

TRENDS IN ZOOSEMIOTIC STUDIES

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In contrast to the above discourse, one important aspect to grasp is a little map of orientation of zoosemiotic studies during these first forty years of life. In other words, what has zoosemiotics been dealing with? To say it concerns animal communication is not only generic: it is probably imprecise, too, for it paradoxically gives, through an omnicomprehensive expression, a quite partial picture of reality.

In my opinion, at least two main branches should be distinguished within zoosemiotics, both to be divided, in turn, in two more sub-branches. On the one hand, I shall refer to zoosemiotics in the traditional sense, i.e. a discipline dealing with the behaviour “communication”, through the most obvious theoretical tools of semiotics. I shall call this branch **ethological zoosemiotics**. In turn, ethological zoosemiotics can be divided into a **traditional** current and a **cognitive** one. The former includes the studies performed by the early Sebeok, or Lindauer, or other scholars belonging to Lorenzian or behaviouristic traditions. Within the field of cognitive zoosemiotics, I shall mention at least the latest Sebeok, Cimatti, and Bekoff (not to mention strong anticipations provided by Darwin).

As for the second branch of zoosemiotics, which I here call **anthropological**, I intend to refer to the studies dealing with the semiotic interaction between human beings and other animals, including those of cultural and/or sociological type. Interspecific communication experiments are one example (although very sceptic, Sebeok dealt quite often with those, and so did Petrilli, Deely, Cimatti, Bekoff and others). Such types of study fall under a sub-category of anthropological zoosemiotics, which I call **communicational**. This term refers to the contexts where human-animal interaction is of a communicative type, i.e. interactive, reciprocal and intentional. Moreover, studies of applied zoosemiotics, such as human-pets or human-cattle interaction, fall under this group, too.

The second sub-category within anthropological zoosemiotics is, by consequence, named **significational**: here, the non-human animal is a pure source of meaning, an object, rather than a subject, of signification. The model is thus of an ecosemiotic type: whereas, indeed, ecosemiotics is the study of human representation of nature, this typology of zoosemiotics deals with the human representation of other animals. It is evidently the case of myths, tales, allegories, but also systematic classifications, such as taxonomy.

It thus appears that ethological zoosemiotics has a close relationship with natural sciences (starting, obviously, from ethology), while anthropological zoosemiotics is a closer relative of human sciences, especially the so-called anthrozoology and the social sciences, which nowadays show an increasing interest in animal-related issues. In a way, the definition of zoosemiotics provided by Nöth appears as the most appropriate for this framework: zoosemiotics 1) is interdisciplinary, and 2) occupies an intermediary position between natural and human sciences.

The reflections I will propose from now on seek to investigate mostly the human-other animal relation, and are thus very likely to fit the anthropological zoosemiotic section, with a particular (but not exclusive) stress on the significational area.