Review Essay

The Human Use of Signs or Elements of Anthroposemiosis. John N. Deely. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, 1994. xiii + 240 pp. including "paragraph glosses", appendix, references, author and subject indexes (pp. 132-240). Paperback Edition: $23.95. ISBN 0-8476-7804-0.

Even in 1982, John Deely should have realized that not all British anthropologists reduced "culture to social system" after the manner of Radcliffe-Brown, nor were all of them guilty of "an inadequate understanding of semiosis" (p. xi). Apart from wondering why these statements were necessary, fairness demands that developments in British anthropology from 1971 onwards be recognized. Edwin Ardener's work represented those who abandoned (if they ever took up) Radcliffe-Brown's ideas along with Malinowskian functionalism. His work stands as permanent testimony to the fact that not all British anthropologists were (or are) inadequate in their understanding of semiotics and semiosis. I don't think Deely's incautious statements would have been made had he familiarized himself with

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1975. The Voice of Prophecy. [The Munro Lecture], University of Edinburgh. Published in Chapman 1989: 134-154.

1977. Comprehending Others. Paper given at the Wenner-Gren Symposium, part 2 published as *Social Anthropology, Language and Reality*, in D. Parkin, (Ed.) 1982, and part 1 published as *Ethology and Language*, in R. Harré and V. Reynolds (Eds.) 1984.

1981. The Problem of Dominance. *JASO*, 12(2): 116-21, reprinted in Dube, L., E. Leacock, and S. Ardener (Eds.) 1986.

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Farnell, B. 1995. *Do You See What I Mean: Plains Indian Sign Talk and the Embodiment of Action*. University of Texas Press, Austin [with accompanying CD-Rom].
Foster, M. and S. Brandeis (Eds.). 1980. *Symbol As Sense*. Academic Press, N.Y.
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Parkin, D. (Ed.). 1982. *Semantic Anthropology* [ASA 22]. Academic Press, N.Y.
Pocock, D. 1973. The Idea of a Personal Anthropology. Paper for the Decennial Conference of the ASA, published in the *Jour. for the Anthrop. Study of Human Movement* [JASHM], 8(1): 11-42.
Schwimmer, E. (Ed.). 1978. *The Yearbook of Symbolic Anthropology*. Hurst, London.
Varela, C. 1984. Pocock, Williams and Gouldner: Initial Reactions of Three Social Scientists to the Problem of Objectivity. *JASHM*, 3(2): 53-73. Reprinted in *JASHM*, 8(1): 43-64, 1994.
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Listed above and represented at the 1982 Durham conference of the ASA were some of Ardener's former graduate students, e.g., Malcolm Crick, Malcolm Chapman, and Drid Williams (whose 'Prefigurements of Art: A Reply to Sebeok' questioned the inclusion of animals into human worlds, but was never honored with a reply). The contributions listed above, among others, might have provided Deely with indications that time and an understanding of semiosis didn't stand still for British anthropologists any more than it did for Americans (p. xi).

I began this review with a portentous list of scholarly writings for two reasons: to set the record straight about steadily increased emphases in British social anthropology from 1971 onward concerning language, different ideas of objectivity, examinations of relationships between primates and human beings, modernism and the semiotics of human movement and actions. I also want to make it clear that I have no quarrel with Deely's scholarship, which is praiseworthy, or his commitment to a Peircian-based anthroposemiosis, which, although not shared by everyone, is admirable. The main problem I have with this book is that it seems to have been written as if no other investigations of the human use of signs -- in particular, action signs -- has been done. This may reflect the author's alliance with an old boys' club on the North American continent that produced (and perpetuates) a matrix of political situations long existing in the United States with reference to semiotics, jokingly referred to by some as "Sebeotics". Because of this, semiotics has been (no doubt unintentionally) a relatively closed shop. *The Human Use of Signs*, as far as I can see, doesn't alter the situation, and there is a further problem: by failing to recognize the work of others in the same field of study who lack the Sebeok *imprimatur*, Deely does himself a major disservice, I think, for it may be colleagues who aren't in high places, but in low, relatively insignificant places, upon whose friendly interest and understanding the continuing life of his prodigious scholarly work ultimately depends.

Although he touches upon subjects intimately familiar to all of us interested in the signs of human action (e.g., embodiment, objectivity, reflexivity, epistemology, ontology), he does so without acknowledging many contemporary anthropological -- specifically, semasiological -- expressions of them, which to this reader, at any rate, makes the book less useful than it might have been. Although he says, "The present work is published in the hope especially of drawing other workers into the labor of understanding the human use of signs . . ." (p. xiii), I'm filled with doubts.

