes i.e., semioticians, as a disconnected community of inquiry.

Through this categorisation, semioticians are stripped of agency, since they are constructed as ‘less influential’, ‘weaker’ or even blame-worthy (Bamberg et al. 2011). Furthermore, the actions they perform are also negatively evaluated. This dimension is also salient for understanding respondents’ identity formation processes, since the low-agency dimension is more clearly appreciated here. There are two ways whereby participants explicitly, or not-so-explicitly, produced their ‘different’ categorisations. These are: a) ascription of attributes and b) portrayal of semioticians as a ‘disconnected’ community.

The first attribute that group members were ascribed was ‘lacking knowledge’ with regard to other subjects:

(I17)

Je reproche souvent aux sémioticiens sous prétexte d'utiliser la sémiotique (1.0) ils se permettent de parler de n'importe quoi.

C'est un (1.0) des problèmes que j'ai avec la sémiotique, c'est-à-dire des gens qui fin je vais pas en citer

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mais qui s'autorisent à parler de tel objet alors qu'ils ne le connaissent pas quoi.

I often criticise semioticians under the pretext of using semiotics (1.0) that they allow themselves to talk about anything.

That's one (.) of the issues I have with semiotics. I mean, people who, well, I'm not going to mention any of them, but they permit themselves to talk on a subject that they know nothing about, you know.

In these sequences, I17 positioned herself as a 'critique' against semioticians who allow themselves to talk about other subjects by stressing the performance of certain tasks: 'ils se permettent de parler...s'autorisent à parler'. In addition, they are represented as ignorant and pretentious who allow themselves to make deceptive claims: 'ils ne le connaissent pas'. It is worth noticing the pronominal reference in both sequences in which the respondent does not identify with them.

A second negative attribute they were assigned with was *being discordant* among themselves. This positioning was nuanced in the form of different representations. For instance, I08 enacted this attribute as *a lack of dialogue* among semiotics researchers:

Extract 3 I08

B: Creo que eso le falta a la Semiótica (.) porque finalmente por mucho que se junten no hay diálogo entre los semiotistas (1.0) Tú ya verás ((laugh))

I: ((laugh))

B: No sacas a un greimasiano (.) que dialogue con un peirceano ¿no?

I: Mhm (.) claro

B: O un seguidor de la Escuela de Tartu no sale de sus de sus modelos ¿no?

B: Or a follower of the Tartu School, they just can't get out of their own models, right? (.)

At positioning level 2 (the interactional level) the respondent highlighted the disputes among different semiotic traditions and constructed a 'collective other' to separate semioticians by theoretical orientations: Greimasians, Peirceans and Tartu-Moscow School followers (lines 3–6). At the same interactional level, this positioning was co-constructed when I08 indexically positioned himself by warning the interviewer about this lack of dialogue: 'Tú ya verás ((laugh))'. In this utterance, I08 is making reference to his own context pertaining to his decades of experience in the field of semiotics. I must add that, to my surprise, the respondent showed himself as completely disengaged from semiotics across the interaction.

Lastly, the same attribute was represented twice. The first time, this was done through an evaluation regarding

the incapacity of semioticians to accept transdisciplinary research in:

Extract 4 (I38)

B: 'Now in semiotics there are very heavy divisions just like in the socialist party ((laughter)) you know' you have the persons that cannot understand Saussure and vice-versa

I: Okay yeah.

B: And I think (.) I'm the only trend that overcomes that distinction. So I don't even see a group (.) trying to institutionalise semiotics (.) or you will see the Saussureans trying to institutionalise theirs, but they still can't talk to each other because (2.0) they are ontologically different. ((Laughter)).

(I21)

'Semioticians they are so compartmentalised, and don't accept this transdisciplinary'.

Second, through an analogy and also by dint of indexical positioning as in the case of the next fragment.

In this extract, we start at level 1, and we can see that apart from referring to the divisive character of semioticians, I38 is indexically positioning himself in the telling, since he is making reference to local context and his political views: making an analogy between the socialist party and the community of semioticians (lines 1–2). Furthermore, he enacts another division in Saussurean followers: also depicted as unable to maintain a dialogue (lines 5–6). Notice that the presence of laughter is intended to mitigate the severity of this attribute (lines 1 and 7).

At the interactional world we observe that I38 positions himself as 'an only trend who can overcome this distinction' – indicated through the mental verb 'to think'. In a previous moment of the interview the respondent claimed to be the initiator of a paradigm in semiotics.

