

# Conference Report

## **Tradition and Innovation – the Cornerstones of Modern Semiotics**

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Semiotics is often seen as an old science, a part of philosophy, linguistics or cultural studies, but in September 2014 its new, modern face was shown during the XII World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS/AIS, [www.iass-ais.org](http://www.iass-ais.org)) held in Sofia, Bulgaria. Even the title of the congress – 'New Semiotics. Between Tradition and Innovation' – was indicative of the ongoing changes in that large and varied field. 'Innovation', in particular, was not simply the main theme explored by the participants but the hallmark itself of the organization of the Congress.

For the first time in 2014 the Congress started with broad discussions in the social media like Facebook, Twitter, Google+ where all the suggestions for round tables and papers were placed. That enabled the participants to select the session topics and facilitators they found more congenial to their interests. This new approach to Congress communication provided also an opportunity to highlight the profile of the new semiotics – that which takes place everyday on different geographical and institutional sites but which needs to be strengthened today, through closer collaboration and systematic synergies, through a new strategy that affirms the importance of the semiotic disciplinary field both in the new academic realities and outside the university, in the labour market and the market of research services. The new semiotics holds the promise of a global, project-oriented science, which will be more focused on its contribution to the human endeavour within the flexible boundaries of interdisciplinarity.

The Congress' program included many of the most interesting and well developed semiotic fields. It was divided in few main sections with more than ten round tables in each. As usual, the most important division in the program was between theoretical and applied semiotics. In the first section were included round tables devoted to the areas of visual semiotics, cognitive semiotics, cultural semiotics, textual semiotics, existential semiotics, biosemiotics, ecosemiotics, edusemiotics and semiotics of space. Participants from more than sixty countries took part in these round tables with papers and discussions. The Congress traced the rising interest in the field of edusemiotics which is seen as a new approach and instrument for improving the educational process and gaining deeper understanding of the needs of the new generations.

The applied semiotics section also attracted a large number of participants, with contributions in the following major research areas: semiotics of law, semiotics of translation, semiotics of literature, cinema and theater, semiotics of mass/new media, semiotics of video games/Internet, semiotics of music, semiotics of architecture, semiotics of religion, marketing semiotics, sociosemiotics, urban semiotics, fashion semiotics,

consumer culture and semiotics. In this wide range of research orientations, it was noticeable the vivid interest shown in marketing semiotics and the related topics of brand research, advertising semiotics and market research. In fact, during the Congress there were round tables in marketing semiotics in both English and Spanish with more than twenty participants each. The Congress papers and discussions confirmed the importance of marketing semiotics in achieving a better understanding of the consumers' needs and highlighted the value of applied semiotics in the contemporary business world.

Keeping a time-honored tradition, the Congress program had a special place for some of the most prominent and esteemed semioticians. The usual format of the plenary lectures was substituted by an innovative form of presentations, grouped under the 'Semiotics and its Masters' series of lectures. More than 25 speakers were invited to take part in the series, delivering lectures on the most crucial problems of contemporary semiotics. Among them Gunther Kress, Jacques Fontanille, Göran Sonesson, John Deely, Paul Copley, Jesper Hoffmeyer, José Enrique Finol, Patrizia Violi, Eero Tarasti, Ugo Volli, Kalevi Kull etc. Some of the topics they covered were 'What the humanities are for – a semiotic perspective', 'Semiotics as a Metalanguage for Science', 'Semiosis and Human Understanding', 'Forms of living and the semiotics of culture', 'On the Corposphere: body, eroticism and pornography', 'Semiotic individuation. From amoebae to humans', 'A sketch of a Social Semiotics: questions and directions', 'The Invention of the Text', 'Semiotics as Critical Discourse', 'Ways of Understanding. Semiotics and Hermeneutics'.

The Congress had the privilege to have two eminent figures of semiotics as honorary guest speakers – Jaakko Hintikka and Solomon Marcus. Their lectures took place on the mornings of 17th and 18th of September, in Bulgaria Hall, in the center of Sofia. The topics of their lectures were 'Language Games as a Focal Concept of Language Theory' and 'Hidden Signs: The Literary Face of the Non-Literary Texts'. The lectures were open not only for the Congress' participants but also for journalists and not specialized audience.

For those not acquainted with the institutional background of the Congress it's worth mentioning that the International Association for Semiotic Studies (Association Internationale de Sémiotique) was established in 1969 and the founding members include distinguished semioticians like Algirdas Julien Greimas, Roman Jakobson, Julia Kristeva, Emile Benveniste, André Martinet, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Thomas A. Sebeok, and Juri Lotman. Today the IASS/AIS has about 500 individual members in 83 countries, and about 1000 followers if we count the people from the Collective Members (international and multinational associations dealing with the semiotics of particular topics, national semiotic associations, regional groups, research centers, research groups, circles, university institutes). In 2014 co-organizer and host of the Congress was New Bulgarian University (NBU, [www.nbu.bg](http://www.nbu.bg)) – the biggest private university in Bulgaria, founded in 1991 by a mandate of the Parliament, also the university which introduced and continues to be the seat of major innovations in Bulgarian academia. More specifically, the organizer of the Congress was the Southeast European Center for Semiotic Studies (SECSS), which organizes the famous Early Fall School of Semiotics since 1995. The close collaboration between SECSS, IASS/AIS and the New Bulgarian University ensured a hugely successful event, which attracted more than 500 registered participants from 61 countries, comprising both established semioticians and young semiotics scholars.

During the Congress there were elections for the President and the Bureau of the IASS. Prof. Paul Copley from Middlesex University (London), has been elected as IASS's new President until 2019, while the former President Prof. Eero Tarasti was elected for his merits as a honorary president. With its new leadership IASS/AIS is about to take a new course, aimed to take up the social, cultural and academic challenges of twentieth-first century. Among the most important commitments that the newly elected President of IASS Prof. Copley made, are:

- raising the profile of the IASS and semiotics;
- encouraging collaborations between geographical regions where there is a strong tradition in semiotics and other regions (for example, East Asia, South America, Africa);

- setting up an IASS postgraduate network in semiotics, to share practice and support among early career researchers in the field and to monitor job prospects for young scholars;
- setting up an archive devoted to the IASS and an Open Access repository for members' publications.

At a time of great changes and challenges for the institution of the University, for the humanities as an area of study and research, but also for culture as a whole, 'New Semiotics: between Tradition and Innovation' achieved its two main aims: to provide a forum for the presentation of cutting-edge international semiotic research; and to demonstrate to the global community the central role that semiotics will continue to play in the analysis of life in contemporary societies.

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