



**Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław, Poland  
in cooperation with:  
Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Norway  
“Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău (UB) Romania  
University of Ljubljana (UL), Slovenia**

## **THE SIGNS OF PLAY AND THE PLAY OF SIGNS**

# On the inspiration source of this presentation

- The current PP presentation includes selected parts of chapters written by Elżbieta Magdalena Wąsik and Zdzisław Wąsik for the project *GameIT: Gamestorming for Innovative Teaching* realized under the Program Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships by the consortium of University of Ljubljana (UL), Slovenia, “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău (UB), Romania, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Norway and Philological School of Higher Education (WSF), Poland.

- The titles and contents of these chapters utilize the achievements of the authors' presentations delivered at the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America: "The Play of Signs/The Signs of Play", held at Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP), in Puebla, Mexico, on October 25-29, 2017.
- Selected papers from this meeting have been edited in the special issue of *Language and Semiotic Studies* and in the SSA Yearbook: *The Play of Musement. Semiotics 2017*.



Language and Semiotic Studies

ISSN 2096-031X

CN 32-1859/H

# Language and Semiotic Studies

语言与符号学研究

**Special Issue: The Play of Signs/The Signs of Play**

**Guest Editor: Deborah Eicher-Cat**



# ZDZISŁAW WĄSIK

Professor in Linguistic Semiotics and Communicology

Executive Member of the International Association for Semiotic Studies

Laureate Fellow, Bureau Member & Director of Coordinators for Europe of the  
International Communicology Institute

Elected Foreign Member of the Romanian  
Association of Semiotic Studies,

Full Member of the Semiotic Society of America

Honorary Member of the Semiotic Society of Finland

Invited Member of the International Scientific Board of the Academy of  
Cultural Heritages in Helsinki/Athens

# Abstract

Elżbieta Magdalena Wąsik, "Play and game in the semiotic-communicational domains of culture".

This chapter aims to show that play in the world of humans is basically something different than in the world of animals. Its author presents selected approaches to human abilities to engage in play- and game-related activities from the viewpoint of cultural studies, psychology, studies on economic organization, philosophy of language, as well as communication studies to find an explanation of the play-related character of communication.

Communicating individuals are shown as competent players, who receive and interpret information conveyed by their partners, while reacting to them more or less appropriately. The author treats culture as a peculiar play of human possibilities that synthesizes the experiences of humans, ordered according to axiological principles, which allows them to strive for a more complete and fuller existence. Moreover, she supports the claim that human individuals intentionally create the works of art aiming at a better and better understanding of their world through a play-related modeling activity.

**KEYWORDS:** game and play, language and art, modeling systems, symbolic forms, theory of culture,

# Abstract

Zdzisław Wąsik, "Playing games as a lived experience of pleasure in the knowledge acquisition about the world".

Alluding to “the play of musement”, this chapter reviews the concepts of ‘knowledge/knowing’, mathesis ‘ordering’ and mathetics ‘learning’ in relation to semiosis ‘sign-meaning-production/signification’. Therefore, it confronts the theory of generalized knowledge about cosmic reality with the individualized knowledge acquired by cognizing organisms in their adaptation to changeable and variable surroundings.

Against the distinction between mathesis as the science of order and mathetics as the science of learning, the author puts forward a semio-mathetic view of the humans as meaning-creating and meaning-discerning or meaning-learning and meaning-utilizing subjects who not only acquire their knowledge about the real world but also form their private worldviews via semiotic categorization of cognized objects. Hence, the conviction about the existence of one objective world studied by scientists is counterpoised against the statement about the occurrence of a multiplicity of subjective worlds which are experienced, constructed and imaginatively altered in everyday life.

Exposing the semiotic activity of cognizing subjects as a pleasure of playing with the images of reality, or as a pleasure-oriented ordering of learned worlds beyond the signs, along with the worlds of functional tools and valuable goods of culture, the author postulates to consider, for the sake of further studies, the conceptions of those philosophers of mind and nature whose thought had been affected by the critics of pure experience in opposition the critics of pure reason.

**KEYWORDS:** play and game, mundane phenomenology, knowledge and knowing, pleasure and gratification, reality and world

# 1. Play and game in the semiotic-communicational domains of culture

culture

communicational domains of

1. Play and game in the semiotic-

## 1.1. Language games as the play of signs

- Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), the originator of ordinary language philosophy, introduced the concept of the language game, arguing that the meaning of a word (or a sentence) is its use by language speakers.
- In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (1957 [1953]: 11) contended that “the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life”.