In all these sequences and narratives, respondents oriented themselves against the other members of the semiotics community (despite being fully aligned with the field of semiotics in other moments). This points to the 'naturalisation' or 'acceptance' of this status as if it was a *taken-for-granted norm*. Moreover, it points to the existence of a *shared belief*. Since these are features of a capital D-discourse (Gee 1999), it then becomes apparent that a D-discourse of the field of semiotics could exist.

COUNTERING THE D-DISDISCOURSE AS A POSITIONING STRATEGY

In this subsection, I will explore and analyse different ways in which three respondents contested the dominant D-discourse as an alternative positioning strategy to construct sameness in the community of semioticians. This counter-positioning is unique to understand respondents' identity formation because when doing so, they also displayed how they wanted to be perceived—as engaged researchers in the field of semiotics.

In the first account, I25 orients to the indexical dimension of the D-discourse by means of evaluative indexicals and constructs himself as a particular type of editor.

Extract 5 (I25)

Quand la sémiotique, bon, qui n'est pas très connue comme discipline, il faut le dire. Donc, la sémiotique est partout et nulle part. c'est-à-dire, à la fois tout le monde (.) que ce soit la littérature, que ce soit la géographie. Voilà, tout le monde connaît un peu, un petit peu de sémiotique et qu'est-ce que c'est et, finalement si je retrouvais des articles de sémiotique il n'y a pas de revues non plus. Voilà, c'est un problème, voilà, et surtout on voulait déclarer avec cette revue que la sémiotique est actuelle, qu'elle fait des choses aujourd'hui parce qu'on a une image un peu vieille de la sémiotique, un air des anciens, des sémioticiens, vous savez ? On pense que la sémiotique c'est des années soixante, c'est Roland Barthes et tout ça. Donc, voilà, on voulait montrer que la sémiotique avance, que la sémiotique n'arrête pas de cette (.) que se confronte avec d'autres disciplines et qu'il y a un échange, voilà.

B: Semiotics is, well, it's not very well known as a discipline, it has to be said. So, semiotics is everywhere and nowhere. I mean, everyone at the same time (.) whether it's literature, whether it's geography. Well, everybody knows a little, a small bit about semiotics and what it's about. After all, I could find semiotics papers and there aren't even any journals. There, it's a problem, there, and above all we wanted to declare with this journal that semiotics is current, that it's doing things because there is a bit of an old image about semiotics, an old-fashioned feel, of semioticians, you know? We think that semiotics is from the sixties, Roland Barthes and all that. So, well, what we wanted to show is that semiotics is moving forward, that semiotics doesn't stop at this (.) that it shares ideas with other disciplines and that there's an exchange, that's all.

In this *generic narrative of tasks*, the respondent is explaining some of his motivations for inaugurating a semiotics journal. Prior to this fragment, the respondent tells how he mobilised other colleagues to start the edition of this journal. The transcript starts at a point in which I25 is explaining that semiotics is not well-known as a discipline. There is an explicit reference to the spatial aspect of the D-discourse of semiotics when representing the field as 'everywhere and nowhere' (line 2). Next, in lines 4–5, the respondent engages in an inconsistent telling in which he argues that an absence of semiotics journals is one of the reasons to open a new periodical, 'il n'y a pas de revues non plus'. The respondent engages in this inconsistency despite the fact that there is a written comprehensive list that shows the number of

outlets which are currently published in the world (Kull, Maran 2013).

In the last part of the account, I25 utters three *evaluative indexicals* in order to explain a collective representation of semiotics as a field stuck in the past: 'des années soixante/ [the name of] Roland Barthes/ tout ça'. The three terms evaluate and depict semiotics as an old field from the 1960s which still remains connected to structuralism and the work of Roland Barthes. In this way, at Level 3, I25 is orienting himself towards the dominant Discourse, yet he is not complicit in it and characterises himself as a semiotician committed to the diffusion of the field. The sense of commitment is actually expressed in the utterances 'on voulait déclarer... on voulait montrer'. Both utterances express a commitment on part of the speaker and how he endorses the propositional content. Notice the double use of the modal marker 'vouloir' ('want'), in which he intends to show a stronger degree of commitment in his assertions regarding his intention to counter these representations. Hence, I25 intends to offer a *counternarrative*, i.e., a narrative designed to resist dominant Discourses (Bamberg 2004) in his work as journal editor.