For a start, I couldn't stop my mind from making constant text comparisons. Deely's "Part IV. Otherness" (pp. 121-133) begins like this:

> 285. If our preceding analysis is anywhere near the mark, discovery of "the other" is far from anything unique to anthropology. Anthropology's object of investigation is unique only in that the "otherness" it brings within our purview as demanding to be understood is on the same essential level as that of the investigator. The problem is less one of passing an "acid test" of including our own perceptions under the 'ethno-' rubric (Herzfeld 1987: 199) than it is one of thematically realizing and critically controlling the consequences of such inclusion. The risk of "tumbling back into a second barbarism" (ibid.) is much reduced once it is well understood that the inevitable and irreducible ethnocentricity of our own perceptions as such need never be given the last word in the development of an interpretation, for the reasons that, as we shall shortly see, the primordial horizon of interpretation, insofar as interpretation is an anthroposemiotic phenomenon inclusive of but differentiating zoösemiosis from within, *begins* with the other (Deely 1994: 121).

There is no "paragraphal gloss" (to the uninitiated, footnotes or endnotes) for ¶285, therefore it may be taken "as is", but when I ask myself *what* has been said in 161 words, I find three fairly mundane points: 1. anthropology didn't discover the notion of "the other", 2. anthropologists study creatures who are the same as themselves, and must control the consequences of this sameness; 3. our perceptions are "irreducibly ethnocentric", but ethnocentricity needn't have "the last word" because interpretation is (a) an anthroposemiotic phenomenon that differentiates zoösemiotics from within and (b) "*begins* with the other", to which we might ask, "How?"

"Comprehending Others", the title of Chapter 11 of Chapman's collection of Ardener's papers (1989: 159-185), begins like this:

> In previous papers I have described the concept of 'the social' as a space with definitional properties [see the *Voice of Prophecy* paper] in which the unit is the event [see the *Events* paper]. I do not intend to pursue these discussions on this occasion but to exemplify some intersections of language with events. The particular view of the relation of language to social anthropology that is implicit in it is not necessarily widespread in social anthropology, but it has much in common with various other approaches, which might not express matters in identical terms (see for example, Crick 1976). The idea of a more 'semantic' approach to social anthropology is far from new, and even in its more recent manifestations we shall soon be speaking of decades rather than years. I have already discussed elsewhere some common concerns of the present age: the relationship between structures of the 'high structuralist' kind associated with Lévi-Strauss, and those of a more Radcliffe-Brownian type associated with much post-war social anthropology. *It is questionable whether we need a very cumbersome apparatus of linguistic theory to discuss the problems of understanding each other.* It is worth remembering, however, that the linguistic inspiration of structuralism resulted in the almost accidental discovery that society can be analysed in some ways like a text. It turned out that structuralism in its heyday (or at least the particular anthropologists and others that we may call 'high structuralists') had no compelling theory that would demonstrate the essential unity of structure and action. Structuralism [and, I suspect, Deely's anthroposemiosis] floats, as it were, attached by an inadequate number of ropes to the old empiricist ground beneath (Ardener [1975] - italics supplied).

Where Deely says he approaches the *subject* of 'otherness' from a non-empirical, but foundational standpoint (p. 1), Ardener approaches the subject of *comprehending others* having put "the old empiricist ground" behind him, tackling the subject of 'otherness' from a view of ethology and language that begins with ". . . the point at which social anthropology takes over from what for many is a purely observational subject -- the study of primates" (Ardener 1989: 160). Having accepted that, I wonder whether we need a cumbersome apparatus of semiotic theory to discuss the problems of understanding each other or non-human, language-less creatures?

I don't think Deely disagrees with Ardener about where 'being human' begins; "In other words, the understanding of semiosis begins inevitably from within human experience . . ." (Deely, p. 62, ¶154), nor does he seem to disagree about the conceptual *levels* of human experience: "Ideas in this sense, conceptions within perceptions of the world, are unique to and species-specifically definitive of anthroposemiosis . . ." (Deely p. 62, ¶158), yet I must confess I don't understand what Deely is getting at, where I have no problem understanding Ardener's description of ". . . supposedly direct observation[s] of significant behaviour [where] the human observer's cultural background penetrates even his description of primate behaviour" (1989: 161).

