

paul j. THIBAULT

with a foreword by M. A. K. Halliday

brain, mind and the  
signifying body

*An Ecosocial Semiotic Theory*



## Brain, Mind, and the Signifying Body

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Paul J. Thibault

*with a foreword by*

M. A. K. Halliday

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# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	x
<i>Foreword by M. A. K. Halliday</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii

## PART I

### Chapter 1: Introduction

The Body-brain System, Meaning-making Activity, and Ecosocial Environment: Building a New, Unified Discourse	3
2 The Conceptual Framework of the Ecosocial Semiotic Perspective	8
3 Gibson's Ecological Theory of Perception and the Three-level Scalar Hierarchy View of Organism-plus-Environment Transactions	11
4 The Brain as Regulator of Sensori-motor Activity: Implications for Social Semiosis	18
5 Topological and Typological Modes of Semiotic-material Interdependence	23
6 Contextualization and Meta-redundancy	26
7 A Critique of the Causal View of Brain-mind Relations	30
8 Defining and Extending the Notion of Meaning in Terms of the Three-level Hierarchy and the Specification Hierarchy	34
9 The Signifying Body: Rethinking the Stratified view of Semiosis in Terms of the Three-level Scalar Hierarchy	39
10 Systemic-functional Linguistic Theory: Bringing Together the Intra-organism and Inter-organism Perspectives on Meaning-making	46
11 Reconnecting the Semiotic Concept of Value to the Body-brain System and to Meaning-making Activity	49
12 A Thumbnail Sketch of the Book	54

## PART II

### Chapter 2: Sensori-motor Activity, Movement, and Social Meaning-making: Rethinking the Expression Plane of Semiosis

1 Some Early Signposts from Saussure and Hjelmslev: The Expression Plane as Embodied Articulatory Movement	59
2 Energy Exchange and the Complementarity of Interacting Body-brains	68

3	The Stratified Model of Semiosis: The Problem of Conceptual Abstractness and Scalar Homogeneity	69
4	Blackboxing the Sensori-motor Dimension: Language Seen as Modality-independent Centralized Processing Mechanism	72
5	The Intentional Character of 'Inner' and 'Outer' Sensori-motor Activity: Towards a Unified Account	75
6	The Symbolic Possibilities of Bodily Movement	77
7	Articulatory Movement Seen as Actional Semiotic, Not Physical Behaviour	78
8	Inner and Outer Body States and Social Semiosis	81
9	The Semiotic Mediation and Entraining of Embodied Bio-kinematic Potential	83
10	Metafunctional Diversity on the Expression Plane	86
11	The Expression Plane is the Interface between Body and Ecosocial Environment	87
12	The Metafunctional Basis of Vocal-tract Articulatory Activity	90
13	Subjectivity, Agency, and the Prosodic Realization of Interpersonal Meaning	94
14	Vocal-tract Gestures and Grammar: Symptom and/or Supervenience?	98
15	The Intentional Character of Articulatory Activity	100
16	Embodying the Metafunctions: The Example of Vocal-tract Articulatory Activity	103
17	The Metafunctional Basis of Space and of Bodily Movement in Ecosocial Space-time	105
Chapter 3: Body Dynamics, Meaning-making, and Scale Heterogeneity: Expression and Content as Cross-scalar Semiotic Processes Embedding the Body-brain in its Ecosocial Environment		
The Dynamical Character of Expression and Content and the Cross-coupling of Diverse Scalar Levels of Semiotic Organization		
2	The Expression Stratum and the Principle of Alternation	108
3	Stratification in Relation to Expression and Content	109
4	The Integration of Iconic, Indexical and Symbolic Modes of Meaning in Phonology	116
5	Rhythm and the Foot	118
6	The Metafunctional Organization of Phonology as seen from the Perspective of Rhythm and the Foot	120
7	The Integration of Iconic, Indexical and Symbolic Modes of Meaning in Lexicogrammar	122
8	Language as Particle, Wave, and Field	126
9	The Brain as Selective Recognition System: Language and Edelman's Theory of Recategorization	134
10	The Integration of Individuals to their Semiotic Trajectories	139
11	The Intrinsically Time-bound Nature of Semiosis: The Integration of Temporal Dynamics Across Scales of Expression and Content	146
		148