In the next fragment, I will present how the speaker intends to counter the dominant discourse by displaying

Extract 6 (I12)

B : Alors souvent on me dit que la sémiotique est difficile, mais vous avez dû déjà entendre ça, non ? Que c'est difficile, qu'on n'a pas besoin de tout ça, que c'est lourd (.) Oui, bon. J'essaie d'être un peu fataliste là-dessus. J'essaie de pas utiliser de jargon, j'essaie d'être simple et claire, mais c'est très difficile, d'être simple et clair.

I : Oui.

(9 lines omitted talking about her students)

B : Voilà, donc moi j'essaie d'inoculer un tout petit peu la sémiotique comme ça, si je peux dire et de faire inoculer mes doctorants pour qu'ils aient des postes aussi, c'est ça bien sûr. Je ne suis pas sûre qu'il y aura beaucoup à l'avenir de postes de sémioticiens, d'enseignants qui ne feraient que de la sémiotique, mais je pense que, heureusement ou malheureusement, il y a des possibilités dans ces différentes filières. Sur l'image scientifique, sur le journalisme, etc. Je pense que les sémioticiens ont beaucoup de choses à dire dans ces domaines-là.

I : Oui.

B : Oui. Mais il faut aussi qu'ils s'ouvrent. Et qu'ils aient, parce qu'ils n'ont, on n'a pas forcément la culture du domaine. Il faut qu'on mange cette culture de domaine, qu'on en soit gourmands, qu'on l'accepte, qu'on la regarde, qu'on la reconnaisse, non ? C'est vrai, on n'a pas la science infuse, on n'est pas (.) On est un peu trop insulaires, quelquefois, non ?

I : Oui, oui

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herself as a concerned educator. In this account, the respondent also draws on the *principle of relationality* as a resource to claim membership in the in-group of semioticians.

B: Well, it's often said to me that semiotics is difficult, but you must have already heard that, haven't you? That it's difficult, that there's no need of it, that it's heavy (.) Yes, well. I try to be a bit fatalistic about it. I try not to use the jargon, I try to be simple and clear, but being simple and clear is very difficult.

I: Yes

(9 lines omitted talking about her students)

B: There, so I try to inject a bit of semiotics that way, if I can put it like that, and inject my PhD students so that they can get posts too, that's right of course.

I don't know whether there will be many posts for semioticians in the future, professors who will only do semiotics, but I think that, happily or unhappily, there are opportunities in these different fields.

About the scientific image, about journalism, etc.

I think that semioticians have lots to say in these areas.

I: Yes

B: Yes. But they also need to open up. And that they have, because they don't, we don't necessarily have the field culture. We need to consume this field culture, be hungry for it, accept it, take a good look at it, recognise it, don't we? It's true, we don't have inherent knowledge, we're not (.) We're a bit too insular, sometimes, aren't we?

I: Yes, yes

This is a *projection of the self* account and has both explanatory and justificatory character. The respondent also tries to negotiate a positioning with the recipient. In addition, it navigates local and macro contexts of discourse. At the very beginning, the presence of the *discourse marker*, 'alors' points to uncertainty and the need to provide a structured response (Bergen, Plauché 2001).

At Level 1, I12 positions herself in relation to her PhD students. With regard to them, the speaker also relates to wider frames regarding higher education and the scarce posts for semioticians in the respondent's country of work (lines 8–11). At this same level, I12 performs volitional tasks to cast herself as an *active agent* vis-à-vis her students and to show her commitment to the field through the performance of several activities 'J'essaie de pas utiliser de jargon, j'essaie d'être simple et claire... j'essaie d'inoculer un tout petit peu la sémiotique'. In this utterance, the modal marker 'pouvoir' contributes to show the respondent's engagement in her work as educator.

At Level 2, we can appreciate how I12 addresses the recipient when trying to seek agreement twice. First, when asking his opinion she utilises the negation adverb 'non' with interrogative intentions (lines 1–2) and at the close of the account 'non?'. Notice the *epistemic modal marker* inflected in compound past (*passé composé*)

'dû' (devoir, equivalent 'to must' in English) indicates the respondent's question oriented to possibility. This interactively positions the interviewer in the telling and, in the last part, his positive response aligns with the interviewer's expectations.