When I say, "I don't understand what Deely is getting at", I mean to draw attention to the process of trying to tease out the sense and meaning of ¶297, for example, which starts by saying, "The animal aware of its objective world in such a fashion [Firstness?] is alone positioned to form the conception, along with reality, and of a piece with it, of *otherness*". Later, concerning the comments about "the bone of the dinosaur" (Deely ¶306, p. 130-131), where "an ignorant human animal" or "an animal other than human" is the perceiver of the bone in contrast to [a human, linguistic, animal?] who "may happen to be a paleontologist" -- the latter being the only "sufficiently knowledgeable observer [to] objectify the bone", I land up in a sea of subordinate clauses with no raft -- not even a straw -- of a dominant idea to cling to.

If this confession of mystification is interpreted as my inability to understand rather than Deely's inability to state his ideas clearly and unequivocally, so be it. Peirce himself was one of the most convoluted, complicated (and *complicating*) writers in philosophy, especially about the triadic nature of signs. If we add to that the complex nature of the subject of signs and signification, perhaps Deely's writing style is understandable.

But there is a sense in which this is just the point: nowhere could I find Deely's main agenda, which might be (a) a justification of a Peircian approach combined with mediæval philosophy or (b) his insistence that experience is the sole ground of human knowledge, although maybe (c) he means to point out that reality requires a comprehending mind, or (d) he might want simply to include primates and zoösemiotics into the study of the human use of signs, but hesitates to be that blunt about it, or (e) the whole effort is meant to arrive at ¶309 - 311, where he outlines the task of anthropology and tells what he thinks the task involves. To me, he seemed to conclude with a well-known, essentially mediæval conception from which religious considerations are carefully excised:

> With anthropology we recover the microcosm, wherein the whole of nature is reflected and, at the same moment, transcended in the direction of a development of understanding over time (p. 133, ¶311).

Living in today's world where most of one's problems with criticism, understanding and response stem from work that is oversimplified and/or popularized, Deely's discussion of the relations between human and animal domains projects readers into a complex "fourfold plan of discussion" (p. 11), in which this reader floundered almost before she began. Nor could I merely point to his erudition (Sebeok), his "philosophical defense of the logic of anthropological practice" (Herzfeld), or his creation of "the construction of the foundations for a semiotic philosophical anthropology" (Parmentier), as his supporters do in the praise songs on the back cover of the book. Why?

After reading Deely's book, I'm not sure what Sebeok, Herzfeld or Parmentier mean, although I'm not for a moment suggesting that Deely's work *isn't* scholarly or erudite. It is. I'm also not suggesting that Deely *hasn't* presented a "philosophical defense of the logic of anthropological practice". My problem is that if called upon to tell a seminar of graduate students what that defense is, or what Deely means by "anthropological practice", I wouldn't have a clue where to begin, although I believe I understand something about anthropological practice and I've spent the past 25 years attempting to understand human acts and actions. I'm not prepared to suggest, either, that Deely *hasn't* constructed "the foundations for a semiotic philosophical anthropology". Maybe he has. My problem lies in assessing the greater or lesser value of a *semiotic* philosophical anthropology as against the plain philosophical anthropology with which I am familiar which has been around for a long time. But, I want to be more specific than this, and the specificity I will bring to bear on portions of Deely's text will, I hope, provide him with the means to correct me if I'm wrong or tell me how to broaden my understanding if that's what I lack.

We start with ¶30 (p. 11), as the notion of "text" plays an important part in signification, the subject of Part I of the book.[1] [see p.135].

> 30. In our fourfold plan of discussion, "sign" is the most fundamental notion. The reason is that the notion of a text . . . is inconceivable apart from the notion of *critick* . . . which is in turn predicated on the *possibility of* analysis and evaluation of texts, and the notion of "other" depends for its explication precisely on textuality. While there may be other things besides signs, there are no texts without signs, and criticism of whatever sort loses its object in the absence of texts.
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> 31. There are signs, and there are other things besides: things which are unknown to us at the moment and perhaps for all our individual life; things which existed before us and other things which will exist after us; things which exist only as a result of our social interactions, like governments and flags; and things which exist within our round of interactions---like daytime and night---but without being produced exactly by those interactions, or at least not inasmuch as they are 'ours', i.e. springing from us in some primary sense.
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> 32. The first and most radical misconception to be addressed is the notion that there are other things besides signs, as if signs were an item within our experience which has its place among other things besides. For, when we speak from the strict standpoint of experience (which of course we must in all contexts where we hope to avoid delusion), the sign is not by any means one thing among many others: the sign is not any thing at all, nor is it even first of all a distinct class of objects. As a type of object or objective structure contrasting with other objective structures, the sign is singularly unstable and derivative, precisely because signs are not objects first of all. Signs are presupposed to there so much as being whatever objects there are in the content of experience in general and at any given time. (Deely 1994: 11-12).