12	Scalar Heterogeneity and the Phonological and Lexicogrammatical Rank Scales	154
13	The Emergence of Linguistic Categories from the Child's Primary Forceful Interactions with its Environment	162

### Part III

#### Chapter 4: The Semiotic Basis of Consciousness

1	First-person and Third-person Accounts of Consciousness	171
2	The Representation of Subjective Experience in Consciousness in Relation to the Higher-scalar Environment of the Individual	173
3	Locating the Seat of Consciousness	176
4	The Meaning-making Capacity of the Body-brain Complex through the Discrimination of Difference	184
5	Language Functions and the Cortical Organization of the Brain: Implications for Higher-order Consciousness	189
6	Experiential Meaning and the Assimilation of the Phenomena of Experience to Knowable Categories	195
7	Interpersonal Meaning as Exploratory and Orienting Activity in Relation to the Ground	198
8	The Textual Metafunction as Semiotic Means for Giving Unity and Wholeness to Meaning-making	200
9	Experiential and Interpersonal Meaning in Gaze	201
10	Proto-interpersonal Meaning and the Child's Exploration of its Environment	202
11	Bogdan's Theory of Mental Sharing and Topical Predication	205
12	Interpersonal Meaning, Value, and Action	209
13	Procedural Knowledge, Declarative Knowledge and the Semiotic Spiral towards Symbolic Consciousness	212
14	Interpersonal Meaning, Goal-seeking Activity, and the Goal Hierarchy	215
15	Consciousness and Semiotic Stratification	217
16	An Alternative Reading of Descartes in the Internalist Perspective of Interpretive Activity	224
17	The Entropic Character of Meaning	226
18	Consciousness as the Contextualization of Experience in the Perspective of the Self	227
19	The Embedding of Consciousness in a Higher-scalar System of Interpretance	231

#### Chapter 5: The Metafunctional Character of Consciousness: Some Correlations Between the Neurobiological and Semiotic Dimensions

1	The Contextual Character of Consciousness	236
2	The Metafunctions and the Shape of Consciousness	238
3	Vague Contours of the Metafunctions in the Infant's Early Perceptual-motor Engagements with the Environment	241

4	The Structure of (Self)Consciousness in Perceptual Awareness	246
5	Damasio's Neurobiological Theory of Consciousness	248
6	The Proto-metafunctional Structure of Core and Extended Consciousness	257
7	Integrating the Interaction System and the Meaning System Perspectives on (Self) Consciousness	264
8	Minding the Gap between Minds: Mirror Neurons and Interpersonal Meaning	267
9	Inner Speech as Linguistically Realized Higher-order Thinking	271
10	The Metafunctional Character of Inner Speech as Linguistically Constituted Thought	272
11	The Re-grounding of the Perspectives of Self and Other in Symbolic Consciousness	276
12	Text, Social Meaning-making Practices and Higher-order Consciousness	277
<b>Chapter 6: Brain, Meaning, and Consciousness</b>		
1	Biological and Socio-cultural Factors Form a Single System of Complexly Related and Interacting Factors: Putting Time and Activity Back into the Picture	281
2	Re-interpreting Flohr's Brain-based Theory of Phenomenal Awareness: A Three-level Hierarchy View of the Emergence of Proto-meaning in the Brain	283
3	Brain, Meaning, and Symbolic Consciousness	289
4	The Embodiment of the Material and the Conscious Modes in Expression and Content	290
5	Periodicity and the Intrinsic Temporal Organization of the Expression Stratum of Speech on Diverse Scalar Levels	295
6	The Creation of Symbolic Objects of Consciousness in Semantic Neural Space	296
7	Contextualizing Relations, the Principle of Meta-redundancy, and the Brain as Contextualizing Tool	300
8	A Definition of Consciousness in Terms of the Semiosis that Occurs Within the Brain	302
9	The Three-level Hierarchy, Neuronal Activity, and the Emergence of the Self-perspective	310
	<i>Epilogue</i>	314
	<i>References</i>	318
	<i>Name Index</i>	331
	<i>Subject Index</i>	334