At Level 3, I12 enacts three actions in discourse. First, she invokes the dimension of the D-discourse of semiotics that represent the field as 'difficult, heavy or unnecessary' (lines 2–3). Next, in the last part of the account, I12 openly demands semioticians' openness and self-criticism (lines 16–18). Lastly, the respondent draws on *pronominal choice* as a way to claim membership in the in-group of semioticians: she shifts from the 3rd plural person deictic 'ils' to the inclusive pronoun 'on' (line 22). As Blanche-Benveniste (2003) maintain, the semantic potential of the pronoun *on* provides it with a large degree of flexibility in discourse to dissociate the referents. Thus, by performing this shift in pronouns, I12 is indexing membership feelings in the community of semioticians through the relationship of *similarity* in the *principle of relationality*.

In this manner, the respondent constructs an identity as 'a concerned educator' who, by drawing on a medical metaphor, seeks to 'inoculate' semiotics to her students and to counter this series of dominant Discourses.

The last fragment of this section shows another way of countering the D-discourse when the respondent acknowledges the limitations of semiotics and portrays herself as a critical voice.

Extract 7 (I26)

B : Je trouve que la sémiotique a été assez isolée hein (.) pour des raisons diverses, institutionnelles, mais non seulement, théoriques, la complication de la théorie, la complexité de la théorie (.) qui se réfère à elle-même, bien sûr on est critiqués pour différentes raisons (.) et je pense que beaucoup de raisons sont effectivement valables, c'est-à-dire je pense que la sémiotique a (.) fait pendant de longues années un discours sur elle-même qui n'a pas permis le dialogue ni avec les chercheurs en infocom ni avec (.) l'analyse du discours ni avec d'autres champs de recherche (.) je suis très critique hein vis-à-vis de ma communauté, vis-à-vis de mes maîtres aussi j'essaierai dans ((laugh)) pour ce qui m'est possible de faire (.) de rendre la sémiotique (.) non pas forcément plus accessible mais d'essayer de montrer aux autres ce qu'on peut y gagner (.) en prenant en considération la méthode sémiotique.

The type of account to which this fragment belongs is a *projection of the self*. The respondent starts the account by orienting to the same dimension (as in the case of the previous extract) of the D-discourse of semiotics regarding its complex character: an 'isolated field', 'theoretically complicated' (lines 1–2). In lines 3–4, the respondent takes up a first positioning by

means of pronominal choice. That is to say, the pronoun 'on' fulfils the function of the first plural person inclusive form '*nous*'. This choice of pronouns indicates I26's membership claims within the community of semiotics scholars: 'on est critiqués pour différentes raisons'. Here, the *principle of relationality* becomes manifest in terms of *similarity*.

I find that semiotics has been pretty isolated, eh (.) for institutional reasons but not only that, theoretical ones too, the difficulty of the theory, the complexity of the theory (.) which is self-referential. For sure we're criticised for many reasons (.) and I think that many of those reasons are actually valid, that is to say I think that semiotics (.) has for many years been a discourse on itself that hasn't allowed for dialogue between infocom researchers or with (.) discourse analysis, or other fields
 I: Mmm
 B: of research either (.) I'm very critical, eh, vis-à-vis my community, vis-à-vis my professors too. I'd try ((laugh)) as far as I could (.) to make semiotics (.) not necessarily more accessible but try to show others what can be gained from it (.) taking into consideration the semiotics method.

At Level 2, I26 explicitly positions herself as a 'critical voice in her community' by displaying her epistemic stance: 'je suis très critique hein vis-à-vis de ma communauté, vis-à-vis de mes maîtres aussi' (lines 7-8). A first glance of her *agent self* is conveyed in this utterance: 'je suis très critique'.

Lastly, at Level 3, I26 reacts to the D-discourse by countering it and demonstrating what others can gain by using a semiotics method: 'd'essayer de montrer aux autres ce qu'on peut y gagner (.) en prenant en considération la méthode sémiotique' (line 10). In terms of identity work, I26 constructs an identity as a 'critical researcher' who consciously acknowledges the limitations of semiotics and tries to spread semiotics to other scholars.

So far, the discussion has centred around the claim that respondents can also orient themselves against the D-discourse of semiotics as a positioning strategy and to construct sameness in the larger group of semioticians.

The section below addresses the macro-discursive contexts of the D-discourse of semiotics.

MACRO-CONTEXTS OF THE D-DISDISCOURSE

The fact that a D-discourse of semiotics is shared is an outcome of its naturalisation among the community members, as said above. Besides, it is grounded on larger discourses about higher education that include three main aspects. Firstly, the institutionalisation of academic disciplines in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; secondly, issues regarding the acceptance of inter- and transdisciplinary research; and thirdly, the lack of consensus among early practitioners to organise the

institutionalisation of semiotics. All three aspects follow a continuum that starts with the first aspect.