First, the sentence immediately above, i.e. "Signs are presupposed to [be] there so much as being whatever objects there are in the content of experience in general and at any given time." assuming a typographical error which left 'be' out of the sentence as written, which is still confusing, but somewhat clearer.

Second, we're told in ¶30 that the notion of "sign" is fundamental because a text is inconceivable without the notion of *critick*, which is predicated on the *possibility of* analysis. Moreover, we are to understand (a) there are no texts without signs (though there may be other things besides signs) and (b) criticism loses its object without texts. O.K. -- So far, so good.

Third, we're told "there are signs, and there are other things besides", followed by a brief description of some of those "other things", calling to my mind a passage affirming a paradox in the nature of things-and-the-world that Deely's explanation seems to underline:

> And so two dimensions must be established in the philosophy of science: *a transitive dimension* in which experiences and conjunctions of events are seen as socially produced; and *an intransitive dimension*, in which the objects of scientific thought are seen as generative mechanisms and structures which exist and act independently of men (Bhaskar 1975: 242 - italics supplied).

Fourth, in ¶32, readers are given to understand, "The first and most *radical misconception* to be addressed is the notion that there are other things besides signs", and, not only do I seem to be faced with contradictions, I'm in deeper trouble. I ask myself, "is it a radical misconception, to recognize things and objects in the world that aren't socially produced or humanly made and a set of things and objects that are?", but it isn't the validity of this distinction, or the fact that Deely makes it that bothers me most: "What", I ask myself, "is the relationship between the assertion that begins ¶31 (There are signs, and there are other things besides) and the beginning sentence of ¶32, which seems to say the opposite (it is misconceived to think there are other things besides signs)?" I'm in trouble, too, because of Deely's emphasis on 'experience' in the same paragraph. I *think* I agree that experience provides a means of avoiding delusion, although it is well-known that in some cases, experience itself can constitute delusion, and, additionally, I wonder how much the author buys into traditional phenomenological emphases on 'experience' which has resulted in so much subjectivist/objectivist confusion in learned writing and, in untutored writing, on an overdetermined focus on personal experience that is both tedious and boring?

Although the author says the notion of sign is fundamental, he also says "the sign is singularly unstable and derivative", because "signs are not objects", yet we all know perfectly well that the human body (among many examples), can (and is) seen as an object, and we know it can be a sign or a symbol in a semiotic, *as it always is* in ritual and ceremonial contexts and dances.

In ¶34 (p. 12), however, the author declares, "We shall see that every type of object [presumably including the body?], every objectivity and objective structure as such, owes its being within experience to the sign", and again, I have to ask, "How?" The statement doesn't help my already unresolved confusions, because it merely makes me think he's trying to cover all bases (which we all try to do) and have his cake and eat it too (which we all don't do). Later in the same paragraph, he remarks, "any object can become a sign of any other object, and every object in experience begins as, or quickly becomes, a sign of several other objects" which apparently is supposed to illustrate the fundamental nature of signs as "invariants at the base of experience", but, by this time, I have too many questions successfully to go on -- but go on I did. Sometimes what an author has to say doesn't become clear until most of the text has been read.

However, when asked for an overall assessment of this book, I would have to tell graduate students and colleagues that the author confidently plunges his readers into the vast subject of signification by introducing, in the first six paragraphs, several loaded words, i.e. 'signs', 'text', 'thing', 'object', 'experience', and 'objectivity', doing so within a program outlined in ¶24, of an examination of

> . . . the generic element in the semiotic definition of *anthropos* as *animal linguisticum*, that is to say, what is common to zoösemiosis and anthroposemiosis through the action of signs in the building up of "experience" as something in its own right superordinate to the brute secondness of environmental interactions (p. 9).

But, when push comes to shove, I'm not sure what he's committed to. Perhaps if I (or any reader outside his immediate circle of discussants and students) had been privy to the talks Deely had with Sebeok about "what is common to zoösemiotics and anthroposemiosis", we might understand more of what Deely's 240 pages of text is all about. Then, too, clarity with regard to educated readers outside of the comparatively few who are familiar with the ethics that Deely's discourse demands (pp. 173-174), requires some consideration surely -- some *orientation*, perhaps, -- if only a preliminary chapter designed to explain why anyone outside of those mentioned in the acknowledgments or cited in the bibliography should read this book. Reading *The Human Use of Signs* projected me back to March 1, 1976 to my Doctoral *viva voce*. The first question I was asked to address was "Tell us why this thesis is important and why should anyone bother to read it?"