# List of Figures

2.1	Example of gestural scores for /pæn/ ('pan') and /bæn/ ('ban'); borrowed from Browman and Goldstein (1995: 189)	91
3.1	Syllable structure of <i>sail</i> , showing moraic and non-moraic elements	113
3.2	Trajectory of wave of stressed and unstressed syllables in clause complex, showing alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables as syntagm unfolds in time	114
3.3	Trajectory of tonicity wave in clause complex	114
3.4	Rhythmic field of the word <i>sailed</i> , showing Ictus and Remiss phases of its temporal trajectory	123
3.5	Dependency relations between Ictus and Remiss phases in <i>never</i>	124
3.6	Thematicity wave in the English clause complex, showing Theme and Rheme as two peaks of informational quanta	129
3.7	Multiple modalizing fields acting on the syntagmatic domain of a proposition, showing the scope over which each field's modalized influence extends	131
3.8	Simplified determiner system, showing the categorial distinction between the values 'specific' and 'non-specific', as symbolized by English <i>the</i> and <i>a</i>	133
3.9	Expression stratum as combinatorial hierarchy, showing reorganization of higher levels as recouplings of elements on lower levels thereby allowing for the emergence of new systemic possibilities and, hence, new system-environment couplings	143
3.10	The integration of initial at-oneness with the world to the expansion of information-meaning at more specified levels of semiosis along an individuating trajectory	149
3.11	Linguistic categorization and its emergence from pre-linguistic forceful interactions between body and environment	168
4.1	Integration-cum-presupposition hierarchy of iconic, indexical, and symbolic modes of grounding	211
4.2	Classification of input and output impulses involved in the symbolic transduction of stimulus information and sensori-motor activity in semiosis (adapted and modified from Gibson 1983 [1966]: 46)	219
6.1	Reentrant loop of conscious experience, showing relationship between self and object of experience	288
6.2	Content and expression and their relations to the central and peripheral nervous systems; adapted from Peng (1994)	294
6.3	Open-ended hierarchy of semiotic triplicates of levels showing the integration of perceptual, conceptual, and symbolic phenomena of conscious experience	307

# List of Tables

2.1	The robustness of the agent and its interfacing with the expression and content strata of language	64
2.2	Stratified model of language, showing vertical hierarchy of different levels of abstraction	69
2.3	Metafunctional analysis of exchange unit: phonological, lexicogrammatical and discourse semantic strata; tonic segments in upper case	96
3.1	The expression stratum of spoken language in relation to the three-level hierarchy	110
3.2	Semiotic properties of icon, index, and symbol	135
3.3	The metafunctional organization of both phonology and lexicogrammar on the expression and content strata illustrating the operation of mixed-mode semiosis, combining both discrete typological-categorical distinctions and continuous topological variation on both strata	152
3.4	The content stratum of language in relation to the three-level hierarchy	158
3.5	Emergence of embodied category formation and its differentiation into 'learning about' and 'acting on' through forceful interaction with environment	166
4.1	Lateralization of language functions in the left and right hemispheres according to Deacon	191
4.2	A comparison of four accounts of language form and function in context, showing an emerging consensus concerning the multifunctional nature of language and its contextual motivation	194
4.3	Proto-experiential meaning in gaze vector	201
4.4	Proto-interpersonal meaning in gaze vector, showing ground functions	202
4.5	Multimodal eo-deployment of perceptual-semiotic resources in the exchange between the child and his mother in Halliday's example	208
4.6	Types of knowledge and stages of semiotic development in early infant semiosis	213
6.1	Metafunctional analysis of the imperative clause ( <i>you</i> ) <i>look at the mess</i>	298
6.2	Scalar hierarchy of anatomical structures of perception and relative functions	304

# Foreword

It is a privilege to be invited to introduce a work of this range and importance. Paul Thibault's book is appearing at a time when the disciplinary borders inherited from the previous century - no longer felt as enabling, but rather as constraining, as boundaries rather than borders - are tending to fuzz out and disappear; and new strategies of thought, new dimensions of knowledge are emerging. This book makes a significant contribution to the ongoing dialogue around these critical themes.