- Among the multiplicity of language-games, Wittgenstein listed: giving orders, and obeying them, describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements, constructing an object from a description (a drawing), reporting an event, speculating about an event, forming and testing a hypothesis, presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams, making up a story; and reading it, playacting, singing catches, guessing riddles, making a joke, telling it, solving a problem in practical arithmetic, translating from one language into another (cf. 1957 [1953]: 11–12).

- Comparing language-games with chess, Wittgenstein believed that one usually shows the pieces (for example, the chess king, the chessmen) to somebody who learns how to play chess and explains the rules of the game to his or her. Even though it is a necessary learning stage, it seems to be a not sufficient one because, in Wittgenstein's belief, to know the true value of the pieces, for example, of the chess king, one needs to re-ally play chess

- . Cf. the following quotation:
  - When one shows someone the king in chess and says: “This is the king”, this does not tell him the use of this piece – unless he already knows the rules of the game up to this last point: the shape of the king. You could imagine his having learnt the rules of the game without ever having been shewn an actual piece. The shape of the chessman corresponds here to the sound or shape of a word (Wittgenstein 1957 [1953]: 17).

- For Wittgenstein, speaking a language is both a game and a form of life. At the same time, a language game is an action into which the individual is interweaved through speaking/using a language. And what follows is thus that the meaning of a word or sentence is a consequence of the rule(s) of the game he is playing in a particular context.

## 1.2. Games people play in interpersonal transactions

- Theorists dealing with the play of signs owe a lot to Eric Berne (1910–1970), a Canadian-American psychiatrist, the creator of transactional analysis, the specific meaning of the term game. In Berne's innovative approach to the understanding human behavior, games are negative, maladaptive transactional interactions through which people pursue their hidden goals, usually resulting from various low motives.

- One has to emphasize that, for Berne, games are sequences of predictable, communicative transactions between two individuals, taking place according to a rigid pattern. For the observers, they are seemingly reasonable and faultless behaviors, but they express, as a matter of fact, negative attitudes and hostility of the parties involved towards each other. Therefore, games are the so-called ulterior transaction, which, as Berne claimed, always end with a pay-off, a psychological advantage of one of the individuals.

- To illustrate Berne's line of reasoning, one could quote his definition of communicative games, coming from his book *Games People Play* (1969 /1964/):
- - A game is an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transaction progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome. Descriptively, it is a recurring set of transactions, often repetitions, superficially plausible, with a concealed motivation; or, more colloquially, a series of moves with a snare, or 'gimmick'. Games are clearly differentiated from procedures, rituals, and pastimes by two chief characteristics: (1) their ulterior quality and (2) the pay-off. Procedures may be successful, rituals effective, and pastimes profitable, but all of them are by definition candid; they may involve contest, but not conflict, and the ending may be sensational, but it is not dramatic. Every game, on the other hand, is basically dishonest, and the outcome has a dramatic, as distinct from merely exciting quality. (Berne 1969 /1964/: 44)

- What has to be added is that, in transactional analysis, not only the words, individuals speak, are taken into account. The interpretation of true intentions of communicating individuals entails also considering the nonverbal clues, especially the tone of voice of the speakers, their facial expressions, as well as the movements of their body.
- As a psychiatrist, Berne (1969 /1964 /: 61–147) managed to identify and describe numerous games played by his patients, proving, this way, that there are detectable regularities in human behavior. His merit was thus to present the dynamics of human relations in terms of psychological games.

## 2. Acquiring knowledge as a semio-mathetic interplay between the worlds beyond the signs

worlds beyond the signs  
mathetic interplay between the  
5. Acquiring knowledge as a semio-

## Towards the idea of semio-mathesis

- Introducing the notion of semio-mathesis for methodological purposes, its initiator, Zdzisław Wąsik (2018) alludes firstly to the science of learning known since the Greek Antiquity as mathetics, currently laying in the interest sphere of, *inter alia*, psychologically minded pedagogy, and secondly to the science of ordering or subcategorizing of things in reality.
- The term *mathetics* had been coined by Joannis Amos Comenius as the counterpart of *didactics*, the science of teaching. As Comenius (1680: 1) explained it in details: *Mathetica es ars discendi ... Discere est rem scire quaerere vel, est rerum scientiam (cognitionem) quaerere* [Mathetics is the science of learning ... Learning is searching for knowing the thing or, is searching for the knowledge (cognition) of things].

