
Professor of Germanic Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, Irmengard Rauch has enjoyed a distinguished career at that venerable institution. The bibliography of the present volume contains an impressive, albeit incomplete, listing of her scholarly publications (pp. 274–276). This volume contains twenty of her articles on semiotics (see “Acknowledgments,” pp. xix–xx for the list of permissions obtained for the revised essays in this volume).

In his Foreword (p. xvi), Thomas A. Sebeok, Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus (Indiana University, Bloomington), states that:

As her readers will be able to judge for themselves, the writer of this very nearly unique book’s twenty chapters, the eminent University of California Germanic linguist Irmengard Rauch, whose many scholarly and organizational contributions to general semiotics were crowned by her Presidency of the Fifth Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (held on her campus in Berkeley in June 1994), still fruitfully pursues, as she has done for the past twenty years, an opposite ‘bottom-up,’ strategy. Precisely as her subtitle specifies, ‘the data do the talking’ throughout her meticulous work or, as one might playfully claim, ‘the talking is the data.’ It is the source of her ‘semiotic insight’ – no less, indeed, than of her consistently ‘semiotic outlook.’

In addition to the foreword by Thomas A. Sebeok (pp. xi–xvii), there is an introductory commentary about the articles in this anthology (“Introduction: Leitmotifs at the Nexus of Semiotics and Linguistics,” pp. 1–18). In her preliminary remarks, the author notes that:

This book, based in part on previous research, is bifurcated into a set of eleven chapters (Part One) which lay the foundation for uncovering leitmotifs at the nexus of semiotics and linguistics, and a set of nine chapters (Part Two) which display the cooperation of
the semiotic method and linguistic method leading to a more adequate justification of
hard linguistic data as occurring in given language growth phenomena in Indo-European,
Slavic and Germanic. The chapters of Part One address the seminal questions of
what semiotics and linguistics are, indeed, the nature of their shared object, language,
along with historiography of both semiotics and linguistics, as well as their interdigita-
tion with other disciplines, especially with medicine. The chapters of Part Two demon-
strate the enhanced explanation of phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic,
and pragmatic phenomena, through the application of semiotic tools. (p. 1)

In the introduction, Rauch muses about three key notions amplified and exem-
plified in the rest of this volume, namely, “linguistics” (pp. 3–4), “language”
(pp. 4–6), and “semiotics” (pp. 6–8). In her initial reflections, the author notes
that “[s]emiotics and linguistics have had a long history of juxtaposition. The
relationships between the two fields are represented in varying literatures by
scalar viewpoints with polar extremes which hold these fields as practically syn-
onymous or as virtually unrelated” (p. 3). In her discussion of language, Rauch
observes that definitions of these concepts are myriad, yet with some common
elements. Semiotics, perhaps more so than linguistics and language, eludes a
single, agreed upon meaning. In his monumental encyclopedic dictionary of
semiotics, Sebeok offers definitions and discussion of linguistics compared to
semiotics (Sebeok 1986, II: 912–920), language (Sebeok 1986, I: 425–438), and
semiotics (Sebeok 1986, II: 893–912). Each entry in this encyclopedia demon-
strates the diversity of opinion on an exact specification of these notions.

A discussion of the relationship of linguistics and semiotics occurs in four
chapters (3, 4, 5, 16). Sebeok (1994) whom Rauch cites with some frequency
has, of course, addressed this question. The Distinguished Research Professor
at Indiana University (Bloomington) states that (Sebeok 1994: 105):

The mutual relationship between semiotics and linguistics is to be conceived of as ei-
ther coordinate or hierarchical. If the relationship is hierarchical, there are two possi-
bilities: either linguistics is superordinate, that is, it subsumes semiotics; or semiotics is
superordinate, that is, it subsumes linguistics. Each of these three conjunctions has
been variously put forward, but only the third has enjoyed sustained support.