One feature that contributes to the strength and effectiveness of Paul Thibault's treatment of his topic is the way he engages with the work of leading scholars of the past hundred years whose ideas can be seen as having in some sense anticipated the directions of change. In this respect he is following up his own earlier (1997) study of Ferdinand de Saussure, the scholar usually claimed as 'the father of modern linguistics' and certainly the linguist most frequently revisited and commented on during the entire twentieth-century period. **In** the present book, Paul Thibault discusses the theoretical contributions of Saussure's most important successor, Louis Hjelmslev, as well as those of other scholars such as Karl Biihler and Gregory Bateson who helped to shape the pattern of knowledge for their own and the succeeding time. By picking up on their work Paul Thibault provides an intellectual context for interpreting the theoretical advances made by contemporary scholars who, in their turn, are redefining the parameters of our own thinking - people such as Gerald Edelman, Jay Lemke, Antonio Damasio and Terrence Deacon.

The central organizing concept running through the book is that of meaning, or semiosis - the realm of our existence that is distinct from, and complementary to, the material realm. Paul Thibault theorizes meaning as 'trajectories' taking place in time, in the form of activities on a number of different scalar levels from neuronal activity in the individual brain through to movement across human populations; but manifested critically in the social meaning-making practices of the members of human groups. Here too there is an echo of a previous motif in his work, that of 'Social Semiotics as Praxis' (1991) developed against the background of theory of narrative. All such activities are grounded in biological processes: 'meaning-making is to be explained in terms which are consistent with what we understand about the biological basis of semiosis' (present volume p. 24) - but this is not to say that the whole of semiosis can be explained by reduction to biology.

The most powerful manifestation of semiosis is human language; and in this book Paul Thibault's central concern is the interpretation of language itself as a self-organizing complex system. His concept of the 'signifying body' encapsulates the notion of the human body as the locus where meaning is made, through the operation of the brain at the critical interfacing of the semiotic with the material - the content plane with the ecosocial environment, the expression plane with the physiological resources of the production and reception of speech. Thus all linguistic processes are grounded in processes of the body. But language cannot be reduced to bodily processes, and much of the discussion centres on the organization of language as it appears in depth with this dual perspective.

Paul Thibault defines his starting point in these terms: '... the intrinsic organization of language has evolved in the species (phylogenesis) and develops in the individual (ontogenesis) so that it cross-couples both with the biological makeup of the body-brain and with the socio-cultural organization of our ecosocial environment in ways that closely relate to the kinds of social activities that human beings perform' (present volume p. 48). To me as a linguist perhaps the most significant feature of Paul Thibault's many-faceted approach is the way he builds up the intellectual context both for language and for linguistics, language in its relation to the human condition, linguistics in its relation to human knowledge. In a sense these are two aspects of the same contextualizing process, since language figures as the centrepiece of semiosis, or meaning-making activity, and all construction of knowledge is the making of meaning.

Paul Thibault's project is not so much interdisciplinary as transdisciplinary, coaligning the resources for thinking about his topic along a new thematic discussion. This is the kind of thinking that is needed so that new questions can be asked wherever there are problems to be solved.

M. A. K. HALLIDAY  
*Hong Kong*  
*November 2003*

# Preface

The writing of this book has arisen out of the conviction that there is an urgent need for a materialist ecosocial semiotics which is able to reconnect body-brain processes and interactions both to the social and cultural practices which directly act upon and affect human bodies, as well as to the ways in which bodily and brain processes directly participate in and are a constitutively inseparable part of our meaning-making activity.