I'd like to know why Deely thinks this book is important and why anyone outside his immediate circle should bother to read it. Almost any educated reader could supply paradigmatic reasons, for example, the human use of signs is an *important* subject -- a subject that exercises many scholarly minds these days, but when all is said and done, the only way I can render intelligible the residual dissatisfactions I have, is to say I've no idea how Deely's scholarly findings coincide or supplement, agree or disagree, with those of others, and this is problematical, because the book obviously has universal intent. Moreover, the author *did* have readers in mind, i.e.

> . . . readers may judge their success in reading this book by the clarity they achieve in grasping the twin notions of objectivity (as it pertains equally to zoösemiosis and anthroposemiosis within nature) and code (as code differentiates the objective order from within to constitute the human Umwelt in its difference from the Umwelt of animals whose system of communication and Innenwelt does not include language--as code constitutes the biologically human Umwelt, that is to say, as, additionally, an enculturated Umwelt, or Lebenswelt). Similarly, readers may judge the success of the book itself, eventually, by the degree to which it succeeds in having the concept of the objective understood in the sense of the content of awareness as including aspects and changing aspects of physical and psychic subjectivities without being reducible to either.

> This notion of objectivity, I think, is strictly required to describe the action of signs within experience, and required, hence, within semiotics. It is imposed by semiosis as the action of signs. The reader will find helpful pointers toward the notion in K.R. Popper's discussion of a "third world" (Popper 1972; Popper and Eccles 1977), but the same notion strictly speaking I do not believe is to be found fully realized anywhere outside contemporary semiotics. The "tilt of culture theory to semiotics" (Singer 1978: 203) is best explicable, ultimately, at least on theoretical grounds, through this notion. Such at least is the present argument. (p. 137).

But, I didn't achieve clarity regarding objectivity in any of its interpretations or applications by reading *The Human Use of Signs*. Perhaps someone who isn't clear about, or hasn't thought much about, objectivity *would* achieve clarity. Because the author says nothing about how anthroposemiotic notions of objectivity coincide or do not coincide with anyone else's ideas on the subject (see, for example, Varela 1984 and Pocock 1973/1994), I can only conclude I haven't achieved success reading the book. I read the book with considerable prior knowledge regarding human beings as language-users in contrast to sensate, non-language-using species, thus didn't achieve additional illumination from that source.

I agree that the content of human awareness includes many aspects of subjectivity (although I rarely talk in terms of a subjective/objective opposition), and I concur when he says that human awareness isn't reducible to "physical or psychic subjectivities", but beyond that I couldn't go. I'm not sure if Deely thinks his notion of objectivity is new or that his contempt for current widespread forms of scientism is unshared. Science is the great shibboleth of post-modernism, as it has been for thinkers in many other disciplines since its inception. Perhaps the author's description and application of objectivity "in its strict sense", centering objectivity in anthroposemiosis itself, is what is different. I don't know, but would have to ask, what about the rest of us?

To bring this review to an end: I couldn't confidently assert much of anything about Deely's premises, partly because any author who regularly produces eighty-two word sentences (count them from ". . . readers" to "either" in the above quotation) that leave so many escape hatches through which to bolt, should anyone be bold or foolhardy enough to raise doubts about what has been said, makes one suspicious. Equally, it is true that authors can't be held responsible for every interpretation of his or her thought that emerges from readers' diverse education, trainings, and theoretical commitments. But, when we are offered a book about an important subject having no explanation for its many omissions of, nor even bare references to, the works of contemporaries, readers may justifiably wonder why.

Semiotics may indeed take over anthropology, linguistics, and who knows what else -- I wouldn't attempt to predict, but I remain unrepentant and unpersuaded. I await with friendly interest Deely's dialogue with contemporaries who share his concerns and admire his scholarship, but who live outside the current political pale of semiotics in the United States, perhaps in a state of "brute secondness", along with our notions about indexicality and anthropology?

Drid Williams

NOTE:

[1] I begin an exegesis of the paragraphs below with David Pocock's "counsel of perfection" (1994: 21; 8.3-8.4) and a Wittgensteinian question in mind: "But if you say: "How am I to know what he means, when I see nothing but the signs he gives?" then I say: "How is he to know what he means, when he has nothing but the signs either?" (1958: 139e).