- A similar term *mathesis* had been used following the tradition of Anglo-Norman philosophy, by Michel Foucault in his work *The Order of Things* "mathesis, understood as a universal science of measurement and order" (1970 [1966]: 55; "the relation of all knowledge to the mathesis is posited as the possibility of establishing an ordered succession between things, even non-measurable ones" (1970 [1966]: 57).
- "When dealing with the ordering of simple natures, one has recourse to a mathesis, ... When dealing with the ordering of complex natures ... one has to establish a system of signs. These signs are to the order of composite natures what algebra is to the order of simple natures" (Foucault, 1970 [1966]: 71).

## The pleasure of playing games in the learning and ordering of the world through signs

- Thus, for applying the concept of semio-mathesis to learning as ordering of knowledge about the world through the process of its acquisition, it is worth citing the opinion of Gregory Bateson (1951: 237) that there are discrepancies among particular schools of thought as regards the relationship between world and reality.

- Thus, for applying the concept of semio-mathesis to learning as ordering of knowledge about the world through the process of its acquisition, it is worth citing the opinion of Gregory Bateson (1951: 237) that there are discrepancies among particular schools of thought as regards the relationship between world and reality.

- Accordingly, the world may be described after Bateson:
  - (1) as a category of observables in opposition to mental phantasies,
  - (2) as a social construct according to which the interpretation of reality is determined by dissimilar viewpoints in different cultures,
  - (3) as a set of ordered things and states of affair in the personal perception of reality acquired through observation and formulated through mental propositions,
  - (4) as a kind of living through and coping with the world of phenomena on the basis of pleasure and gratification,
  - (5) as a pre-given factual world based on communication in opposition to the artificially created magical world based on rituals (1951: 239–242).

- Relevant for the purposes of this paper is Bateson's understanding of reality as playing with the world image for pleasure gratification, deducible from the following statement (1951: 240–241):
  - The word “reality” is used in a fourth sense which is only indirectly and by inadvertence associated with the first three. This sense appears commonly in the phrase “the reality principle,” which “principle” is commonly contrasted with “the pleasure principle,” giving to the word “reality” a special evaluational flavor of discipline or unpleasure. Here the term “reality” slips from referring to that which exists or that which is perceived, and comes to refer to a world of values.

- In his deliberations on play and learning with reference to the logical truth in communication, Bateson claims that
  - “the evolution of play may have been an important step in the evolution of communication”, as far the exchanged messages or signals among communicating subjects do not denote what they stand for. Interacting organisms “are usually communicating about something which does not exist” (1987 /1972/ [1955]: 188).

- In Bateson's opinion, the domain of non-realistic fictional communication it is just the
  - “region where art, magic, and religion meet and overlap”, as far as there are “two peculiarities of play: (a) that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that that which is denoted by these signals is nonexistent” (Bateson 1987 /1972/ [1955]: 188–189).

- Recapitulating his thought Bateson states furthermore that
  - “The discrimination between ‘play’ and ‘nonplay,’ like the discrimination between fantasy and nonfantasy, is certainly a function of secondary process, or ‘ego.’ Within the dream the dreamer is usually unaware that he is dreaming, and within ‘play’ he must often be reminded that ‘This is play’” (Bateson 1987: 190).

## Simple learning & Gestalt learning

- For employing the conception of semio-mathesis to the knowledge acquisition, it seems appropriate to put back together the theoretical positions of Gregory Bateson towards learning, which commenced as early as in the 1940s and were continued in the 1970s.
- Working within the framework of behaviorism, prevailing at that time, Bateson initially distinguished two types of learning, called simple learning and Gestalt learning.

- In simple learning, denoted as “**proto-learning**”, “the subject is learning to orient himself to certain types of contexts, or is acquiring ‘insight’ into the contexts of problem solving.” (Bateson 1987 /1972/ [1942]: 173).
- Whereas Gestalt learning, seen as “**learning to learn**”, is equated by Bateson, “with acquiring apperceptive habits,” as a kind of **deutero-learning** (quoted and cited after 1987 /1972/ [1942]: 176).