This book is concerned with the role of the body-brain complex in our social meaning-making practices. In recent years, the role of the body and the brain in our social meaning-making practices has been a source of considerable interest and discussion. However, it is my contention that these discussions do not move our understanding of the body's central role in meaning-making beyond the discourse- and language-centred models of textual 'representation' which continue to inform most accounts of the constitutive role of the body in social semiosis. A different orientation is called for. This orientation is what I refer to, following Jay Lemke, as an ecosocial semiotics of human meaning-making activity.

Like human meaning-making activity itself, this book is very much a hybrid phenomenon. This reflects my conviction that the science of human meaning-making activity is necessarily a transdisciplinary theory and praxis. While working on the lectures of the course 'Saussure and Beyond' that I wrote for the Cyber Semiotics Institute between 1996 and 1998 (WWW site: <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb>). it became increasingly clear to me that many of the fundamental questions concerning ecosocial semiotic theory can only be answered by engaging in a dialogue with the foundational concepts and questions of both the social and the life sciences. In some ways, my web course 'Saussure and Beyond' is a kind of Prolegomenon to the present study.

In the past two decades or so, the dialogue between the human and life sciences has been given new direction and impetus by the development of the theory of complex adaptive dynamic open systems. Such systems are characterized by the fact that their component parts give rise to newly emergent levels of organization that are not reducible to the sum of their lower-level components. Instead, the higher, global levels take on dynamical characteristics that have constraining effects on the lower, local levels. Furthermore, dynamic open systems bring time and history to the centre of the theoretical enquiry. Time, irreversibility, the embedding of systems in higher-scalar environments, and individuation, are all important features of this new way of understanding the world, including the part we play in it. Thus, the prediction and control of phenomena

and the universalizing principles and modes of explanation in the natural and social sciences that have been the hallmarks of the 'classical' approach to science in the past three or four centuries no longer hold sway in this new view of the world and our place in it. Meaning, the interpretation of meaning across many different scalar levels, and our being necessarily inside such systems of interpenetration, will be seen to play a key role in this perspective.

The new perspectives that the theory of complex dynamic systems makes available to the science of human meaning-making activity allow us to ask new questions. What are the foundational concepts of this approach? What is the relationship between the physical-biological and the social-cultural dimensions of our being? What does this approach entail for the relationship between the expression and content strata of semiotic systems? Does meaning originate in 'mind' or 'brain', or is it the result of complex, time-bound semiotic trajectories that loop between the individual's intrinsic dynamics and the ecosocial environment in which the individual is embedded? What is an ecosocial environment? How does the body-brain complex relate to meaning-making activity? How does consciousness relate to meaning-making activity? What is the status of the discourse- and language-centred models of textual 'representation' in relation to the centrality of activity? How do the material and the semiotic dimensions of meaning-making activity combine with each other? What is the political significance of an ecosocial semiotic theory?

It is only through the attempt to understand the constitutive inseparability of the semiotic-discursive and physical-material cross-couplings and dynamics that we can adequately theorize our and others' embodiments, our subjective experience of our ecosocial environments, our perceptions of our inner states and sensations and the meanings we attribute to these both in our internal dialogues in 'inner' speech activity, as well as in our interactions with others, and the materiality of the body as playing a central, not marginal, role in social meaning-making activity.

In this volume, I have sought to engage with the relevant perspectives and theoretical insights of a range of disciplines - e.g. linguistics, semiotics, biology, and psychology - in order to understand their relevance to the ecosocial semiotic framework of this book and to reconstitute their perspectives and insights within that framework. In doing so, I have tried to organize the diverse insights and theoretical perspectives that I engage with in this book into a coherent set of principles and analytical tools that will serve to extend the ecosocial semiotic framework into new areas of enquiry and practice.

A second book, which I have completed and which will appear after the present one, will focus more specifically on the cultural, social, interpersonal and developmental aspects of the ways in which body-brain systems are cross-coupled to their ecosocial semiotic environments. In many ways, the arguments of the two books are complementary in terms of the overall ecosocial semiotic perspective.