The first dimension that I will address now is related to the emergence of organised knowledge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Globally speaking, the current state of semiotics needs to be understood in relation to the emergence of disciplines in the modern sense at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. This process, which contributed to the disciplinarisation and specialisation of different 'forms of scientific knowledge', left semiotics out. Mainly due to the absence of a collectivity of organised researchers who were able to develop valid criteria to get it recognised as a discipline and to integrate it into the university curricula (Rastier 2001). Disciplines were thus a new mode of organisation and ordering of knowledge that was a direct outcome of the limitations of the classificatory systems of knowledge. In this manner, there was a gradually developing process of academic-disciplinary splitting from which have emerged natural sciences, social sciences, and what we currently know as disciplinarised humanities (Li 2006).

However, at this moment and as Deely argues, modern science became so specialised that academics 'felt threatened by the entry of semiotics upon the intellectual scene' (Deely 2015b, 84). Therefore, its holistic, boundary-crossing character did not contribute to its entrance in the disciplinary market.

As knowledge became more and more specialised, communities of scholars looked for additional disciplinary organisational modes of science. Thus, the original disciplines were compartmentalised and did not remain any more to be 'the crucial frames for orientation for the delineation of subject matters and the formulation of research problems' (Weingart 2010, 12). This takes me to the second aspect of this discussion, which addresses *interdisciplinarity*.

Broadly speaking, interdisciplinary research privileges the convergence between disciplines, fields or knowledge bodies, and features two aspects: a) the articulation of two disciplines with a simpler research object; b) its systematicity, i.e., more than two disciplines with a more complex research object (Posner 2003; Haidar 2006).

Inter- and transdisciplinary research objects emerge due to two main reasons according to Haidar (2006). First, the continuously growing epistemological developments in science obliges a more explicative progress of scientific theories, as well as the complexity of historical, social, cultural and political processes; and second, the continuous 'flux' of humanities and natural sciences oblige them to set a constructive dialogue.

Weingart (2010) adds a third motive that lies in the promotion by funding agencies in the interest of linking political goals with the development of certain types of inquiries. Consequently, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are responses to simultaneous epistemological and historical constraints.

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A matter that needs to be added here pertains to semiotics' heterogeneity of research objects and epistemological shifts. To put it briefly, semiotics addresses all objects from the viewpoint of their functioning as a meaning-process and as Posner argues, 'it has a value-free perspective which also determines a domain that is studied in its totality' (Posner 2003, 2366). Nevertheless, this conceptualisation of semiotics may be at odds with a more rigid understanding of academic disciplines (and knowledge in general) that divides the world into concrete domains, and that encourages the regulation of academic practices in the humanities and social sciences in order to become rigid.

Currently, despite strong political pressure to impose cross disciplinary boundaries by the commercial establishment (Archer 2008), interdisciplinary research is still regarded as dubious due to a seeming lack of epistemological standards. This finds a response in the prevailing academic model in which excellence needs to be demonstrated. Ironically, as Huutoniemi has pointed out, there is still a need to develop further ways to evaluate the many phenomena of interdisciplinarity: 'rigorous criteria for judging interdisciplinary quality are strongly needed' (Huutoniemi 2010, 311). This means that interdisciplinary research is still being assessed on traditional standards of disciplinarity. This endangers fields like semiotics, which intend to cross academic boundaries.

Now, I will discuss the last macro-context of the D-discourse of semiotics regarding the lack of consensus among semioticians to define the institutional organisation of the field. Early practitioners of semiotics in the late 1960s and 1970s were concerned with the endowment of an epistemological identity to the field (see: Greimas 1976; Sebeok 1976; Posner et al. 2003). Yet, they disregarded the organisation of the field in the academic systems and did not take into consideration how the lack of organisation would affect the practitioners' as well as the field's identities.

As discussed earlier (section 1), Sebeok, going beyond Saussure's attempt to establish 'the study of life of signs within society' (Saussure 1916, 33), and heavily drawing upon both the medieval and Peirce's conceptualisation of semiotics as a doctrine – 'the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental variable of semiosis' (CP 5.488) – considered semiotics as a 'doctrine of signs' and refused to call it a science or a theory (Sebeok 1976). By choosing this term, Sebeok intended to establish semiotics as a comprehensive, 'global' approach (Deely 2015a; Copley et al. 2011) that was way beyond disciplinary constraints. However, as Bouissac (2021) has recently argued, this treatment of semiotics is sterile since 'doctrines do not endeavour to create new knowledge as they claim to embody authoritative truths and exclude the eventuality of counter-intuitive results that would challenge them'. I concur with this argument because labelling semiotics as a doctrine is not institutionally useful or valid. The national higher education systems are organised around a disciplinary structure. Thus, this

treatment would have direct impact on the institutional organisation of semiotics.