- Summarized under four types of the acquisition of knowledge, Learning I, II, III and IV are defined as follows:
- (I) the first order learning, i.e., “habitual learning”, when the relationships between two (or more) organisms are based on stimulus–response conditionings evoking indulgence or avoidance strategies;
- (II) the second order learning, i.e. “learning to learn”, where the organisms can correct or change their responses knowing how to choose between alternatives while obtaining of information about the conditional patterns of contexts in which the past first order learning, in sequences of experiences, has occurred;

- and, finally,
- (III) the third order learning, i.e., “learning to learn to receive signals”, where there is the “transference” of viewpoints from one participant to another causing the change in his or her expectations about the structure of their, hitherto pathogenic, convictions, for example, in the psychotherapist–patient relationship, imitating as such the image of parent–child relationships from the upbringing times.
- As to fourth order of learning, Bateson supplements: “Learning IV would be change in Learning III, but probably does not occur in any adult living organism on this earth. Evolutionary process has, however, created organisms whose ontogeny brings them to Level III. The combination of phylogenesis with ontogenesis, in fact, achieves Level IV.” (1987 /1972/: 298).

## Bibliography

- Bateson, Gregory. 1951. Psychiatric thinking: An epistemological approach, In: Jürgen Ruesch, Gregory Bateson. *Communication. The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*. New York: Norton & Company, 228–256.

- Bateson, Gregory. 1987 /1972/ [1942]. Social planning and the concept of deutero-learning (reprinted from the original conference paper of 1942). In: Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind. Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* Northvale, London: Jason Aronson, 166–182 (reprint) /San Francisco: Chandler, 159–176/
- [(original title) Comment on *The Comparative Study of Culture and the Purposive Cultivation of Democratic Values* by Margaret Mead. In: Lyman Bryson and Louis Finkelstein (eds.). *Science, Philosophy and Religion: Second Symposium (held September 8-11, 1941 at New York). Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion.* New York: Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, 81–97].

- Bateson, Gregory. 1951. Psychiatric thinking: An epistemological approach, In: Jürgen Ruesch, Gregory Bateson. *Communication. The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*. New York: Norton & Company, 228–256.
- Bateson, Gregory. 1987 /1972/ [1953]. Metalogue: About games and being serious. In: Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind. Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Northvale, London: Jason Aronson, 1987, 24–30 (reprint)
- /San Francisco: Chandler, 1972, 14–20/
- [*ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 10: 213–217].

- Bateson, Gregory. 1987 /1972/ [1955]. A theory of play and fantasy. In: Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind. Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* Northvale, London: Jason Aronson, 183–198 /San Francisco: Chandler, 177–198/ [APA *Psychiatric Research Reports* 2: 39–51].
- Bateson, Gregory. 1987 /1972/. The logical categories of learning and communication. In: Gregory Bateson *Steps to an Ecology of Mind. Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Northvale, London: Jason Aronson, 1987, 284–314 (reprint) /San Francisco: Chandler, 279–308.

- Berne, Eric. 1969 /1964/. *Games People Play. The Psychology of Human Relationships*. New York, NY: Grove Press/Reprint. Harmondsworth, UK Penguin Books.
- Comenius, Joannis Amos [Komenský, Jan Amos,]. 1680. *Spicilegium didacticum artium discendi ac docendi summam brevibus praeceptis exhibens*. Amstelodami: Typis Christophori Cunradi.
- <http://www.digitalniknihovna.cz/mzk/view/uuid:dcc8aa20-59d2-11e4-8b11-005056827e51?page=uuid:211e1470-6168-11e4-8b87-001018b5eb5c>

- Foucault, Michel. 1970 [1966]. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. from the French. New York, NY: Pantheon; London, UK: Tavistock Publications
- [*Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris : Éditions Gallimard].

- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1957 [1953]. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G[ertrude] E[lizabeth] M[argaret] Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- [*Die Philosophischen Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp].
- Wąsik, Zdzisław. 2018. Epistemology as a semio-mathetic interplay with changeable and variable worlds of living systems. In: Geoffrey Owens, Jamin Pelkey, Sari Park (eds.). *The Play of Musement. Semiotics 2017*: Semiotic Society of America. Charlottesville, Virginia: Philosophy Documentation Center, 21–33.

**Thank you very much for attention!**

**ZDZISŁAW WĄSIK**