I am grateful to Professor Guglielmo Cinque, former Dean of the *Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere* of the University of Venice, and to Professor Paolo Balboni, then Director of the *Dipartimento di Scienze del Linguaggio* of the same University. Both Guglielmo and Paolo generously supported my application for study leave from the University of Venice during 2002, as well as facilitating its passage through the University bureaucracy. This leave was crucial in allowing me to complete this project.

This book was completed in August 2002 during my stay as a Visiting Professor in the Department of English in Lingnan University in Hong Kong. I wish to express my appreciation and gratitude to my colleagues at Lingnan University and especially to the Head of the Department of English, Professor Barry Asker, for providing so much support and assistance during the period of my stay at Lingnan University and also for making my stay there such an enjoyable and rewarding one. Wendy Wong, the departmental secretary, was a constant source of invaluable secretarial and practical assistance.

I have been privileged to be able to present some of the arguments developed in this book to colleagues and students in universities and research institutes in the following countries: Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Norway, San Marino, Singapore, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States. It is impossible to thank all of you by name, but I am most grateful to all of you for providing a forum for my ideas, as well as for your critical discussion and input.

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I also wish to thank my mother, Sylvia, my father, Philip, my brother, Mark, and my sister, Linda, for believing in me and helping to make it all happen.

To my daughter, Ilaria, my profound appreciation and gratitude for her understanding and love.

I have dedicated this book to the memory of Morag Harris. My deep sense of loss at her passing cannot adequately be expressed in words.

Finally, to Ordy, for filling my life with her radiance and love.

PAUL J. THIBAUT  
*Bologna*  
*October 2003*

*In memory of*

**Morag Anne Harris**

*17 November 1954-11 December 2000*

# Part I

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# 1 Introduction

## 1. The Body-brain System, Meaning-making Activity, and Ecosocial Environment: Building a New, Unified Discourse

This book is concerned with the relations between the body-brain system, meaning-making activity, and the ecosocial environment in which the former are embedded. An increasing number of studies in recent years show the inadequacies of the view that the brain is the seat of disembodied mental processes, or that cognitive and meaning-making activities stop at the skin of the individual organism. Moreover, the idea that the 'inner' mental life of the individual can be disjoined from our meaning-making (semiotic) activity itself needs to be re-examined. Traditionally, Western cultural traditions have evolved two radically distinct discourse traditions for talking about notions such as mind, cognition, and the mental, on the one hand, and society, communication, and the semiotic, on the other (see Gee 1992; Lemke 1995a: 81-82; Manghi 1988; Walkerdine 1997). Furthermore, the material basis of both 'inner' cognitive processes and 'outer' meaning-making, or semiotic, activity has been disjoined from our discourses about the mental (e.g. thinking) and meaning (e.g. discourse, language). Another problem stems from the way in which semiosis is narrowly defined in terms of linguistically informed notions of text. One negative consequence of this restriction is the failure to see not only the continuities that link human semiosis with the semiosis of other species, but also the continuities that exist between perception, non-linguistic conceptual thinking, mental imaging, consciousness, and semiosis.

A second negative consequence lies in the way in which linguistic models of text have been used as models of embodied meaning-making activity – activity which is embedded in its ecosocial environment. Textual products and records are produced and/or used in different kinds of social activities (see Lemke 1984a: 78-80; Thibault 1991a: chapters 2-4, 1994, 2003a: 58). The more fundamental notion in the theoretical framework of the present study is that of activity. Texts are integral parts of activities in particular ecosocial contexts, yet they have a secondary and derived status with respect to the activities in which they are made and in which they participate. Activity is primary in the present framework (see also Goodwin 1996a, 1996b; Lave 1997).

Activity extends beyond the individual into the ecosocial environment. Meaning-making activity is a trajectory-in-time. In saying this, I am adapting the notion of an *ontogenetic trajectory* in the work of Salthe (1993: 181-5). The locus