In addition to this treatment, semiotics was supposed to fulfil the explicative and federative role of what later Posner would define as 'a *metadiscipline* of all academic disciplines' (Posner 2003, 2366). Similarly, both Greimas and Lotman conceived of semiotics as a scientific project that encompass all manifestations of meaning, the former as a 'science of meaning' whose main aim was to provide a link between all the humanities and social sciences so that a scientific revolution could take place in humanities (Greimas 1976; Greimas, Courtés 1983), and the latter as a presumed 'method of the humanities' (Lotman 2000, 4).

At this point, and even though semiotics internally differentiated itself and became specialised in subdisciplines, it was poorly organised in the national academic systems. In consequence, it was assigned a different status in each country that was far from the status of an institutionally recognised discipline.

Now that I have shown the larger contexts of this Discourse, I will briefly discuss the implications of this D-discourse with regard to respondents' identifications. I argue that this group of researchers constructed this D-discourse as a way to convey multiple ways of talking about semiotics from the subjective perspective of inhabiting a marginal field. Those respondents who vindicated this Discourse were the ones who distanced themselves from the field, whereas those who reject it cast themselves a more durable sense of engagement in the field.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper discussed some of the experiences told by forty semioticians. Each respondent's story was co-constructed with me as interviewer in the context of a research interview. In these interactions, they performed identity work by alluding to different academic roles, as well as making relevant different facets of their identity (as semioticians, professors, or members of another community) as well as conveying, through narratives, their subjective stance of working in a peripheral field.

Interviewees navigated between locally-constructed claims and what Gee (1999) calls D-discourses. In this research a prevailing D-discourse emerged and was shaped as ways and shared conventions in which working in the field of semiotics (as a marginal field) is talked about. This Discourse involved discursive practices that also incorporate higher education issues in the form of institutional constraints affecting their field and their professional identities: 1) the lack of institutionalisation of semiotics as a discipline in the nineteenth century; 2) issues regarding the acceptance of inter- and transdisciplinary research; and 3) the lack of consensus among early practitioners to anchor semiotics as a discipline in national academic systems. Moreover, respondents constructed a 'membership categorisation of semioticians

as different' in which they engaged in a range of embodied practices stereotypically associated with negative attributes (such as a depiction of strife and constriction in between each other and through terms and expressions designed to convey features of semiotics in terms of age, space and complexity. This categorisation is also part of the D-discourse of semiotics.

Semiotics remains a neglected discipline insofar as it is not fully organised in most countries. It is, in fact, an example of how fields having heterogeneous research objects and epistemological shifts continue to be at odds with the predominant academic model, which still favours more rigid models of academic disciplines and lacks clearly defined inter- and transdisciplinary evaluation criteria.

Semioticians have been positioned as academic outcasts who have to struggle to get recognition for the work they do on both local and global levels. From a global viewpoint, this happens in the current context of neoliberal higher education in the social sciences and humanities, in which budgets are being cut, faculty is being laid off, entire research centres are closing and the development of semiotics, as a discipline, comes only at the expense of others.

Locally speaking, semioticians experience the institutional constraints of their domestic academic systems. These results reveal some aspects about academics working in smaller, not-very-well-organised fields, people who actually feature more eclectic and flexible identities—mainly those who have to juggle between two or more fields in order to satisfy their institutional requirements and to secure a position in academia.

The scope of this study was limited in terms of the numbers of participants representing individual countries—as in the case of Germany, Luxembourg and Bulgaria (with only one participant per country). Despite the fact that these respondents' participation was precious for the study, further work is needed in these countries to fully grasp a holistic view of the situation of semiotics there. Further research is currently being conducted with other scholars from Latin America. Latin America is one of the regions of the world (alongside China) where semiotics is more active, produces novel research outputs and is getting more organised in the academic institutions. These contexts could afford future research avenues to investigate the negotiation and production of identities in other communities of semioticians in order to reveal a global perspective of the field from the very stance of its practitioners.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research presented in this paper received funding from the European Research Council (DISCONEX project 313,172) and the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT).

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