

# Chapter 12

## (Re)framing Human Critical and Creative Skills: A Semiotic Approach to TNE in the Age of AI

**Marilia Jardim**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1565-590X>

*Royal College of Art, UK*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter presents the argument for the use of semiotic principles in the task of reimagining pedagogies for the age of AI. The challenges identified in the public debate around emerging AI technologies touch upon the matters of Otherness, conflicting constructions of truth, and the matter of fixed versus constructed meaning, which are also prominent questions for Transnational Education endeavours, marking the entanglement of those two areas of enquiry. Part 1, presents an overview of the semiotic critique of AI; part 2, discusses how some core postulates from Semiotics, such as the semantic description and the idea of semiotic modelling, are relevant in pedagogical contexts both in the construction of prompting skills and as an important pillar to navigating the challenges of translation and cultural differences at the core of Transnational Education projects.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a recent article published at *The Conversation*, Anthony Grayling and Brian Ball (2024) interrogate the fundamental role Philosophy has to play in the age of Artificial Intelligence, by highlighting the entanglement of early AI theories with various philosophical traditions, in a critique that echoes a sentiment, among the Humanities and Social Sciences, that there is more than tech to the debate around emerging technologies. Through their reference to the works of Allen Newell and Herbert Simon, we can refine this observation to the entanglement of AI with classic Linguistics, drawing a parallel similar to the one identified by Jean-Guy Meunier (1989), when he argued that, more than a programme processing numbers, AI is a form of “applied semiotics”. Classed by Dario Compagno (2023) as a “Deleuzian” or “Barthesian” entity, AI is essentially a meaning-marking programme: created and operated through natural and artificial languages, it only knows the world through discourses, is trained from existing

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discourses, and prompted, through discourse, to produce new discourses. As a system operating through a textual apparatus, Large Language Models mirror Juri Lotman's (1990, 2009) understanding of culture as a complex network of texts, and the matter of cultural exchange as a chain of translations.

Artificial Intelligence's reliance on written text is symptomatic of the same phenomenon in Western culture and its knowledge production, in a logic in which "written culture" becomes synonymous with all accepted knowledge. Whether that means the encounter of different cultures and natural languages, or the interaction between "natural" and "artificial" forms of intelligence, the relevance of a Semiotics of text for both the Western academic system and Transnational Education (TNE) contexts is pronounced. Some of the key areas in which this theory can contribute to the construction of meaningful pedagogic practices are the matters of intercultural translations, the mediation between competing knowledge and meaning systems, and the contrasts between process and product, and lived experiences and their representation.

With its goal of bringing education across national borders, TNE as a pedagogical project as well as an area of enquiry will face challenges that are necessarily rooted in the problems of communication and meaning. In that context, the introduction of mainstream AI technologies can work as a force helping mitigate existing difficulties through creativity, while it can also widen existing gaps of both access to tools and information, and longstanding power relations that are deployed primarily through language. The first step in that discussion is to reflect on the meaning of the prefix "Trans-" as *across*, *beyond*, and *through*: "Trans-" practices worthy of their name are not simply about geographical mobility, but must contain in themselves a plan for *overcoming* what it prefixes. Thus, at its semantic core, TNE must strive to surpass, rather than superpose the idea of "nation", promoting diverse practices that aim at constructing professional skills that equally transcend this concept of border, equipping future professionals to a globally—and not nationally—organised world.

On the one hand, the sensationalism surrounding the introduction of new AI tools and the inflamed reaction from its critics reignite familiar challenges. The long tradition of Post-colonial theories (Cf. mainly Bhabha, 1994; Buruma & Margalit, 2004; Hall, 2018, 2019; Lévi-Strauss, 1952; Said, 2003; Spivak, 1999) and the interrogation of power relations, bias, identities, diversity, and unique perspectives in knowledge created widespread awareness of the challenges of intercultural exchanges. In such a light, AI and TNE are entangled through the same points of tension and conflict: the polarisation and binary reactions they invoke, and the discursive relations of Otherness, with the capital O, constructed around ethnicities, nationalities, religions, languages and, today, the possibility of hyper-intelligent technologies that could potentially replace humans. Such discursive relations serve as a screen in which existential fears are projected: both the possibility that Others are dangerous, with no morals or appreciation for "our" culture and ways of living; or, the anxiety about opportunities and resources being taken, and the erasure of our cultural practices if Others are integrated. In such a light, the polarised public opinion around AI is a repetition of existing discourses around the mobility of subjects across nations: a dynamic in the public sphere in which one side sings excessive optimism narrowly focused on the benefits of AI tools to human society, or the angst for human jobs, skills, and the destruction of "our" culture.

Like television, the personal computer, the web and, more recently, live streaming and video communication platforms, it is only a matter of time before AI is fully embedded in educational settings. In the same manner our pedagogies learned to adjust and incorporate new technologies in constructive ways that support innovation and best practice, they also adapted to create a meaningful environment for the exchange between cultural traditions, in the context of TNE, finding strategies to mitigate the resistance to Others in monocultural environments. Today, it is the encounter between two forms of

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