

On semiotic (un)predictability: Tartu Summer School of Semiotics 2015

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From 17 August to 20 August 2015, the 10th Summer School of Semiotics² “Semiotic (un)predictability”, which also hosted the 9th Conference of the Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies³, took place in Tartu, Estonia. The 2015 conference was organized by the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu, the Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies and the Estonian Semiotics Association. Tiit Remm (the main organizer), Kalevi Kull, Kristin Vaik, Lauri Linask and Tyler Bennett participated in the work of both the scientific committee (that, besides them, also included Inesa Sahakyan, Luis Emilio Bruni, Morten Tønnessen, Peeter Torop, Sara Lenninger and Timo Maran) and of the organizing team (which also included Katre Pärn, Liina Sieberk and Maarja Vaikmaa). The conference was attended by over a hundred scholars from more than twenty countries, representing various traditions and very different approaches to semiotic studies. Among them, there were many young scholars, who created a particularly joyful intellectual ambiance during the whole four working days – this witnesses to the ever growing interest of the younger generation for semiotics⁴. The title of the conference corresponded well to what a neophyte would have certainly felt looking at the very rich program of this event. As the organizers stated in the foreword to the *Book of Abstracts* (Pärn, Bennett 2015: 9), “[t]he paradoxical co-presence of predictability and unpredictability is a fundamental aspect of the dynamics of the semiotic world. Abduction, habit, diversity explosion,

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² The earlier Tartu Semiotics Summer Schools have been organized as follows: 1964 (Kääriku), 1966 (Kääriku), 1968 (Kääriku), 1970 (Tartu), 1974 (Tartu), 1986 (Kääriku), 1995 (Saarjärve), 2011 (Palmse), 2013 (Kääriku) (see Pärn, Bennett 2015: 10, 13–14; see also Salupere 2012; Kull *et al.* 2011).

³ The previous Conferences of the Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies took place in 1990 (Odense), 1992 (Lund), 1994 (Trondheim), 1996 (Imatra), 1998 (Oslo), 2000 (Copenhagen), 2011 (Lund) and 2013 (Aarhus) (Pärn, Bennett 2015:10, 17; see also Sonesson 1997).

⁴ From 10 August to 14 August, young scholars had the opportunity to start their programme with listening to the lectures of leading semioticians within the framework of the Summer School’s “extended programme”, organized by Katre Pärn (see http://www.flfi.ut.ee/summer_school/2015/extended.html).

(artistic) modelling, code, interaction, meaning-making, signification, innovation, uncertainty, structural change, order and disorder, translation, interpretation – there are numerous concepts that reflect this tension in different kinds of semiotic systems and process”. So that “[p]redictability and unpredictability are processual notions that have been used for the description and analysis of different forms of creativity and freedom on both the psychological and social level” (Pärn, Bennett 2015: 9). Besides, predictability and unpredictability are the two concepts which correspond very well to the (semiotic) spirit of Tartu: “They were also key concepts for Juri Lotman” (Pärn, Bennett 2015: 9).

Plenary lectures delivered at the conference also matched the wide variety of topics presented at the Summer School and their reflection of the intellectual spirit of Tartu, especially as regards what is already appearing to be a traditional interest in semiotics of culture, biosemiotics, sociosemiotics, and the currently increasingly growing interest in the theory of general semiotics as such.

As to the interest in the general theory of semiotics, the first plenary lecture, given by **Jordan Zlatev** (Sweden) and entitled “The semiotic hierarchy revised: From life to language”, was largely drawing on his 2009 work “The semiotic hierarchy”, in which a general framework for cognitive semiotics is presented. Four “macro-levels” are distinguished in this research: life, consciousness, sign use and language. Later, however, yet another level, one between consciousness and sign use, was added by the researcher: culture. As it was argued in the lecture, culture, understood as historically transmitted shared meanings, precedes sign use, at the same time presupposing a “fairly extended social consciousness”. **Mihai Nadin** (United States) centred a very important part of his plenary lecture around the notion of anticipation, connecting it with that of semiotics: a new foundation of semiotics could integrate the sign in a dynamic perspective, which is supposed to be better adapted to capture the very essence (“meaning”) of any interaction. The conference participants’ increasing interest in the general theory of semiotics manifested itself in the fact that the prize of the Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies for the best graduate student presentation was awarded for a paper dealing with problems of general theory of semiotics and entitled “A theoretical model of the meta-semiosphere”. The laureate was Maja Gvózdź from Poland.

Within the framework of the work on the semiotics of culture, **Ilya Utekhin** (Russia) dedicated his plenary lecture to the “anthroposemiotic” problem of humans dealing with their future, presenting not only different cultural and language approaches to the perception of future in different “traditions”, but also various possible means to their investigation (based, partly, on semiotic methods).

Finally, the plenary lecture of **Stuart Kauffman** (United States) was dedicated to the “enablement and unprestatability of living”. The focus of his lecture was the

notion of biological function: according to Kauffman, on the one hand, the difference between what is semiotic and what is not is based on the concept of function; on the other hand, the evolution of the biosphere is in large part the evolution of novel functions; finally, the existence of functions already presupposes semiosis⁵.

Non-plenary papers were presented at numerous, most often parallel, sessions, which sometimes combined at least two of the three aspects of general questions of semiotics, semiotics of culture, and biosemiotics. The sessions included “Discovering semiotic unpredictability”, “Cognitive development and education”, “Probability, predictability and their alternatives in semiotic analysis”, “Modelling and unpredictability”, “Playing (un)predictability”, etc.

The majority of the conference’s events took place in Tartu; however, during one day all the participants were invited to work in the cosy farmstead of Leigo. In addition to the session “Perspectives from Tartu” and a plenary lecture, an open discussion and a round table on the “Unpredictability in Tartu semiotics” were organised there.

Certainly not all current trends and schools of semiotics could be presented at the Summer School: for instance, there were no papers on the semiotics of economy, nor any about juridical semiotics, etc. – which was quite predictable from the very beginning. Nevertheless, the wide variety of the presented papers testifies to the very rich aspects of fields in which (un)predictability turns out to be one of the most important semiotic factors.

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⁵ Videos of all plenary lectures are available at a University of Tartu site, www.uttv.ee.