Sebeok (1994: 106) rejects the first two hypotheses quickly by showing that
since semiotics is “the study of communication of any messages whatever” (Ja-
kobson 1974: 32), it must subsume linguistics as a subpart of its domain. Sebe-
ok (1994: 106) also cites himself (Sebeok 1976: 1) when he embellishes Jakob-
son’s definition of semiotics by stating that it is “… the exchange of any
messages whatever and of the systems of signs that underlie them.” He further
(Sebeok 1994: 106) observes that “[i]ts [semiotics] concerns include consider-
ations of how messages are, successively, generated, encoded, transmitted, de-
coded, and interpreted, and how this entire transaction (semiosis) is worked
upon the context.”
In the rest of her introduction, Rauch modifies Peirce’s aphorism “symbols grow” (p. 8) when she states that “language grows.” By this statement, the author means that language is dynamic, i.e., in Chomskyan terms, this faculty has a creative dimension, and, in Humboldtian terms makes infinite use of finite means.

In the remainder of this first chapter, Rauch talks about phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic growth and change in language.


Space precludes a detailed analysis of the entire contents of this volume. As the titles of the various chapters in each of the two parts of this collection indicate, Rauch has certainly dealt with most of the major areas of semiotics: verbal and non-verbal language, signs, semiosis, icons, textuality, narrative structure, symptomatology, lying, and so forth. In this sense, *Semiotic Insights* is not unlike introductory semiotics textbooks in its range of topics, though it certainly differs both in its analytical depth and its breadth of coverage.

In order to provide the reader with a sense of Rauch’s excellent book, a few specific examples of topics covered in her work are worth noting. Rauch’s tenth chapter (pp. 126–150) on the “protosemiotists” contains her overview of some of the central figures of this interdiscipline by summarizing critical biographical statements of these imposing giants of the field, written by equally prominent scholars (Krampen, Oehler, Posner, and von Uexküll 1981): (1) Klaus Oehler on Charles Sanders Peirce; (2) Roland Posner on Charles Morris; (3) Martin Krampen on Ferdinand de Saussure; (4) Jürgen Trabant on Louis Hjelmslev; (5) Umberto Eco on Roman Jakobson; (6) Thomas A. Sebeok on Karl Bühler; (7) Thure von Uexküll on Jakob von Uexküll; and (8) Eugen Baer on Thomas A. Sebeok.

In the following chapter, the author discusses the current status of semiotics, and she addresses an important question often posed by its critics. Rauch notes
that “[t]he pluralism of semiotic thought appears to belie the existence of a paradigm with canons and theses, yet individual metasemiotic writings continually attest to a canon (or canons) and theses” (p. 153). Her response to this enigmatic question is to repeat Eco’s postmodernist view that a unified theory of semiotics should not exist (p. 156). Her opinion is that the diversity of semiotics “…requires intellectual tolerance and openness” (p. 158) – a position upheld at the various meetings of the prestigious International Association for Semiotic Studies.

In her conclusion (pp. 251–255), Rauch reviews the major areas of semiotics discussed in this volume. She cites Tobin (1997: 4–5) when she discusses the problematic question of defining language (pp. 251–252):

From a Saussurian, sign-oriented, or semiotic point of view, language may be defined as a system of systems that is composed of various subsystems (revolving around the notion of the linguistic sign) that are organized internally and systematically related to each other and that is used by human beings to communicate … this definition of language implies a respect for and reliance on actual or real (as opposed to contrived or solely introspective) data culled from discourse and a commitment to deal with the human factor (i.e., the cognitive, perceptual linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior of human beings) as it is relevant to communication in different linguistic and situational contexts.

Although this book contains a series of articles written by Rauch during her long and productive career, and one which is still a work in progress, the entire volume coheres nicely because of the arrangement of the chapters, the care in the selection of the essays, the steady progression of the materials as the topics flow naturally from each preceding one, and the fact that she has carefully revised and updated the original versions. This cohesion gives the reader the sense of experiencing a tightly woven unified text.

A “Bibliography” (pp. 257–284), a “Name Index” (pp. 285–290), and a “Subject Index” (pp. 291–300) complement this fine volume.

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References